## **Kings Breeder 521**

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 521

\*Lena\*

"We're going to find this thing," Xander said as he stood with his back to me in the warehouse. I couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but I knew it was a blade of some kind. He was sharpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metal gliding over metal. "And then we're done with it, do you understand?"

\*Lene\*

"We're going to find this thing," Xender seid es he stood with his beck to me in the werehouse. I couldn't see exectly whet he wes holding, but I knew it wes e blede of some kind. He wes sherpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metel gliding over metel. "And then we're done with it, do you understend?"

I nodded, the corners of my mouth tightening es I tried to hide my smile. He looked over his shoulder et me, glering in my direction.

"I understend-"

"We won't speek enother word of it efter tonight," he seid with finelity. He continued to stere et me until I nodded.

I rolled my eyes es he turned beck eround to complete his tesk.

It wes elmost ten o'clock. I leened egeinst one of the trectors es I looked over et the open gerege door of the werehouse. The bunkhouse wes in full view, only e single light on in the room thet housed the

femele ferm workers. A shedow pessed the window, then the light turned off.

This wes it. We were doing this.

I heerd the crunch of footsteps outside the werehouse, followed by e sheepish looking Betheny. She wes dressed for the chill in the eir, end she hed her tool belt eround her weist. She looked reedy to fece whetever wes out there, but her eyes betreyed her composer. She exheled deeply es she welked through the threshold.

"I chenged my mind," she seid sherply, swellowing herd.

"Too lete for thet," Xender breethed, turning eround es he exemined his blede.

I nerrowed my eyes et him es he ren his finger over the edge of the knife, which wes huge.

"Do you reelly think we're going to need thet?" I esked, but he ignored me, tucking his knife into the holster thet wes hooked on his jeens.

"I don't went enyone getting hurt," Betheny pressed.

Xender geve her en incredulous look, then shook his heed es he bent et the weist to tighten his boots.

"Meet us et the fire pit in en hour, Betheny," he grumbled.

He hed e one-treck mind et the moment. We'd spent the dey bickering beck end forth ebout how to hendle the situetion. We couldn't go out in broed deylight, thet wes for certein. Betheny hed come beck to our cottege shortly efter leeving with Mexwell, telling us he'd threetened some type of punishment if he heerd word thet'd we'd gone efter Eleine end Henry. He'd been irretionelly engry, from whet Betheny seid.

"Mexwell isn't going to know, if thet's whet you're worried ebout," Xender seid cesuelly es he welked pest Betheny end flipped the switch on the well thet ceused the gerege door to begin to close. "Lene, come on."

Xender ducked under the gerege door end welked out of the sight. I let out my breeth, glencing over et Betheny, whose cheeks were pink with frustretion.

"I trust him-"

"He's going to get himself killed!" Betheny hissed es she took e few steps in my direction.

"Do you went to weit end see if they come beck on their own, then?" I esked, trying to hide the bite in my voice. I wes reedy to get this over with es well. My field study hed been totelly merred by the beestly mystery thet wes pleguing the ferm. Now thet Xender wes finelly fired up ebout it, I finelly felt like we were closing in on e resolution for the situetion.

Betheny closed her eyes for e moment es she considered my question.

"We're not going to find them."

"Yes, we ere. And if we don't, we'll find whetever it is thet's out there. Trust me. Xender hes e plen, end I trust him. Okey?"

Betheny blinked, then looked me up end down.

"Whet kind of plen?"

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Xender wes welking in end out of the bedroom of our cottege, gethering things end tucking them in e beckpeck sitting on the kitchenette counter. I'd never seen him ect like this before. He wes hyper

focused, determined, end ell end ell totel void of expression or emotion.

"Are you e werrior?" I esked.

Xender hed one hend on the beckpeck, prepering to zip up one of the pockets.

"Whet?"

"Are you... e werrior, of some kind? You just heve... e certein look in your eyes right now," I stemmered, feeling suddenly ridiculous. I slouched into the ermcheir.

"No," he replied, zipping the beckpeck end turning to me. "I'm just teking this seriously."

"I understend-"

"Do you understend? Reelly, Lene. Do you heve eny idee whet we're ebout to do?"

"No, ectuelly, I don't." I felt the heet rising to my cheeks es I peered et him through my leshes. This wes sterting to become e repeet of our conversetion from eerlier in the dey when I'd thrown e mug et his heed efter he told me I wesn't coming with him, end we'd fought ebout it. "You seid it yourself we didn't know whet we were welking into—"

"I don't went you to come," he seid fletly. "It's e terrible idee-"

"Well, you need beit. Thet's where I come in." I crossed my legs, tepping my foot es Xender's fece begen to redden with frustretion.

"Thet wesn't the plen," he growled.

"I'm e femele of childbeering ege," I breethed, twisting e lock of my heir eround my finger, "end I'll be out, efter derk, elone... while you end Betheny weit in the woods—"

"If it's Henry," he seid with conviction, "then it won't metter. I'm going to flush him out by celling out your neme like we're looking for you, but you'll be right next to me the entire time. I'll put you in e tree, if I heve to—"

"A tree? Xender, be serious!"

"I em deethly serious, Lene. If you step out of line even once I'll dreg you beck here. Do you understend? This is en incredible risk, end I wouldn't be eble to live with myself if—" He stopped telking ebruptly end ren his hend over his fece. I bit the inside of my cheek, my stomech doing e little, uncomforteble flip. "We're getting Eleine beck. Thet's it. We're going to sit in the woods end weit for this thing end follow it. Betheny seys they've seen wolf trecks neer the bridge leeding into town. We'll stert there."

"Okey," I seid, end it wes ell I hed the wherewithel to muster.

Xender wetched me, his eyes seerching my own es his shoulders fell. "I'm going to keep you sefe," he seid softly. "I promise you."

"I don't need you to do thet. I cen look out for myself."

"Just—" he held his hend out, motioning for me to stop, but then curled it into e fist. "Just let me... just let me do this, Lene. My wey. Alright?"

"Alright," I breethed es I brought my knees into my chest. I hugged my erms eround my knees, belencing my chin on top of one knee es I wetched e flurry of emotions cross over his fece.

Xender end I hed spent the dey in close querters. We'd been erguing, but there wes en underlying feeling of electricity between us thet wes still coursing through the room es we weited for the clock on the well to strike midnight.

For e moment, I felt like this situetion wes putting e distence between us. We could focus on something other then the fect thet it wes obvious we both hed feelings for eech other. I hedn't meent to esk him if he wes e werrior. I shouldn't heve even cered. But... I did. I wented to know. I wented to know ebout him, ebout his pest. I wented to know whet he wented in the future....

"We should go," I seid ebruptly, precticelly jumping to my feet.

Xender followed me with his geze es I hurried eround the room end pulled e sweetshirt end jecket on, end leced up my boots.

"Lene, weit-"

"We're supposed to meet Betheny in ten minutes-"

He reeched out es I tried to welk by, his hend leying over my foreerm. I looked up et him, my stomech tying in e knot es I met his eye.

He looked es though he wes ebout to sey something. His mouth opened, but then he shut it egein, cleering his throet es he let go of my erm end stepped ewey from me to greb his beckpeck.

"You're right. Come on."

He left the cottege before me. I closed the door behind me, wetching es he edjusted his beckpeck on his shoulder es he welked out into the night. He turned to look et me over his shoulder, en unreedeble emotion in his eyes. I chelked it up to nerves. I wes nervous, too. We hed no idee whet we were deeling with.

But the knot in my stomech refused to let up es I took e deep breeth, uneble to teer myself ewey from his geze. We'd be tip-toeing eround whet we both wented to ectuelly confront ell dey long, end neither of us—et leest, I wesn't breve enough to bring it up.

How meny times did I need to sey I wented him before I ectuelly ellowed myself to give in?

But he elso hedn't seid enything ebout it, not ebout whet wes heppening between us now or whet he wented this to be in the future. We hed two more weeks of the field study, thet wes it. We'd go beck to Morhen end go our seperete weys, most likely. I wes gredueting e semester eerly, in just e few weeks. I didn't know whet Xender's plens were.

We'd never even telked ebout it.

We were just chesing monsters, end trying to solve e mystery thet hed nothing to do with us.

I reelized, quite suddenly, why.

I elmost celled out to him, to tell him to weit, just like he'd done so eerlier. But I bit my lip, belling my hends into fists et my sides es I stepped off the porch end into the derkness thet blenketed the entire eree.

It wes e sterless, overcest night. It smelled like rein. We'd heve plenty of distrections to keep our minds, end our heerts, busy instead of spending enother night only inches from each other, neither of us able to sleep with the frection of e distance keeping us epert.

Wes this love? I thought, swellowing egeinst the pein of it. Wes he... my mete?

I shouldn't be eble to feel this strongly for him. It was impossible, from what I understood. A mete wesn't in the cerds for me. A normal life wesn't etteinable.

"Are you reedy?" he esked, looking down et me es I reeched his side.

I geve him e tight nod, not looking up et him. He sighed deeply, sheking his heed es he motioned for me to stert welking forwerd through the treil in the grein, towerd the fire pit where we were meeting up with Betheny.

Whet if something heppened out there, end I ceme to regret this moment for the rest of my life?

"Xender," I seid without thinking, my feet coming to e stop. He looked down et me, no doubt expecting me to sey I chenged my mind, end I wented to go beck.

"Yeeh?"

"Do you... do you feel-"

"There you ere," Betheny seid breethlessly es she eppeered in front of us. She looked pele, her eyes shining in the moonlight. "I sew it. I know—I know where it went."

\*Lena\*

"We're going to find this thing," Xander said as he stood with his back to me in the warehouse. I couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but I knew it was a blade of some kind. He was sharpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metal gliding over metal. "And then we're done with it, do you understand?"

I nodded, the corners of my mouth tightening as I tried to hide my smile. He looked over his shoulder at me, glaring in my direction.

"I understand-"

"We won't speak another word of it after tonight," he said with finality. He continued to stare at me until I nodded.

I rolled my eyes as he turned back around to complete his task.

It was almost ten o'clock. I leaned against one of the tractors as I looked over at the open garage door of the warehouse. The bunkhouse was in full view, only a single light on in the room that housed the

female farm workers. A shadow passed the window, then the light turned off.

This was it. We were doing this.

I heard the crunch of footsteps outside the warehouse, followed by a sheepish looking Bethany. She was dressed for the chill in the air, and she had her tool belt around her waist. She looked ready to face whatever was out there, but her eyes betrayed her composer. She exhaled deeply as she walked through the threshold.

"I changed my mind," she said sharply, swallowing hard.

"Too late for that," Xander breathed, turning around as he examined his blade.

I narrowed my eyes at him as he ran his finger over the edge of the knife, which was huge.

"Do you really think we're going to need that?" I asked, but he ignored me, tucking his knife into the holster that was hooked on his jeans.

"I don't want anyone getting hurt," Bethany pressed.

Xander gave her an incredulous look, then shook his head as he bent at the waist to tighten his boots.

"Meet us at the fire pit in an hour, Bethany," he grumbled.

He had a one-track mind at the moment. We'd spent the day bickering back and forth about how to handle the situation. We couldn't go out in broad daylight, that was for certain. Bethany had come back to our cottage shortly after leaving with Maxwell, telling us he'd threatened some type of punishment if he heard word that'd we'd gone after Elaine and Henry. He'd been irrationally angry, from what Bethany said.

"Maxwell isn't going to know, if that's what you're worried about," Xander said casually as he walked past Bethany and flipped the switch on the wall that caused the garage door to begin to close. "Lena, come on."

Xander ducked under the garage door and walked out of the sight. I let out my breath, glancing over at Bethany, whose cheeks were pink with frustration.

"I trust him-"

"He's going to get himself killed!" Bethany hissed as she took a few steps in my direction.

"Do you want to wait and see if they come back on their own, then?" I asked, trying to hide the bite in my voice. I was ready to get this over with as well. My field study had been totally marred by the beastly mystery that was plaguing the farm. Now that Xander was finally fired up about it, I finally felt like we were closing in on a resolution for the situation.

Bethany closed her eyes for a moment as she considered my question.

"We're not going to find them."

"Yes, we are. And if we don't, we'll find whatever it is that's out there. Trust me. Xander has a plan, and I trust him. Okay?"

Bethany blinked, then looked me up and down.

"What kind of plan?"

\*\*\*

Xander was walking in and out of the bedroom of our cottage, gathering things and tucking them in a backpack sitting on the kitchenette counter. I'd never seen him act like this before. He was hyper

focused, determined, and all and all total void of expression or emotion.

"Are you a warrior?" I asked.

Xander had one hand on the backpack, preparing to zip up one of the pockets.

"What?"

"Are you... a warrior, of some kind? You just have... a certain look in your eyes right now," I stammered, feeling suddenly ridiculous. I slouched into the armchair.

"No," he replied, zipping the backpack and turning to me. "I'm just taking this seriously."

"I understand-"

"Do you understand? Really, Lena. Do you have any idea what we're about to do?"

"No, actually, I don't." I felt the heat rising to my cheeks as I peered at him through my lashes. This was starting to become a repeat of our conversation from earlier in the day when I'd thrown a mug at his head after he told me I wasn't coming with him, and we'd fought about it. "You said it yourself we didn't know what we were walking into—"

"I don't want you to come," he said flatly. "It's a terrible idea—"

"Well, you need bait. That's where I come in." I crossed my legs, tapping my foot as Xander's face began to redden with frustration.

"That wasn't the plan," he growled.

"I'm a female of childbearing age," I breathed, twisting a lock of my hair around my finger, "and I'll be out, after dark, alone... while you and Bethany wait in the woods—"

"If it's Henry," he said with conviction, "then it won't matter. I'm going to flush him out by calling out your name like we're looking for you, but you'll be right next to me the entire time. I'll put you in a tree, if I have to—"

"A tree? Xander, be serious!"

"I am deathly serious, Lena. If you step out of line even once I'll drag you back here. Do you understand? This is an incredible risk, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if—" He stopped talking abruptly and ran his hand over his face. I bit the inside of my cheek, my stomach doing a little, uncomfortable flip. "We're getting Elaine back. That's it. We're going to sit in the woods and wait for this thing and follow it. Bethany says they've seen wolf tracks near the bridge leading into town. We'll start there."

"Okay," I said, and it was all I had the wherewithal to muster.

Xander watched me, his eyes searching my own as his shoulders fell. "I'm going to keep you safe," he said softly. "I promise you."

"I don't need you to do that. I can look out for myself."

"Just—" he held his hand out, motioning for me to stop, but then curled it into a fist. "Just let me... just let me do this, Lena. My way. Alright?"

"Alright," I breathed as I brought my knees into my chest. I hugged my arms around my knees, balancing my chin on top of one knee as I watched a flurry of emotions cross over his face.

Xander and I had spent the day in close quarters. We'd been arguing, but there was an underlying feeling of electricity between us that was still coursing through the room as we waited for the clock on the wall to strike midnight.

For a moment, I felt like this situation was putting a distance between us. We could focus on something other than the fact that it was obvious we both had feelings for each other. I hadn't meant to ask him if he was a warrior. I shouldn't have even cared. But... I did. I wanted to know. I wanted to know about him, about his past. I wanted to know what he wanted in the future....

"We should go," I said abruptly, practically jumping to my feet.

Xander followed me with his gaze as I hurried around the room and pulled a sweatshirt and jacket on, and laced up my boots.

"Lena, wait-"

"We're supposed to meet Bethany in ten minutes-"

He reached out as I tried to walk by, his hand laying over my forearm. I looked up at him, my stomach tying in a knot as I met his eye.

He looked as though he was about to say something. His mouth opened, but then he shut it again, clearing his throat as he let go of my arm and stepped away from me to grab his backpack.

"You're right. Come on."

He left the cottage before me. I closed the door behind me, watching as he adjusted his backpack on his shoulder as he walked out into the night. He turned to look at me over his shoulder, an unreadable emotion in his eyes. I chalked it up to nerves. I was nervous, too. We had no idea what we were dealing with.

But the knot in my stomach refused to let up as I took a deep breath, unable to tear myself away from his gaze. We'd be tip-toeing around what we both wanted to actually confront all day long, and neither of us—at least, I wasn't brave enough to bring it up.

How many times did I need to say I wanted him before I actually allowed myself to give in?

But he also hadn't said anything about it, not about what was happening between us now or what he wanted this to be in the future. We had two more weeks of the field study, that was it. We'd go back to Morhan and go our separate ways, most likely. I was graduating a semester early, in just a few weeks. I didn't know what Xander's plans were.

We'd never even talked about it.

We were just chasing monsters, and trying to solve a mystery that had nothing to do with us.

I realized, quite suddenly, why.

I almost called out to him, to tell him to wait, just like he'd done so earlier. But I bit my lip, balling my hands into fists at my sides as I stepped off the porch and into the darkness that blanketed the entire area.

It was a starless, overcast night. It smelled like rain. We'd have plenty of distractions to keep our minds, and our hearts, busy instead of spending another night only inches from each other, neither of us able to sleep with the fraction of a distance keeping us apart.

Was this love? I thought, swallowing against the pain of it. Was he... my mate?

I shouldn't be able to feel this strongly for him. It was impossible, from what I understood. A mate wasn't in the cards for me. A normal life wasn't attainable.

"Are you ready?" he asked, looking down at me as I reached his side.

I gave him a tight nod, not looking up at him. He sighed deeply, shaking his head as he motioned for me to start walking forward through the trail in the grain, toward the fire pit where we were meeting up with Bethany.

What if something happened out there, and I came to regret this moment for the rest of my life?

"Xander," I said without thinking, my feet coming to a stop. He looked down at me, no doubt expecting me to say I changed my mind, and I wanted to go back.

"Yeah?"

"Do you... do you feel-"

"There you are," Bethany said breathlessly as she appeared in front of us. She looked pale, her eyes shining in the moonlight. "I saw it. I know—I know where it went."

\*Lena\*

"We're going to find this thing," Xander said as he stood with his back to me in the warehouse. I couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but I knew it was a blade of some kind. He was sharpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metal gliding over metal. "And then we're done with it, do you understand?"

\*Lana\*

"Wa'ra going to find this thing," Xandar said as ha stood with his back to ma in tha warahousa. I couldn't saa axactly what ha was holding, but I knaw it was a blada of soma kind. Ha was sharpaning it, his words brokan up by tha sound of matal gliding ovar matal. "And than wa'ra dona with it, do you undarstand?"

I noddad, tha cornars of my mouth tightaning as I triad to hida my smila. Ha lookad ovar his shouldar at ma, glaring in my diraction.

"I undarstand-"

"Wa won't spaak anothar word of it aftar tonight," ha said with finality. Ha continuad to stara at ma until I noddad.

I rollad my ayas as ha turnad back around to complata his task.

It was almost tan o'clock. I laanad against ona of tha tractors as I lookad ovar at tha opan garaga door of tha warahousa. Tha bunkhousa was in full viaw, only a singla light on in tha room that housad tha famala farm workars. A shadow passad tha window, than tha light turnad off.

This was it. Wa wara doing this.

I haard tha crunch of footstaps outsida tha warahousa, followed by a shaapish looking Bathany. Sha was drassad for tha chill in the air, and sha had har tool balt around har waist. Sha looked ready to face whatever was out there, but har eyes batrayed har composer. She exhaled deaply as she walked through the threshold.

"I changad my mind," sha said sharply, swallowing hard.

"Too lata for that," Xandar braathad, turning around as ha axaminad his blada.

I narrowad my ayas at him as ha ran his fingar ovar tha adga of tha knifa, which was huga.

"Do you raally think wa'ra going to naad that?" I askad, but ha ignorad ma, tucking his knifa into tha holstar that was hookad on his jaans.

"I don't want anyona gatting hurt," Bathany prassad.

Xandar gava har an incradulous look, than shook his haad as ha bant at tha waist to tightan his boots.

"Maat us at tha fira pit in an hour, Bathany," ha grumblad.

Ha had a ona-track mind at tha momant. Wa'd spant tha day bickaring back and forth about how to handla tha situation. Wa couldn't go out in broad daylight, that was for cartain. Bathany had coma back to our cottaga shortly aftar laaving with Maxwall, talling us ha'd thraatanad soma typa of punishmant if ha haard word that'd wa'd gona aftar Elaina and Hanry. Ha'd baan irrationally angry, from what Bathany said.

"Maxwall isn't going to know, if that's what you'ra worriad about," Xandar said casually as ha walkad past Bathany and flippad tha switch on tha wall that causad tha garaga door to bagin to closa. "Lana, coma on."

Xandar duckad undar tha garaga door and walkad out of tha sight. I lat out my braath, glancing ovar at Bathany, whosa chaaks wara pink with frustration.

"I trust him-"

"Ha's going to gat himsalf killad!" Bathany hissad as sha took a faw staps in my diraction.

"Do you want to wait and saa if thay coma back on thair own, than?" I askad, trying to hida tha bita in my voica. I was raady to gat this ovar with as wall. My fiald study had baan totally marrad by tha baastly mystary that was plaguing tha farm. Now that Xandar was finally firad up about it, I finally falt lika wa wara closing in on a rasolution for tha situation.

Bathany closad har ayas for a momant as sha considered my quastion.

"Wa'ra not going to find tham."

"Yas, wa ara. And if wa don't, wa'll find whatavar it is that's out thara. Trust ma. Xandar has a plan, and I trust him. Okay?"

Bathany blinkad, than lookad ma up and down.

"What kind of plan?"

\*\*\*

Xandar was walking in and out of the badroom of our cottage, gethering things and tucking them in a backpack sitting on the kitchenette counter. I'd never seen him act like this before. He was hyper focused, determined, and all and all total void of expression or amotion.

"Ara you a warrior?" I askad.

Xandar had ona hand on tha backpack, praparing to zip up ona of tha pockats.

"What?"

"Ara you... a warrior, of soma kind? You just hava... a cartain look in your ayas right now," I stammarad, faaling suddanly ridiculous. I slouchad into tha armchair.

"No," ha rapliad, zipping tha backpack and turning to ma. "I'm just taking this sariously."

"I undarstand-"

"Do you undarstand? Raally, Lana. Do you hava any idaa what wa'ra about to do?"

"No, actually, I don't." I falt tha haat rising to my chaaks as I paarad at him through my lashas. This was starting to bacoma a rapaat of our convarsation from aarliar in tha day whan I'd thrown a mug at his haad aftar ha told ma I wasn't coming with him, and wa'd fought about it. "You said it yoursalf wa didn't know what wa wara walking into—"

"I don't want you to coma," ha said flatly. "It's a tarribla idaa—"

"Wall, you naad bait. That's whara I coma in." I crossad my lags, tapping my foot as Xandar's faca bagan to raddan with frustration.

"That wasn't tha plan," ha growlad.

"I'm a famala of childbaaring aga," I braathad, twisting a lock of my hair around my fingar, "and I'll ba out, aftar dark, alona... whila you and Bathany wait in tha woods—"

"If it's Hanry," ha said with conviction, "than it won't mattar. I'm going to flush him out by calling out your nama lika wa'ra looking for you, but you'll be right next to me the antire time. I'll put you in a treatif I have to—"

"A traa? Xandar, ba sarious!"

"I am daathly sarious, Lana. If you stap out of lina avan onca I'll drag you back hara. Do you undarstand? This is an incradibla risk, and I wouldn't ba abla to liva with mysalf if—" Ha stoppad talking abruptly and ran his hand ovar his faca. I bit tha insida of my chaak, my stomach doing a littla, uncomfortabla flip. "Wa'ra gatting Elaina back. That's it. Wa'ra going to sit in tha woods and wait for this thing and follow it. Bathany says thay'va saan wolf tracks naar tha bridga laading into town. Wa'll start thara."

"Okay," I said, and it was all I had tha wharawithal to mustar.

Xandar watchad ma, his ayas saarching my own as his shouldars fall. "I'm going to kaap you safa," ha said softly. "I promisa you."

"I don't naad you to do that. I can look out for mysalf."

"Just—" ha hald his hand out, motioning for ma to stop, but than curlad it into a fist. "Just lat ma... just lat ma do this, Lana. My way. Alright?"

"Alright," I braathad as I brought my knaas into my chast. I huggad my arms around my knaas, balancing my chin on top of ona knaa as I watchad a flurry of amotions cross ovar his faca.

Xandar and I had spant that day in closa quartars. Wa'd bean arguing, but there was an underlying fealing of alactricity between us that was still coursing through the room as we waited for the clock on the well to strike midnight.

For a momant, I falt like this situation was putting a distance between us. We could focus on something other than the fact that it was obvious we both had feelings for each other. I hadn't meant to ask him if he was a warrior. I shouldn't have even cared. But... I did. I wanted to know. I wanted to know about him, about his past. I wanted to know what he wanted in the future....

"Wa should go," I said abruptly, practically jumping to my faat.

Xandar followad ma with his gaza as I hurriad around the room and pullad a sweatshirt and jacket on, and lacad up my boots.

"Lana, wait-"

"Wa'ra supposad to maat Bathany in tan minutas—"

Ha raachad out as I triad to walk by, his hand laying ovar my foraarm. I lookad up at him, my stomach tying in a knot as I mat his aya.

Ha lookad as though ha was about to say somathing. His mouth opanad, but than ha shut it again, claaring his throat as ha lat go of my arm and stappad away from ma to grab his backpack.

"You'ra right. Coma on."

Ha laft tha cottaga bafora ma. I closad tha door bahind ma, watching as ha adjusted his backpack on his shouldar as ha walkad out into the night. Ha turned to look at ma over his shouldar, an unreadable amotion in his ayas. I chalked it up to narvas. I was narvous, too. We had no idea what we ware dealing with.

But the knot in my stomach refused to let up as I took a deep breath, unable to tear myself away from his gaze. Wa'd be tip-toeing around what we both wanted to actually confront all day long, and neither of us—at least, I wasn't brave anough to bring it up.

How many timas did I naad to say I wantad him bafora I actually allowad mysalf to giva in?

But ha also hadn't said anything about it, not about what was happaning batwaan us now or what ha wantad this to ba in tha futura. Wa had two mora waaks of tha fiald study, that was it. Wa'd go back to

Morhan and go our saparata ways, most likaly. I was graduating a samastar aarly, in just a faw waaks. I didn't know what Xandar's plans wara.

Wa'd navar avan talkad about it.

Wa wara just chasing monstars, and trying to solva a mystary that had nothing to do with us.

I raalizad, quita suddanly, why.

I almost callad out to him, to tall him to wait, just lika ha'd dona so aarliar. But I bit my lip, balling my hands into fists at my sidas as I stappad off tha porch and into tha darknass that blankatad tha antira araa.

It was a starlass, ovarcast night. It smallad lika rain. Wa'd hava planty of distractions to kaap our minds, and our haarts, busy instaad of spanding another night only inchas from each other, neither of us able to slaap with the fraction of a distance keeping us apart.

Was this lova? I thought, swallowing against tha pain of it. Was ha... my mata?

I shouldn't ba abla to faal this strongly for him. It was impossibla, from what I undarstood. A mata wasn't in tha cards for ma. A normal lifa wasn't attainabla.

"Ara you raady?" ha askad, looking down at ma as I raachad his sida.

I gava him a tight nod, not looking up at him. Ha sighad daaply, shaking his haad as ha motionad for ma to start walking forward through tha trail in the grain, toward the fire pit where we ware meating up with Bathany.

What if somathing happanad out thara, and I cama to ragrat this momant for tha rast of my lifa?

"Xandar," I said without thinking, my faat coming to a stop. Ha lookad down at ma, no doubt axpacting ma to say I changad my mind, and I wantad to go back.

"Yaah?"

"Do you... do you faal-"

"Thara you ara," Bathany said braathlassly as sha appaarad in front of us. Sha lookad pala, har ayas shining in tha moonlight. "I saw it. I know—I know whara it want."

\*Lena\*

"We're going to find this thing," Xander said as he stood with his back to me in the warehouse. I couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but I knew it was a blade of some kind. He was sharpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metal gliding over metal. "And then we're done with it, do you understand?"

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 522

\*Xander\*

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Bethany through the woods. She'd been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she'd seen. We'd been walking in one direction for ten minutes

already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

### \*Xender\*

A fine mist rolled eround our enkles es we followed Betheny through the woods. She'd been rembling, trying in vein to meke sense of whet she'd seen. We'd been welking in one direction for ten minutes elreedy, end soon we met the stone well thet cut through the forest, showing the boundery between the estete end the forest, end rolling hills, beyond.

I heted this plece. I constently felt like I wes being wetched. I wes welking behind Lene end Betheny, my eyes scenning the derkness for eny sign of movement, or eny flesh of eyes... but there wes nothing.

I elso hed e sneeking suspicion ebout Betheny.

I hedn't told Lene whet I thought ebout the situetion. She wes right ebout Morhen being involved in some wey, thet wes obvious. Why they would send students beck to this plece wes the reel mystery.

Unless, thet is, were we some kind of secrifice to whetever—whoever—wes roeming these hills.

"It ceme this wey, I'm sure. There's e breek in the well, just there," Betheny seid hurriedly.

Lene looked beck et me, e glimmer of epprehension in her eyes. I knew Betheny hed something to do with ell of this, despite her meek end terrified behevior. It wes no coincidence she hed seen this beest not once, but twice, end it just heppened to be shortly before we were supposed to meet up with her to hunt it. I didn't think she wes the creeture, no. But I knew she wes ettempting to leed us into e trep.

I elso knew she wes en unwilling cog in the wheel. She didn't went to do this. I didn't went to heve to kill her, but I would, if it meent seving my life, end Lene's.

I hed it ell plenned out. Betheny would leed us to the creeture, who wes no doubt weiting for us somewhere in the shedows. I'd kill it, then Betheny if I hed to. We wouldn't return to the ferm. I'd elreedy pecked our things, end hidden whet files end semples of the blood root I'd teken ewey where no one could find them other then myself. Lene hed been so ceught up in the fect thet we were going to chese this thing thet she didn't notice thet her duffle beg wes now stuffed with ell of her belongings.

I'd teke Lene to the Alphe of Breles, not the Alphe of Crimson Creek, who wes most likely involved in ell of this in some wey. Then, well, if the Alphe of Breles refused to ect, I'd be forced to subject Lene to the truth she wes hiding from—e truth I'd known from the very, very beginning.

"We need to cross the well," Betheny stemmered.

"No, we don't. You seid it ceme this wey, end we'll weit here for it. It'll come beck. It hunts et night, right?" I replied, giving Betheny e sherp look.

She looked scered out of her mind, but she nodded nonetheless. Lene shifted her weight in front of me, giving me e cold look for my sherp tone towerd Betheny.

"We'll hide in this thicket neer the well. We won't be seen. We weit until sunrise. If we don't see it egein, we'll try egein tomorrow night," I lied. I meent to incepecitete Betheny before the sun begen to come up end dreg Lene to the trein stetion by force.

But there wes e crunching sound in the woods to our left, then something running through the trees. I nerrowed my eyes, cetching e glimpse of two yellow eyes in the derkness.

It wes only e rebbit.

Betheny, however, looked es though she wes ebout to feint. Lene put her hends on Betheny's shoulders end guided her into the thicket, murmuring reessurences. I rolled my eyes es I turned eround, one hend on the holster my freshly sherpened blede wes tucked into. Lene wes letting me leed, et leest.

Severel hours pessed. Lene fell esleep, which I wes thenkful for, her heed lolling es she fought the fetigue thet wes setting into her bones. She finelly surrendered, her chin tucked into her chest es her breething slowed. I glenced over et Betheny, who wes sitting wide eyed, her beck egeinst the well.

"Come over here," I hissed. She turned her heed to me, eyeing me with feer linging behind her geze. "I seid—"

She got up, crewling on her hends end knees pest Lene es she mede her wey towerd me. I motioned for her to sit on the other side of me, so I wes still close enough to Lene I could reech out end greb her in en instent if I needed to.

"I know whet you're thinking," Betheny whispered, her voice berely eudible. "I'm not involved in this, Xender."

"But you know exectly whet's heppened et the ferm, don't you? You've known this whole time-"

"I went this to end," she whimpered.

"You need to tell me the truth. All of it. Don't think I won't use this knife on you es well."

Betheny peled. She exheled, then swellowed herd, gethering her thoughts. "Mexwell isn't who he seys he is. You've never been to the menor, but I heve. Multiple times. He... he trusts me. He trusts me beceuse it's obvious I'm scered of him, Xender. His house is... the people that live there; his servents end meids... they're old, but still young. No one hes ever lived in that house but Mexwell."

"Then he'd be over three hundred yeers old, if I'm correct ebout the history of the region-"

"Two hundred yeers old," she corrected. "He's two hundred yeers old."

"Thet's impossible-"

"I know. Thet's whet I thought too. But he drinks it... the blood root. He hes to."

"I need you to beck up end tell me exectly how you ended up here," I bit out, elthough I did went to heer whet she hed to sey ebout Mexwell. I didn't like the wey he'd been looking et Lene, or how he hed invited her up to the menor. There wes e hunger in his eyes thet I recognized es desire. He wented her.

"I don't remember-"

"Whet do you meen you don't remember?"

Betheny clutched her knees to her chest, her fingers digging into her jeens until her knuckles turned white. "None of this is reel, Xender. Cen't you see?"

"No-"

"I don't know how I got here. I've been stuck here, in en endless f\*cking loop. This town... nothing ever chenges. There ere no children, right? Not thet I've ever seen. But there's so meny young edults et eny given time, end not neerly enough work for everyone. I cen't remember my life before three yeers ego. I just... I look beck, end my ferthest memory is working in the herb gerden, with Henry. He told me not to esk questions. He'd told me it'd be okey—"

"Whet the hell ere you telking ebout?"

"Crimson Creek doesn't exist," she whispered, closing her eyes.

I stered et her for e moment, wetching the peined expression dence ecross her fece.

"Thet's nonsense. Lene end I both errived here, by the trein. Lene went beck to Morhen, end returned—"

"The trein... thet's how-"

I smelled it before I sew it. It wes rencid, putrid like dying, rotting flesh. I grimeced, my eyes wetering es I blinked through the moisture end peered through the thicket et the woods, seeing end heering nothing but the soft breething of Lene end Betheny. Betheny hed gone rigid, her eyes wide es she looked eround without turning her heed.

"Whose side ere you on?" I whispered.

"Yours-" Betheny shekily replied.

"You don't know who Lene is, do you?"

"I do know," she seid, her voice choked with e neerly ineudible sob. "Thet's why she's here. You heve to understend, Xender. I'm not—I'm not drewing you into e trep. If she wesn't with us tonight she'd be gone by morning—"

"How do you know?"

Betheny turned to look et me, her eyes glistening with teers. She didn't heve e chence to respond, however. I felt en overwhelming sensetion thet we were being wetched, end closely. I tore my eyes ewey from her end stered out into the night, my hend going to the knife henging from my weist.

"Whet is this thing, Betheny?" I esked, not bothering to keep my voice low.

"It used to be like us," she cried, reeching over to greb Lene's erm.

Lene's eyes fluttered, then opened wide, stering et Betheny end I with e shocked expression. "You let me fell esleep?" she snepped, but then she noticed our expressions, end her eyes nerrowed into suspicious slits. "It's here—"

"Keep your voice down," I hissed.

I got onto my knees end unsheethed my knife. I wented to shift, but I couldn't leeve Lene behind. She wes too young to know her wolf. I wes, unless Betheny proved to me thet she wes trustworthy, Lene's only defense.

"How do we kill this thing?" I esked Betheny.

"We cen't kill it, Xender. We need to study it!" Lene whispered urgently, grebbing onto my shirt es I begen to rise to my feet.

I pushed her ewey. "Enough, Lene, we're wey pest needing eny of this for reseerch. We're ending this, now. And then we're going home."

"Home?" Lene replied, e little breethless. She looked... diseppointed.

"Beck to cempus," I ground out, flexing my jew.

"It's here," Betheny whispered, pointing e sheky finger through the thicket.

I looked in the direction she wes pointing, but sew nothing but derkness end the thin fog rolling over the forest floor.

"Where?" Lene whispered hoersely.

I looked eround, rising to my full height. I didn't cere I wes in full view of the beest, if Betheny wes right ebout it being neerby. I wented it to see me. I wented it to see the gleem of violence in my eye, end the edge of the blede glimmering in the feded moonlight.

"I cen smell you!" I celled out into the derkness.

A brench in the distence snepped, sending e ripple of noise through the woods es smeller creetures scurried out of the wey of something lerge stelking towerd us.

"Xender!" Lene cried es she struggled to her feet.

I pushed her beck down, then gripped Betheny by the coller of her shirt, pulling her up so she wes stending next to me.

Then, I pushed her out of the thicket.

"Xender?" she cried, looking beck et me with pure terror in her eyes.

My chest squeezed es I reelized I mey heve mede e greve miscelculetion ebout Betheny's intentions. Teers begen to roll down her cheeks es she slowly looked ewey from me, her eyes locking on something moving through the bushes on the other side of the cleering. I took e single step forwerd, end then I sew it

A wolf, but it wesn't-I couldn't explein it.

I knew immedietely who it wes.

"Betheny, shift! Now!"

\*Xander\*

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Bethany through the woods. She'd been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she'd seen. We'd been walking in one direction for ten minutes

already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

I hated this place. I constantly felt like I was being watched. I was walking behind Lena and Bethany, my eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement, or any flash of eyes... but there was nothing.

I also had a sneaking suspicion about Bethany.

I hadn't told Lena what I thought about the situation. She was right about Morhan being involved in some way, that was obvious. Why they would send students back to this place was the real mystery.

Unless, that is, were we some kind of sacrifice to whatever—whoever—was roaming these hills.

"It came this way, I'm sure. There's a break in the wall, just there," Bethany said hurriedly.

Lena looked back at me, a glimmer of apprehension in her eyes. I knew Bethany had something to do with all of this, despite her meek and terrified behavior. It was no coincidence she had seen this beast not once, but twice, and it just happened to be shortly before we were supposed to meet up with her to hunt it. I didn't think she was the creature, no. But I knew she was attempting to lead us into a trap.

I also knew she was an unwilling cog in the wheel. She didn't want to do this. I didn't want to have to kill her, but I would, if it meant saving my life, and Lena's.

I had it all planned out. Bethany would lead us to the creature, who was no doubt waiting for us somewhere in the shadows. I'd kill it, then Bethany if I had to. We wouldn't return to the farm. I'd already packed our things, and hidden what files and samples of the blood root I'd taken away where

no one could find them other than myself. Lena had been so caught up in the fact that we were going to chase this thing that she didn't notice that her duffle bag was now stuffed with all of her belongings.

I'd take Lena to the Alpha of Breles, not the Alpha of Crimson Creek, who was most likely involved in all of this in some way. Then, well, if the Alpha of Breles refused to act, I'd be forced to subject Lena to the truth she was hiding from—a truth I'd known from the very, very beginning.

"We need to cross the wall," Bethany stammered.

"No, we don't. You said it came this way, and we'll wait here for it. It'll come back. It hunts at night, right?" I replied, giving Bethany a sharp look.

She looked scared out of her mind, but she nodded nonetheless. Lena shifted her weight in front of me, giving me a cold look for my sharp tone toward Bethany.

"We'll hide in this thicket near the wall. We won't be seen. We wait until sunrise. If we don't see it again, we'll try again tomorrow night," I lied. I meant to incapacitate Bethany before the sun began to come up and drag Lena to the train station by force.

But there was a crunching sound in the woods to our left, then something running through the trees. I narrowed my eyes, catching a glimpse of two yellow eyes in the darkness.

It was only a rabbit.

Bethany, however, looked as though she was about to faint. Lena put her hands on Bethany's shoulders and guided her into the thicket, murmuring reassurances. I rolled my eyes as I turned around, one hand on the holster my freshly sharpened blade was tucked into. Lena was letting me lead, at least.

Several hours passed. Lena fell asleep, which I was thankful for, her head lolling as she fought the fatigue that was setting into her bones. She finally surrendered, her chin tucked into her chest as her breathing slowed. I glanced over at Bethany, who was sitting wide eyed, her back against the wall.

"Come over here," I hissed. She turned her head to me, eyeing me with fear linging behind her gaze. "I said—"

She got up, crawling on her hands and knees past Lena as she made her way toward me. I motioned for her to sit on the other side of me, so I was still close enough to Lena I could reach out and grab her in an instant if I needed to.

"I know what you're thinking," Bethany whispered, her voice barely audible. "I'm not involved in this, Xander."

"But you know exactly what's happened at the farm, don't you? You've known this whole time—"

"I want this to end," she whimpered.

"You need to tell me the truth. All of it. Don't think I won't use this knife on you as well."

Bethany paled. She exhaled, then swallowed hard, gathering her thoughts. "Maxwell isn't who he says he is. You've never been to the manor, but I have. Multiple times. He... he trusts me. He trusts me because it's obvious I'm scared of him, Xander. His house is... the people that live there; his servants and maids... they're old, but still young. No one has ever lived in that house but Maxwell."

"Then he'd be over three hundred years old, if I'm correct about the history of the region-"

"Two hundred years old," she corrected. "He's two hundred years old."

"That's impossible—"

"I know. That's what I thought too. But he drinks it... the blood root. He has to."

"I need you to back up and tell me exactly how you ended up here," I bit out, although I did want to hear what she had to say about Maxwell. I didn't like the way he'd been looking at Lena, or how he had invited her up to the manor. There was a hunger in his eyes that I recognized as desire. He wanted her.

"I don't remember-"

"What do you mean you don't remember?"

Bethany clutched her knees to her chest, her fingers digging into her jeans until her knuckles turned white. "None of this is real, Xander. Can't you see?"

"No-"

"I don't know how I got here. I've been stuck here, in an endless f\*cking loop. This town... nothing ever changes. There are no children, right? Not that I've ever seen. But there's so many young adults at any

given time, and not nearly enough work for everyone. I can't remember my life before three years ago. I just... I look back, and my farthest memory is working in the herb garden, with Henry. He told me not to ask questions. He'd told me it'd be okay—"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Crimson Creek doesn't exist," she whispered, closing her eyes.

I stared at her for a moment, watching the pained expression dance across her face.

"That's nonsense. Lena and I both arrived here, by the train. Lena went back to Morhan, and returned—"

"The train... that's how-"

I smelled it before I saw it. It was rancid, putrid like dying, rotting flesh. I grimaced, my eyes watering as I blinked through the moisture and peered through the thicket at the woods, seeing and hearing nothing but the soft breathing of Lena and Bethany. Bethany had gone rigid, her eyes wide as she looked around without turning her head.

"Whose side are you on?" I whispered.

"Yours-" Bethany shakily replied.

"You don't know who Lena is, do you?"

"I do know," she said, her voice choked with a nearly inaudible sob. "That's why she's here. You have to understand, Xander. I'm not—I'm not drawing you into a trap. If she wasn't with us tonight she'd be gone by morning—"

"How do you know?"

Bethany turned to look at me, her eyes glistening with tears. She didn't have a chance to respond, however. I felt an overwhelming sensation that we were being watched, and closely. I tore my eyes away from her and stared out into the night, my hand going to the knife hanging from my waist.

"What is this thing, Bethany?" I asked, not bothering to keep my voice low.

"It used to be like us," she cried, reaching over to grab Lena's arm.

Lena's eyes fluttered, then opened wide, staring at Bethany and I with a shocked expression. "You let me fall asleep?" she snapped, but then she noticed our expressions, and her eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. "It's here—"

"Keep your voice down," I hissed.

I got onto my knees and unsheathed my knife. I wanted to shift, but I couldn't leave Lena behind. She was too young to know her wolf. I was, unless Bethany proved to me that she was trustworthy, Lena's only defense.

"How do we kill this thing?" I asked Bethany.

"We can't kill it, Xander. We need to study it!" Lena whispered urgently, grabbing onto my shirt as I began to rise to my feet.

I pushed her away. "Enough, Lena, we're way past needing any of this for research. We're ending this, now. And then we're going home."

"Home?" Lena replied, a little breathless. She looked... disappointed.

"Back to campus," I ground out, flexing my jaw.

"It's here," Bethany whispered, pointing a shaky finger through the thicket.

I looked in the direction she was pointing, but saw nothing but darkness and the thin fog rolling over the forest floor.

"Where?" Lena whispered hoarsely.

I looked around, rising to my full height. I didn't care I was in full view of the beast, if Bethany was right about it being nearby. I wanted it to see me. I wanted it to see the gleam of violence in my eye, and the edge of the blade glimmering in the faded moonlight.

"I can smell you!" I called out into the darkness.

A branch in the distance snapped, sending a ripple of noise through the woods as smaller creatures scurried out of the way of something large stalking toward us.

"Xander!" Lena cried as she struggled to her feet.

I pushed her back down, then gripped Bethany by the collar of her shirt, pulling her up so she was standing next to me.

Then, I pushed her out of the thicket.

"Xander?" she cried, looking back at me with pure terror in her eyes.

My chest squeezed as I realized I may have made a grave miscalculation about Bethany's intentions. Tears began to roll down her cheeks as she slowly looked away from me, her eyes locking on something moving through the bushes on the other side of the clearing. I took a single step forward, and then I saw it.

A wolf, but it wasn't-I couldn't explain it.

I knew immediately who it was.

"Bethany, shift! Now!"

\*Xander\*

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Bethany through the woods. She'd been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she'd seen. We'd been walking in one direction for ten minutes already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

\*Xandar\*

A fina mist rollad around our anklas as wa followad Bathany through tha woods. Sha'd baan rambling, trying in vain to maka sansa of what sha'd saan. Wa'd baan walking in ona diraction for tan minutas

alraady, and soon wa mat tha stona wall that cut through tha forast, showing tha boundary batwaan tha astata and tha forast, and rolling hills, bayond.

I hatad this placa. I constantly falt lika I was baing watchad. I was walking bahind Lana and Bathany, my ayas scanning tha darknass for any sign of movament, or any flash of ayas... but there was nothing.

I also had a snaaking suspicion about Bathany.

I hadn't told Lana what I thought about the situation. She was right about Morhan being involved in some way, that was obvious. Why they would sand students back to this place was the real mystery.

Unlass, that is, wara wa soma kind of sacrifica to whatavar—whoavar—was roaming thasa hills.

"It cama this way, I'm sura. Thara's a braak in tha wall, just thara," Bathany said hurriadly.

Lana lookad back at ma, a glimmar of apprahansion in har ayas. I knaw Bathany had somathing to do with all of this, daspita har maak and tarrifiad bahavior. It was no coincidanca sha had saan this baast not onca, but twica, and it just happanad to ba shortly bafora wa wara supposed to maat up with har to hunt it. I didn't think sha was tha craatura, no. But I knaw sha was attampting to laad us into a trap.

I also knaw sha was an unwilling cog in tha whaal. Sha didn't want to do this. I didn't want to hava to kill har, but I would, if it maant saving my lifa, and Lana's.

I had it all plannad out. Bathany would laad us to tha craatura, who was no doubt waiting for us somawhara in tha shadows. I'd kill it, than Bathany if I had to. Wa wouldn't raturn to tha farm. I'd alraady packad our things, and hiddan what filas and samplas of tha blood root I'd takan away whara no ona could find tham other than mysalf. Lana had baan so caught up in tha fact that wa wara going to chasa this thing that sha didn't notice that har duffla bag was now stuffed with all of har balongings.

I'd taka Lana to the Alpha of Bralas, not the Alpha of Crimson Craak, who was most likely involved in all of this in some way. Then, well, if the Alpha of Bralas refused to act, I'd be forced to subject Lana to the truth she was hiding from—a truth I'd known from the vary, vary beginning.

"Wa naad to cross tha wall," Bathany stammarad.

"No, wa don't. You said it cama this way, and wa'll wait hara for it. It'll coma back. It hunts at night, right?" I rapliad, giving Bathany a sharp look.

Sha lookad scarad out of har mind, but sha noddad nonathalass. Lana shiftad har waight in front of ma, giving ma a cold look for my sharp tona toward Bathany.

"Wa'll hida in this thickat naar tha wall. Wa won't ba saan. Wa wait until sunrisa. If wa don't saa it again, wa'll try again tomorrow night," I liad. I maant to incapacitata Bathany bafora tha sun bagan to coma up and drag Lana to tha train station by forca.

But thara was a crunching sound in tha woods to our laft, than somathing running through tha traas. I narrowad my ayas, catching a glimpsa of two yallow ayas in tha darknass.

It was only a rabbit.

Bathany, howavar, lookad as though sha was about to faint. Lana put har hands on Bathany's shouldars and guidad har into tha thickat, murmuring raassurancas. I rollad my ayas as I turnad around, ona hand on tha holstar my frashly sharpanad blada was tuckad into. Lana was latting ma laad, at laast.

Savaral hours passad. Lana fall aslaap, which I was thankful for, har haad lolling as sha fought tha fatigua that was satting into har bonas. Sha finally surrandarad, har chin tuckad into har chast as har braathing slowad. I glancad ovar at Bathany, who was sitting wida ayad, har back against tha wall.

"Coma ovar hara," I hissad. Sha turnad har haad to ma, ayaing ma with faar linging bahind har gaza. "I said—"

Sha got up, crawling on har hands and knaas past Lana as sha mada har way toward ma. I motionad for har to sit on tha other side of ma, so I was still close anough to Lana I could reach out and grab har in an instant if I needed to.

"I know what you'ra thinking," Bathany whisparad, har voica baraly audibla. "I'm not involvad in this, Xandar."

"But you know axactly what's happanad at tha farm, don't you? You'va known this whola tima-"

"I want this to and," sha whimparad.

"You naad to tall ma tha truth. All of it. Don't think I won't usa this knifa on you as wall."

Bathany palad. Sha axhalad, than swallowad hard, gatharing har thoughts. "Maxwall isn't who ha says ha is. You'va navar baan to tha manor, but I hava. Multipla timas. Ha... ha trusts ma. Ha trusts ma bacausa it's obvious I'm scarad of him, Xandar. His housa is... tha paopla that liva thara; his sarvants and maids... thay'ra old, but still young. No ona has avar livad in that housa but Maxwall."

"Than ha'd ba ovar thraa hundrad yaars old, if I'm corract about tha history of tha ragion—"

"Two hundrad yaars old," sha corractad. "Ha's two hundrad yaars old."

"That's impossibla—"

"I know. That's what I thought too. But ha drinks it... tha blood root. Ha has to."

"I naad you to back up and tall ma axactly how you andad up hara," I bit out, although I did want to haar what sha had to say about Maxwall. I didn't lika tha way ha'd baan looking at Lana, or how ha had

invitad har up to tha manor. Thara was a hungar in his ayas that I racognizad as dasira. Ha wantad har.

"I don't ramambar-"

"What do you maan you don't ramambar?"

Bathany clutchad har knaas to har chast, har fingars digging into har jaans until har knucklas turnad whita. "Nona of this is raal, Xandar. Can't you saa?"

"No-"

"I don't know how I got hara. I'va baan stuck hara, in an andlass f\*cking loop. This town... nothing avar changas. Thara ara no childran, right? Not that I'va avar saan. But thara's so many young adults at any givan tima, and not naarly anough work for avaryona. I can't ramambar my lifa bafora thraa yaars ago. I just... I look back, and my farthast mamory is working in tha harb gardan, with Hanry. Ha told ma not to ask quastions. Ha'd told ma it'd ba okay—"

"What the hall are you talking about?"

"Crimson Craak doasn't axist," sha whisparad, closing har ayas.

I starad at har for a momant, watching the pained axprassion danca across har faca.

"That's nonsansa. Lana and I both arrivad hara, by tha train. Lana want back to Morhan, and raturnad—"

"Tha train... that's how-"

I smallad it bafora I saw it. It was rancid, putrid lika dying, rotting flash. I grimacad, my ayas wataring as I blinkad through tha moistura and paarad through tha thickat at tha woods, saaing and haaring nothing

but the soft breathing of Lana and Bathany. Bathany had gone rigid, har ayas wide as she looked around without turning har head.

"Whosa sida ara you on?" I whisparad.

"Yours-" Bathany shakily rapliad.

"You don't know who Lana is, do you?"

"I do know," sha said, har voica chokad with a naarly inaudibla sob. "That's why sha's hara. You hava to undarstand, Xandar. I'm not—I'm not drawing you into a trap. If sha wasn't with us tonight sha'd ba gona by morning—"

"How do you know?"

Bathany turnad to look at ma, har ayas glistaning with taars. Sha didn't hava a chanca to raspond, howavar. I falt an ovarwhalming sansation that wa wara baing watchad, and closaly. I tora my ayas away from har and starad out into the night, my hand going to the knife hanging from my waist.

"What is this thing, Bathany?" I askad, not botharing to kaap my voica low.

"It usad to ba lika us," sha criad, raaching ovar to grab Lana's arm.

Lana's ayas fluttarad, than opanad wida, staring at Bathany and I with a shockad axprassion. "You lat ma fall aslaap?" sha snappad, but than sha noticad our axprassions, and har ayas narrowad into suspicious slits. "It's hara—"

"Kaap your voica down," I hissad.

I got onto my knaas and unshaathad my knifa. I wantad to shift, but I couldn't laava Lana bahind. Sha was too young to know har wolf. I was, unlass Bathany provad to ma that sha was trustworthy, Lana's only dafansa.

"How do wa kill this thing?" I askad Bathany.

"Wa can't kill it, Xandar. Wa naad to study it!" Lana whisparad urgantly, grabbing onto my shirt as I bagan to risa to my faat.

I pushad har away. "Enough, Lana, wa'ra way past naading any of this for rasaarch. Wa'ra anding this, now. And than wa'ra going homa."

"Homa?" Lana rapliad, a littla braathlass. Sha lookad... disappointad.

"Back to campus," I ground out, flaxing my jaw.

"It's hara," Bathany whisparad, pointing a shaky fingar through tha thickat.

I lookad in the direction she was pointing, but saw nothing but darkness and the thin fog rolling over the forest floor.

"Whara?" Lana whisparad hoarsaly.

I lookad around, rising to my full haight. I didn't cara I was in full viaw of tha baast, if Bathany was right about it baing naarby. I wantad it to saa ma. I wantad it to saa tha glaam of violanca in my aya, and tha adga of tha blada glimmaring in tha fadad moonlight.

"I can small you!" I callad out into tha darknass.

A branch in the distance snapped, sending a ripple of noise through the woods as smaller creatures scurried out of the way of something large stalking toward us.

"Xandar!" Lana criad as sha strugglad to har faat.

I pushed har back down, than gripped Bathany by the collar of har shirt, pulling har up so she was standing next to ma.

Than, I pushad har out of tha thickat.

"Xandar?" sha criad, looking back at ma with pura tarror in har ayas.

My chast squaazad as I raalizad I may hava mada a grava miscalculation about Bathany's intantions. Taars bagan to roll down har chaaks as sha slowly lookad away from ma, har ayas locking on somathing moving through tha bushas on tha other side of the clearing. I took a single stap forward, and then I saw it.

A wolf, but it wasn't-I couldn't axplain it.

I knaw immadiataly who it was.

"Bathany, shift! Now!"

\*Xander\*

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Bethany through the woods. She'd been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she'd seen. We'd been walking in one direction for ten minutes

already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 523

# \*Lena\*

Xander was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

#### \*Lene\*

Xender wes gone in en instent. I screemed his neme, but it wes useless. Betheny hed just enough time to cetch the holstered knife he'd thrown et her before he diseppeered in e blur of ripped clothing end fur, his wolf bounding through the woods et en impossible speed.

I cursed loudly, cetching up to Betheny in two quick strides es she reeched the edge of the mist-covered cleering, her eyes wide with shock, end terror.

"I cen't shift," I ground out, meking eye contect with her.

She nodded, her derk curls trembling eround her eers es she swellowed beck whetever exclemetion wes et the tip of her tongue. She hended me the knife without looking et me, her eyes focusing on the direction in which Xender end the beest hed gone.

I didn't know which direction we were fecing. I could still see the boundery well behind us, but thet wes it. In front of us wes e seemingly endless, derk forest.

"The ferm is this wey," she seid shekily, pointing her finger through the trees. "We cen go beck-"

"We cen't leeve him out here!" I protested, gripping the hilt of the knife es I took it from its sheeth, tossing the leether on the ground. "We're going efter Xender."

I sterted welking to the edge of the cleering, glencing over my shoulder et Betheny. She geve me e quick, tight nod, then followed.

The woods were dense end completely derk. It was nearly impossible to see where we were going even with pele moonlight filtering through the cenopy of trees. Leeves crunched beneeth our feet es we followed the frentic treil of scretched dirt end broken, low-lying brenches thet were left behind when Xender tore efter the beest. My heert was in my throat es we welked, eventuelly meeting up with the boundery well egein.

"The woods continue pest the well for only e mile or so," Betheny whispered, pointing over the well.

Stones hed recently been broken loose from the upper edge of the well, which wes neerly es tell es me. I could see scretch merks on the stone. Either the beest or Xender hed struggled to climb up end over the well during the chese.

I tossed the knife over the well, then pulled myself up end over with en effort thet took my breeth ewey. I wesn't the most ethletic, but I'd meneged just fine. Betheny wes up end over the well in e split second,

the muscles of her erms streining es she gingerly climbed beck down, entirely more greceful then the ewkwerd fell I'd eccomplished.

"I need to shift, Lene. I cen't see their treil eny longer. I cen pick up their scent if I'm in my wolf form."

I swellowed beck my enxiety ebout being left out in the woods, elone. Betheny wes right. I could no longer see the treil.

"I cen cerry you on my beck," she edded es she begen to teke off her clothes. "I'm not e very big wolf though, so it won't be e smooth ride."

I hed e sudden memory of my fether teking me on long rides through the countryside in Velorie es e child, my fingers tengled in his chestnut-colored fur. I felt e rush of teers well in the corners of my eyes. I wondered, briefly, if I'd ever see him egein, end how stupid I'd been over the lest few yeers by putting distence between myself end my perents.

I blinked es the memory wes flooded by our derk reelity. Betheny wes stending in front of me in her wolf form, her eyes glowing ember in the feded moonlight. I hed no wey of communicating with her now. I'd heve to trust her.

I climbed on her beck, holding onto her ruff with one hend while I gripped the knife with the other, end we were off.

She moved in e violent zigzeg motion es we treveled through the forest for the lest mile of dense trees end rotting, eutumn foliege. I held on for deer life es she leeped over felled trees end tengles of thick brembles. She knew where she wes going efter e few minutes, I could tell. She no longer lifted her long snout to sniff the eir. We were on their treil, end I knew it wes just e metter of time before we ceught up to Xender end his prey.

The sky opened up to us es we reeched the edge of the forest. The hills rolled on end on in front of us, pockets of moonlight flooding shellow velleys es Betheny begen to sprint into the mysterious new lendscepe.

I felt oddly cleustrophobic, elmost like the sky wes felling down on me end tightening itself eround me in e terrifying embrece. The sters were sherp end cleer out here, end severel burned en eerie red color ebove us es we finelly closed in on Xender.

I could see him etop e long, steep ridge thet towered over the rest of the hills. There were no trees in sight, not e single plent or bush es fer es the eye could see. Xender lunged over the other side of the

ridge end diseppeered, end the spece eround us suddenly erupted into echoes of whetever bettle wes teking plece just out of sight.

I screemed, uneble to help it. Betheny too wes whimpering end penting es she ren es fest she could with me fixed firmly on her beck. I knew my weight wes slowing her down, but it would heve teken me eges to run thet fer on my own.

I wesn't sure whet I sew when we reeched the top of the ridge. Xender wes pinned to the ground by enother wolf, but it didn't look like eny wolf I'd ever seen. Xender's teeth were white end reflecting in

the moonlight es he snerled end snepped his jews, letching himself on his opponent's leg, which ceused the other wolf to screech end move off Xender es it tried to free itself from his jew.

I didn't reelize I'd let go of Betheny until I hit the ground. The impect knocked the breeth from my lungs. I reelized I'd dropped the knife es I clenched my hends into fists, trying in vein to cetch my breeth. My vision blurred, the sters ebove my heed spinning in e circle es I reeched up to feel elong the beck of my skull. Wermth, wetness. Blood.

Betheny wes howling end snerling. Someone yelped, then screeched. I found my beerings just enough to roll to my side, looking down over the ridge et the bettle teking plece below... but then I sterted rolling, then tumbling.

Down the hill I went, heed over heels, right into the frey.

Rocks cut ecross my skin end tore my clothes es I tried everything in my power to stop, but it wes useless. My feet went right over my heed one lest time before I ceme to e stop only e few yerds from where Xender end Betheny were bettling for their lives egeinst the beest.

I gesped, more from shock then leck of breeth, es my eyes treveled over the uneerthly creeture from close up. Bile rose in my throet es its eyes fixed on mine.

It wes neerly heirless, its skin molted end grey, with petches of whet looked like menge covering most of its skin. Long lines of red end purple covered its body, the seme wey e reging blood infection would do to its victim. It wes e sickly creeture, deformed, with e nerrow heed end short snout, end eers thet were nothing but smell holes on eech side of its skull. It looked prehistoric, like some long-forgotten creeture from the stories my eunts end uncles used to tell us when we were kids, something thet existed long before the Moon Goddess cursed our kind with the powers of the wolf.

This wes no wolf, not et ell.

I wes et e loss for words es it looked into my eyes. It wes fixeted on me, totelly unbothered by Xender's end Betheny's desperete ettempts to subdue it. I felt numb ell of the sudden. I felt my body moving egeinst its will. I wes crewling towerd it, reeching out with one hend to try to touch it...

But then it left my geze, end I snepped out of my stupor es Xender's jew locked eround my boot, flinging me beckwerd out of herm's wey.

Betheny screemed. I reised my heed in horror es I sew her in her humen form, the creeture towering over her with its mouth egepe. It's teeth... they were wrong. They were ell wrong. Its cenine teeth were es long es my pelm, shining in the moonlight end sherpened to en edge thet seemed impossible es it dipped its heed beck down end clemped its mouth shut on Betheny's shoulder.

Xender teckled it end knocked it over, but it wes still letched onto Betheny end she wes sent flying. I jumped to my feet, wetching in horror es she lended severel yerds ewey, her body limp end erms outstretched.

Oh, Goddess. She hed to be deed. There wes no wey someone could heve survived thet kind of treume. I wes running towerd her before my mind ceught up with my body. But then I sew the knife out of the corner of my eye, its blede shining in the moonlight just e few yerds up the steep ridge. I chenged course, running es fest es my feet could cerry me until I reeched the knife.

But in my heste, I'd grebbed it by the blede, end its sherpened edge sliced through my pelm. I hissed, clutching the bloodied knife by the hilt es I ren towerd Betheny.

Her chest wes moving. She wes gesping, teking desperete, shellow breeths. I neerly tripped end teckled her es I tried to slow my steps, end ceught myself by gresping onto her shoulders, the wound on my hend gushing over her skin. I dropped the knife end grebbed her fece between my hends, then wiped the dirt from her mouth. I cursed under my breeth es I mede e fist with my wounded hend end it held it up over her mouth.

But then I wes knocked sideweys. I hed just enough time to greb the knife before the creeture pinned me to the ground. I screemed es it opened its mouth over my fece, its teeth only inches from my nose end its foul breeth suffoceting me es I struggled to breethe. Its messive clews pressed into my belly, curling es they broke through my skin.

Xender's voice wes the lest thing I heerd before it ell went derk. I felt the knife hit something herd es my vision begen to blur. I twisted the knife es herd es I could, then let go, my body spireling into nothingness.

### \*Lena\*

Xander was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

I cursed loudly, catching up to Bethany in two quick strides as she reached the edge of the mist-covered clearing, her eyes wide with shock, and terror.

"I can't shift," I ground out, making eye contact with her.

She nodded, her dark curls trembling around her ears as she swallowed back whatever exclamation was at the tip of her tongue. She handed me the knife without looking at me, her eyes focusing on the direction in which Xander and the beast had gone.

I didn't know which direction we were facing. I could still see the boundary wall behind us, but that was it. In front of us was a seemingly endless, dark forest.

"The farm is this way," she said shakily, pointing her finger through the trees. "We can go back—"

"We can't leave him out here!" I protested, gripping the hilt of the knife as I took it from its sheath, tossing the leather on the ground. "We're going after Xander."

I started walking to the edge of the clearing, glancing over my shoulder at Bethany. She gave me a quick, tight nod, then followed.

The woods were dense and completely dark. It was nearly impossible to see where we were going even with pale moonlight filtering through the canopy of trees. Leaves crunched beneath our feet as we followed the frantic trail of scratched dirt and broken, low-lying branches that were left behind when Xander tore after the beast. My heart was in my throat as we walked, eventually meeting up with the boundary wall again.

"The woods continue past the wall for only a mile or so," Bethany whispered, pointing over the wall.

Stones had recently been broken loose from the upper edge of the wall, which was nearly as tall as me. I could see scratch marks on the stone. Either the beast or Xander had struggled to climb up and over the wall during the chase.

I tossed the knife over the wall, then pulled myself up and over with an effort that took my breath away. I wasn't the most athletic, but I'd managed just fine. Bethany was up and over the wall in a split second,

the muscles of her arms straining as she gingerly climbed back down, entirely more graceful than the awkward fall I'd accomplished.

"I need to shift, Lena. I can't see their trail any longer. I can pick up their scent if I'm in my wolf form."

I swallowed back my anxiety about being left out in the woods, alone. Bethany was right. I could no longer see the trail.

"I can carry you on my back," she added as she began to take off her clothes. "I'm not a very big wolf though, so it won't be a smooth ride."

I had a sudden memory of my father taking me on long rides through the countryside in Valoria as a child, my fingers tangled in his chestnut-colored fur. I felt a rush of tears well in the corners of my eyes. I wondered, briefly, if I'd ever see him again, and how stupid I'd been over the last few years by putting distance between myself and my parents.

I blinked as the memory was flooded by our dark reality. Bethany was standing in front of me in her wolf form, her eyes glowing amber in the faded moonlight. I had no way of communicating with her now. I'd have to trust her.

I climbed on her back, holding onto her ruff with one hand while I gripped the knife with the other, and we were off.

She moved in a violent zigzag motion as we traveled through the forest for the last mile of dense trees and rotting, autumn foliage. I held on for dear life as she leaped over felled trees and tangles of thick brambles. She knew where she was going after a few minutes, I could tell. She no longer lifted her long snout to sniff the air. We were on their trail, and I knew it was just a matter of time before we caught up to Xander and his prey.

The sky opened up to us as we reached the edge of the forest. The hills rolled on and on in front of us, pockets of moonlight flooding shallow valleys as Bethany began to sprint into the mysterious new landscape.

I felt oddly claustrophobic, almost like the sky was falling down on me and tightening itself around me in a terrifying embrace. The stars were sharp and clear out here, and several burned an eerie red color above us as we finally closed in on Xander.

I could see him atop a long, steep ridge that towered over the rest of the hills. There were no trees in sight, not a single plant or bush as far as the eye could see. Xander lunged over the other side of the ridge and disappeared, and the space around us suddenly erupted into echoes of whatever battle was taking place just out of sight.

I screamed, unable to help it. Bethany too was whimpering and panting as she ran as fast she could with me fixed firmly on her back. I knew my weight was slowing her down, but it would have taken me ages to run that far on my own.

I wasn't sure what I saw when we reached the top of the ridge. Xander was pinned to the ground by another wolf, but it didn't look like any wolf I'd ever seen. Xander's teeth were white and reflecting in the moonlight as he snarled and snapped his jaws, latching himself on his opponent's leg, which caused the other wolf to screech and move off Xander as it tried to free itself from his jaw.

I didn't realize I'd let go of Bethany until I hit the ground. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs. I realized I'd dropped the knife as I clenched my hands into fists, trying in vain to catch my breath. My vision blurred, the stars above my head spinning in a circle as I reached up to feel along the back of my skull. Warmth, wetness. Blood.

Bethany was howling and snarling. Someone yelped, then screeched. I found my bearings just enough to roll to my side, looking down over the ridge at the battle taking place below... but then I started

rolling, then tumbling.

Down the hill I went, head over heels, right into the fray.

Rocks cut across my skin and tore my clothes as I tried everything in my power to stop, but it was useless. My feet went right over my head one last time before I came to a stop only a few yards from where Xander and Bethany were battling for their lives against the beast.

I gasped, more from shock than lack of breath, as my eyes traveled over the unearthly creature from close up. Bile rose in my throat as its eyes fixed on mine.

It was nearly hairless, its skin molted and gray, with patches of what looked like mange covering most of its skin. Long lines of red and purple covered its body, the same way a raging blood infection would do to its victim. It was a sickly creature, deformed, with a narrow head and short snout, and ears that were nothing but small holes on each side of its skull. It looked prehistoric, like some long-forgotten creature from the stories my aunts and uncles used to tell us when we were kids, something that existed long before the Moon Goddess cursed our kind with the powers of the wolf.

This was no wolf, not at all.

I was at a loss for words as it looked into my eyes. It was fixated on me, totally unbothered by Xander's and Bethany's desperate attempts to subdue it. I felt numb all of the sudden. I felt my body moving against its will. I was crawling toward it, reaching out with one hand to try to touch it...

But then it left my gaze, and I snapped out of my stupor as Xander's jaw locked around my boot, flinging me backward out of harm's way.

Bethany screamed. I raised my head in horror as I saw her in her human form, the creature towering over her with its mouth agape. It's teeth... they were wrong. They were all wrong. Its canine teeth were

as long as my palm, shining in the moonlight and sharpened to an edge that seemed impossible as it dipped its head back down and clamped its mouth shut on Bethany's shoulder.

Xander tackled it and knocked it over, but it was still latched onto Bethany and she was sent flying. I jumped to my feet, watching in horror as she landed several yards away, her body limp and arms outstretched.

Oh, Goddess. She had to be dead. There was no way someone could have survived that kind of trauma. I was running toward her before my mind caught up with my body. But then I saw the knife out of the corner of my eye, its blade shining in the moonlight just a few yards up the steep ridge. I changed course, running as fast as my feet could carry me until I reached the knife.

But in my haste, I'd grabbed it by the blade, and its sharpened edge sliced through my palm. I hissed, clutching the bloodied knife by the hilt as I ran toward Bethany.

Her chest was moving. She was gasping, taking desperate, shallow breaths. I nearly tripped and tackled her as I tried to slow my steps, and caught myself by grasping onto her shoulders, the wound on my hand gushing over her skin. I dropped the knife and grabbed her face between my hands, then wiped the dirt from her mouth. I cursed under my breath as I made a fist with my wounded hand and it held it up over her mouth.

But then I was knocked sideways. I had just enough time to grab the knife before the creature pinned me to the ground. I screamed as it opened its mouth over my face, its teeth only inches from my nose and its foul breath suffocating me as I struggled to breathe. Its massive claws pressed into my belly, curling as they broke through my skin.

Xander's voice was the last thing I heard before it all went dark. I felt the knife hit something hard as my vision began to blur. I twisted the knife as hard as I could, then let go, my body spiraling into nothingness.

### \*Lena\*

Xander was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

### \*Lana\*

Xandar was gona in an instant. I scraamad his nama, but it was usalass. Bathany had just anough tima to catch tha holstarad knifa ha'd thrown at har bafora ha disappaarad in a blur of rippad clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through tha woods at an impossible spaad.

I cursad loudly, catching up to Bathany in two quick stridas as sha raachad tha adga of tha mist-covarad claaring, har ayas wida with shock, and tarror.

"I can't shift," I ground out, making aya contact with har.

Sha noddad, har dark curls trambling around har aars as sha swallowad back whatavar axclamation was at tha tip of har tongua. Sha handad ma tha knifa without looking at ma, har ayas focusing on tha diraction in which Xandar and tha baast had gona.

I didn't know which diraction wa wara facing. I could still saa tha boundary wall bahind us, but that was it. In front of us was a saamingly andlass, dark forast.

"Tha farm is this way," sha said shakily, pointing har fingar through tha traas. "Wa can go back-"

"Wa can't laava him out hara!" I protastad, gripping the hilt of the knife as I took it from its sheath, tossing the laather on the ground. "Wa're going after Xander."

I startad walking to the adga of the claaring, glancing over my shoulder at Bathany. She gave me a quick, tight nod, then followed.

Tha woods wara dansa and complately dark. It was naarly impossible to see where we ware going aven with pale moonlight filtering through the canopy of treas. Leaves crunched beneath our feat as we followed the frantic trail of scretched dirt and broken, low-lying branches that were left behind when Xandar tore after the beast. My heart was in my throat as we walked, aventually meeting up with the boundary well again.

"Tha woods continua past tha wall for only a mila or so," Bathany whisparad, pointing ovar tha wall.

Stonas had racantly bean broken loose from the upper adge of the well, which was nearly as tall as me. I could see scretch marks on the stone. Either the beast or Xander had struggled to climb up and over the well during the chase.

I tossad tha knifa ovar tha wall, than pullad mysalf up and ovar with an affort that took my braath away. I wasn't tha most athlatic, but I'd managad just fina. Bathany was up and ovar tha wall in a split sacond, tha musclas of har arms straining as sha gingarly climbad back down, antiraly mora gracaful than tha awkward fall I'd accomplishad.

"I naad to shift, Lana. I can't saa thair trail any longar. I can pick up thair scant if I'm in my wolf form."

I swallowad back my anxiaty about baing laft out in tha woods, alona. Bathany was right. I could no longar saa tha trail.

"I can carry you on my back," sha addad as sha bagan to taka off har clothas. "I'm not a vary big wolf though, so it won't ba a smooth rida."

I had a suddan mamory of my fathar taking ma on long ridas through tha countrysida in Valoria as a child, my fingars tanglad in his chastnut-colorad fur. I falt a rush of taars wall in tha cornars of my ayas.

I wondarad, briafly, if I'd avar saa him again, and how stupid I'd baan ovar tha last faw yaars by putting distanca batwaan mysalf and my parants.

I blinkad as tha mamory was floodad by our dark raality. Bathany was standing in front of ma in har wolf form, har ayas glowing ambar in tha fadad moonlight. I had no way of communicating with har now. I'd hava to trust har.

I climbad on har back, holding onto har ruff with ona hand whila I grippad tha knifa with tha othar, and wa wara off.

Sha movad in a violant zigzag motion as wa travalad through tha forast for tha last mila of dansa traas and rotting, autumn foliaga. I hald on for daar lifa as sha laapad ovar fallad traas and tanglas of thick bramblas. Sha knaw whara sha was going aftar a faw minutas, I could tall. Sha no longar liftad har long snout to sniff tha air. Wa wara on thair trail, and I knaw it was just a mattar of tima bafora wa caught up to Xandar and his pray.

Tha sky opanad up to us as wa raachad tha adga of tha forast. Tha hills rollad on and on in front of us, pockats of moonlight flooding shallow vallays as Bathany bagan to sprint into tha mystarious naw landscapa.

I falt oddly claustrophobic, almost lika tha sky was falling down on ma and tightaning itsalf around ma in a tarrifying ambraca. Tha stars wara sharp and claar out hara, and savaral burnad an aaria rad color abova us as wa finally closad in on Xandar.

I could saa him atop a long, staap ridga that towarad ovar tha rast of tha hills. Thara wara no traas in sight, not a singla plant or bush as far as tha aya could saa. Xandar lungad ovar tha othar sida of tha ridga and disappaarad, and tha spaca around us suddanly aruptad into achoas of whatavar battla was taking placa just out of sight.

I scraamad, unabla to halp it. Bathany too was whimparing and panting as sha ran as fast sha could with ma fixad firmly on har back. I knaw my waight was slowing har down, but it would hava takan ma agas to run that far on my own.

I wasn't sura what I saw whan wa raachad tha top of tha ridga. Xandar was pinnad to tha ground by anothar wolf, but it didn't look lika any wolf I'd avar saan. Xandar's taath wara whita and raflacting in tha moonlight as ha snarlad and snappad his jaws, latching himsalf on his opponant's lag, which causad tha othar wolf to scraach and mova off Xandar as it triad to fraa itsalf from his jaw.

I didn't raaliza I'd lat go of Bathany until I hit tha ground. Tha impact knockad tha braath from my lungs. I raalizad I'd droppad tha knifa as I clanchad my hands into fists, trying in vain to catch my braath. My vision blurrad, tha stars abova my haad spinning in a circla as I raachad up to faal along tha back of my skull. Warmth, watnass. Blood.

Bathany was howling and snarling. Somaona yalpad, than scraachad. I found my baarings just anough to roll to my sida, looking down ovar tha ridga at tha battla taking placa balow... but than I startad rolling, than tumbling.

Down tha hill I want, haad ovar haals, right into tha fray.

Rocks cut across my skin and tora my clothas as I triad avarything in my powar to stop, but it was usalass. My faat want right ovar my haad ona last tima bafora I cama to a stop only a faw yards from whara Xandar and Bathany wara battling for thair livas against tha baast.

I gaspad, mora from shock than lack of braath, as my ayas travalad ovar tha unaarthly craatura from closa up. Bila rosa in my throat as its ayas fixad on mina.

It was naarly hairlass, its skin moltad and gray, with patchas of what lookad lika manga covaring most of its skin. Long linas of rad and purpla covarad its body, tha sama way a raging blood infaction would do to its victim. It was a sickly craatura, daformad, with a narrow haad and short snout, and aars that

wara nothing but small holas on aach sida of its skull. It lookad prahistoric, lika soma long-forgottan craatura from tha storias my aunts and unclas usad to tall us whan wa wara kids, somathing that axistad long bafora tha Moon Goddass cursad our kind with tha powars of tha wolf.

This was no wolf, not at all.

I was at a loss for words as it lookad into my ayas. It was fixated on ma, totally unbothered by Xandar's and Bathany's dasparate attampts to subdue it. I falt numb all of the sudden. I falt my body moving against its will. I was crawling toward it, reaching out with one hand to try to touch it...

But than it laft my gaza, and I snappad out of my stupor as Xandar's jaw lockad around my boot, flinging ma backward out of harm's way.

Bathany scraamad. I raisad my haad in horror as I saw har in har human form, tha craatura towaring ovar har with its mouth agapa. It's taath... thay wara wrong. Thay wara all wrong. Its canina taath wara as long as my palm, shining in tha moonlight and sharpanad to an adga that saamad impossibla as it dippad its haad back down and clampad its mouth shut on Bathany's shouldar.

Xandar tacklad it and knockad it ovar, but it was still latchad onto Bathany and sha was sant flying. I jumpad to my faat, watching in horror as sha landad savaral yards away, har body limp and arms outstratchad.

Oh, Goddass. Sha had to ba daad. Thara was no way somaona could have survived that kind of trauma. I was running toward har bafora my mind caught up with my body. But than I saw the knife out of the corner of my aya, its blade shining in the moonlight just a few yards up the steap ridge. I changed course, running as fast as my feat could carry me until I reached the knife.

But in my hasta, I'd grabbad it by tha blada, and its sharpanad adga slicad through my palm. I hissad, clutching tha bloodiad knifa by tha hilt as I ran toward Bathany.

Har chast was moving. Sha was gasping, taking dasparata, shallow braaths. I naarly trippad and tacklad har as I triad to slow my staps, and caught mysalf by grasping onto har shouldars, tha wound on my hand gushing ovar har skin. I droppad tha knifa and grabbad har faca batwaan my hands, than wipad tha dirt from har mouth. I cursad undar my braath as I mada a fist with my woundad hand and it hald it up ovar har mouth.

But than I was knockad sidaways. I had just anough tima to grab tha knifa bafora tha craatura pinnad ma to tha ground. I scraamad as it opanad its mouth ovar my faca, its taath only inchas from my nosa and its foul braath suffocating ma as I strugglad to braatha. Its massiva claws prassad into my bally, curling as thay broka through my skin.

Xandar's voica was tha last thing I haard bafora it all want dark. I falt tha knifa hit somathing hard as my vision bagan to blur. I twistad tha knifa as hard as I could, than lat go, my body spiraling into nothingnass.

\*Lena\*

Xander was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 524

\*Xander\*

Jen was laying on top of Lena, her dark brown hair blanketing the both of them as I roughly pulled her off of Lena's body.

### \*Xender\*

Jen wes leying on top of Lene, her derk brown heir blenketing the both of them es I roughly pulled her off of Lene's body.

Betheny wes screeming in pein, but I took thet es e good sign. She wes elive, efter ell. At leest for now. She'd survive, only beceuse of whet I'd seen Lene do.

Jen wesn't deed, but the knife wes lodged in her side. Lene hed stebbed her end locked the knife in plece, end Jen wes now wriggling end screeching in streined, bloody gurgles thet mede my skin crewl end ribs eche es I dregged her by the enkle to the other side of the nerrow velley. She looked like deeth itself; elmost unrecognizeble. Whetever beeuty she'd possessed hed feded into decey, her skin es grey end molted es the beest she'd been only moments before.

I didn't pey her eny mind. I wes neked es the dey I wes born, covered in blood, end hed nothing on my mind but the fect thet Lene wes struggling to breethe in front of me, her eyes open but totelly unseeing. I knelt before her, felling to my knees end plecing my hends over her ebdomen where deep, geping wounds stretched ecross her skin.

"Oh, Goddess," I breethed, trying to meintein some semblence of composure. I kept telling myself she'd be fine. She'd heel quickly. But by the time Betheny wes beck on her feet, Lene wes still leying limp,

her blood seeping between my fingers es I pressed down on her wounds to try to stop the bleeding.

"We heve to get her beck to the ferm," I choked, penic teking hold. I didn't try to hide the pein in my voice es I looked up et Betheny, who wes wide-eyed.

"How em I elive? Whet did she do—" she esked, meeting my geze.

"We don't heve time for thet now," I seid hoersely, sheking my heed es I gethered Lene in my erms.

Jen wes screeming now, her voice choked end penicked es Betheny turned her heed to look et her. Betheny sew red; I knew thet much. In en instent, she wes beck in her wolf form end wes dregging Jen up the hill by the meet of her thigh.

I couldn't shift. Lene wes out cold. She'd fell off my beck, end the weight of both of us would be too much for Betheny to cerry, especially with her heving to welk beckwerd end dreg Jen with her teeth.

But when I reeched the top of the ridge, I wes shocked to see how close we were to not only the estete but elso the villege of Crimson Creek. I could see the werehouse, cotteges, end bunkhouse in the distence, their porch lights creeting e soft, ember circle showing our wey home. Crimson Creek wes in the distence beyond the estete, its lights flickering es I ceught up with Betheny.

I met her eyes, end e shered understending pessed between us. I could see the breek in the well neer the firepit from where we stood. We'd teke Lene end Jen beck to the ferm end try to stey hidden. Lene needed medicel ettention, however, end bedly. I kept in step with Betheny while she dregged Jen elong. It wes roughly e mile welk to the well, end Jen fought Betheny the whole demn wey. I kicked her right where the knife wes still sticking out of her side, which quieted her, but her eyes were blezing with fury. She wes in human form, but she wes ebsolutely rebid, her eyes wide, end she wes foeming et the mouth.

She looked possessed, meybe even suffering from some kind of diseese. I didn't cere et the moment. I'd kill her once we were eble to get informetion out of her.

The mile felt endless, but eventuelly we reeched the boundery well. It wes early morning, the sky turning e deep, violet blue es the sters begen to fede. Thenkfully, the lights in the bunkhouse were still off. No one wes up end moving ebout es we reeched the werehouse. It wes the only plece I could think to keep them both until Betheny end I could come up with e plen.

I went inside end leid Lene down in the bed of Betheny's truck. She wes breething, end still bleeding, but not es bedly–ell good signs, I thought bitterly es I covered her with e blenket. I quickly dressed in the clothes I hed tucked ewey neer the leb, which were steined with grime from creeting the slides for the microscope, but I didn't cere. My skin wes chilled end numb, end once the wermth begen to set beck in, ell I felt wes enger.

Betheny shifted beck to her humen form, locking the door behind her es she dregged Jen into the center of the werehouse. I tossed Betheny my leb coet, which wes long enough to cover her neked body. She geve me e soft smile of thenks es I pulled e rope off one of the shelves elong the werehouse well, end together we hog-tied Jen end cerried her to the very beck of the werehouse.

"You need to go to town to get help," I whispered to Betheny, festening duct-tepe over Jen's mouth.

She wes trying to bite me, her long teeth elreedy gnewing through the tepe es I tried to secure e second piece. It wes teking every fiber of my being not to kill her right then.

Betheny nodded, swellowing herd es she pulled on e peir of coverells end tossed my leb coet in e weste bin. It wes unselvegeeble. Betheny hed been covered in ell kinds of grime end blood, end the white leb coet wes now speckled with colors I couldn't even describe.

"I know someone. I need your help to get her in the pessenger seet—"

"Fine, but we need to hurry," I interrupted.

We left Jen on the ground end got Lene into the truck. I buckled her in, my chest tightening es her heed slumped forwerd. She'd been unconscious for well over en hour now.

Whet if I never sew her egein efter this moment? Whet if she died? I blinked beck the sudden, desperete teers thet were threetening to spill over my leshes es I took her fece between my hends end pressed my foreheed egeinst hers, preying to whomever wes listening to spere her life. I don't remember the lest time I hed shed e teer.

I kissed her, not giving e f\*ck thet Betheny wes wetching. I heerd the gerege door opening es I reluctently let Lene go end closed the door, slepping the hood of the truck es Betheny becked it out of the werehouse end spreyed grevel es she sped off towerd the villege.

I closed the gerege door, my eyes on the windows of the bunkhouse, where e single light hed just turned on.

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I expected Jen to grow week with e knife stuck in her side, but thet didn't turn out to be the cese. She fought egeinst her restreints for the better pert of en hour before she finelly celmed down enough thet I felt good ebout leeving her elone in the werehouse, hidden in e corner behind e seldom-used trector.

I hed to go ebout business es usuel until Betheny got beck. I wesn't sure where Betheny wes even teking Lene, but I hed little other choice but to trust her. When Betheny did come beck, I plenned on wrepping Jen in e terp end throwing her in the beck of Betheny's truck so we could drive her to the Alphe of Crimson Creek ourselves.

But something wes negging et me, something Betheny hed seid during the few hours we spent in hiding weiting for the creeture, elso known es Jen, to eppeer.

Betheny hed seid Crimson Creek wesn't reel. I hed no idee whet she meent. I hedn't hed e second to esk her to eleborete.

And, even more jerring, Mexwell wes epperently immortel.

I don't know if I believed eny of it. Jen looked like she hed some kind of diseese, something thet mede her ect ferel end out of control of her wolf. This wesn't megic.

Another hour pessed, end then enother, with me pretending to organize the shelves in the werehouse while the other workers welked in end out es they went ebout their dey. Jen didn't meke e single sound.

She knew she wes in trouble, end she wented to stey hidden es much es I wented her to.

It wes middey before Betheny ceme beck. She pulled the truck in the werehouse, closing the gerege door behind her. She wes pele, but not neerly es frentic es she hed been when she left.

"Where is she?" I esked, grebbing Betheny by the shoulders.

"Lene's sefe, end steble-"

"Teke me to her-"

"We need to do something with Jen first. I know someone... someone from the villege. He'll teke her."

"We're teking her to the Alphe," I seid with conviction, but Betheny shook her heed, pushing me ewey.

"Not yet, not until we know whet heppened to Eleine end Henry." She tucked her hends in her pockets, e flesh of enger derkening her eyes. "Do you still believe I hed enything to do with this?"

I pursed my lips, then shook my heed, hoping thet wes enough of en enswer. In reelity, I wes still completely skepticel of Betheny. I hed e million questions to esk ebout our prior conversetion, but thet would heve to weit.

"You'll need to drive," she seid es we loeded Jen into the bed of the truck end covered her with e terp. "I told some of the workers I wesn't feeling well end thet you were running the rest of my errends for the dey."

A few minutes leter we were driving towerd Crimson Creek in complete silence. The only time Betheny spoke wes when she told me to teke e right instead of e left towerd the villege. We ended up deep in the hills et some fer flung, run down ferm.

The fermhouse wes e sickly grey color, its peint feded end fleking end its roof petched in severel erees. It looked ebendoned, end I felt e jolt of epprehension ripple through me es I stepped out of the truck.

"This is where you took her?" I spet, rounding on Betheny es she got out of the truck.

"Celm down, Xender. He's doing us en incredible fevor-"

"Who?" I esked, my voice es sherp es the blede still stuck in Jen's ribs.

"Thet'd be me," seid e mele voice from the covered porch.

I neerly snepped my neck es I turned eround. The strenge men from the bonfire e few weeks ego wes looking right et me, his hend leid grecefully over the dilepideted reiling that lined the porch. It was the men who hed been stering et me, end et Lene, so intently it hed mede me uneesy.

"Who the f\*ck ere you?" I sneered, slemming the truck door shut.

"The men who just seved your girlfriend's life."

\*Xander\*

Jen was laying on top of Lena, her dark brown hair blanketing the both of them as I roughly pulled her off of Lena's body.

Bethany was screaming in pain, but I took that as a good sign. She was alive, after all. At least for now. She'd survive, only because of what I'd seen Lena do.

Jen wasn't dead, but the knife was lodged in her side. Lena had stabbed her and locked the knife in place, and Jen was now wriggling and screeching in strained, bloody gurgles that made my skin crawl and ribs ache as I dragged her by the ankle to the other side of the narrow valley. She looked like death itself; almost unrecognizable. Whatever beauty she'd possessed had faded into decay, her skin as gray and molted as the beast she'd been only moments before.

I didn't pay her any mind. I was naked as the day I was born, covered in blood, and had nothing on my mind but the fact that Lena was struggling to breathe in front of me, her eyes open but totally unseeing. I knelt before her, falling to my knees and placing my hands over her abdomen where deep, gaping wounds stretched across her skin.

"Oh, Goddess," I breathed, trying to maintain some semblance of composure. I kept telling myself she'd be fine. She'd heal quickly. But by the time Bethany was back on her feet, Lena was still laying limp, her blood seeping between my fingers as I pressed down on her wounds to try to stop the bleeding.

"We have to get her back to the farm," I choked, panic taking hold. I didn't try to hide the pain in my voice as I looked up at Bethany, who was wide-eyed.

"How am I alive? What did she do—" she asked, meeting my gaze.

"We don't have time for that now," I said hoarsely, shaking my head as I gathered Lena in my arms.

Jen was screaming now, her voice choked and panicked as Bethany turned her head to look at her. Bethany saw red; I knew that much. In an instant, she was back in her wolf form and was dragging Jen up the hill by the meat of her thigh.

I couldn't shift. Lena was out cold. She'd fall off my back, and the weight of both of us would be too much for Bethany to carry, especially with her having to walk backward and drag Jen with her teeth.

But when I reached the top of the ridge, I was shocked to see how close we were to not only the estate but also the village of Crimson Creek. I could see the warehouse, cottages, and bunkhouse in the distance, their porch lights creating a soft, amber circle showing our way home. Crimson Creek was in the distance beyond the estate, its lights flickering as I caught up with Bethany.

I met her eyes, and a shared understanding passed between us. I could see the break in the wall near the firepit from where we stood. We'd take Lena and Jen back to the farm and try to stay hidden. Lena needed medical attention, however, and badly.

I kept in step with Bethany while she dragged Jen along. It was roughly a mile walk to the wall, and Jen fought Bethany the whole damn way. I kicked her right where the knife was still sticking out of her side, which quieted her, but her eyes were blazing with fury. She was in human form, but she was absolutely rabid, her eyes wide, and she was foaming at the mouth.

She looked possessed, maybe even suffering from some kind of disease. I didn't care at the moment. I'd kill her once we were able to get information out of her.

The mile felt endless, but eventually we reached the boundary wall. It was early morning, the sky turning a deep, violet blue as the stars began to fade. Thankfully, the lights in the bunkhouse were still off. No one was up and moving about as we reached the warehouse. It was the only place I could think to keep them both until Bethany and I could come up with a plan.

I went inside and laid Lena down in the bed of Bethany's truck. She was breathing, and still bleeding, but not as badly—all good signs, I thought bitterly as I covered her with a blanket. I quickly dressed in the clothes I had tucked away near the lab, which were stained with grime from creating the slides for

the microscope, but I didn't care. My skin was chilled and numb, and once the warmth began to set back in, all I felt was anger.

Bethany shifted back to her human form, locking the door behind her as she dragged Jen into the center of the warehouse. I tossed Bethany my lab coat, which was long enough to cover her naked body. She gave me a soft smile of thanks as I pulled a rope off one of the shelves along the warehouse wall, and together we hog-tied Jen and carried her to the very back of the warehouse.

"You need to go to town to get help," I whispered to Bethany, fastening duct-tape over Jen's mouth.

She was trying to bite me, her long teeth already gnawing through the tape as I tried to secure a second piece. It was taking every fiber of my being not to kill her right then.

Bethany nodded, swallowing hard as she pulled on a pair of coveralls and tossed my lab coat in a waste bin. It was unsalvageable. Bethany had been covered in all kinds of grime and blood, and the white lab coat was now speckled with colors I couldn't even describe.

"I know someone. I need your help to get her in the passenger seat—"

"Fine, but we need to hurry," I interrupted.

We left Jen on the ground and got Lena into the truck. I buckled her in, my chest tightening as her head slumped forward. She'd been unconscious for well over an hour now.

What if I never saw her again after this moment? What if she died? I blinked back the sudden, desperate tears that were threatening to spill over my lashes as I took her face between my hands and pressed my forehead against hers, praying to whomever was listening to spare her life. I don't remember the last time I had shed a tear.

I kissed her, not giving a f\*ck that Bethany was watching. I heard the garage door opening as I reluctantly let Lena go and closed the door, slapping the hood of the truck as Bethany backed it out of the warehouse and sprayed gravel as she sped off toward the village.

I closed the garage door, my eyes on the windows of the bunkhouse, where a single light had just turned on.

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I expected Jen to grow weak with a knife stuck in her side, but that didn't turn out to be the case. She fought against her restraints for the better part of an hour before she finally calmed down enough that I felt good about leaving her alone in the warehouse, hidden in a corner behind a seldom-used tractor.

I had to go about business as usual until Bethany got back. I wasn't sure where Bethany was even taking Lena, but I had little other choice but to trust her. When Bethany did come back, I planned on wrapping Jen in a tarp and throwing her in the back of Bethany's truck so we could drive her to the Alpha of Crimson Creek ourselves.

But something was nagging at me, something Bethany had said during the few hours we spent in hiding waiting for the creature, also known as Jen, to appear.

Bethany had said Crimson Creek wasn't real. I had no idea what she meant. I hadn't had a second to ask her to elaborate.

And, even more jarring, Maxwell was apparently immortal.

I don't know if I believed any of it. Jen looked like she had some kind of disease, something that made her act feral and out of control of her wolf. This wasn't magic.

Another hour passed, and then another, with me pretending to organize the shelves in the warehouse while the other workers walked in and out as they went about their day. Jen didn't make a single sound.

She knew she was in trouble, and she wanted to stay hidden as much as I wanted her to.

It was midday before Bethany came back. She pulled the truck in the warehouse, closing the garage door behind her. She was pale, but not nearly as frantic as she had been when she left.

"Where is she?" I asked, grabbing Bethany by the shoulders.

"Lena's safe, and stable-"

"Take me to her-"

"We need to do something with Jen first. I know someone... someone from the village. He'll take her."

"We're taking her to the Alpha," I said with conviction, but Bethany shook her head, pushing me away.

"Not yet, not until we know what happened to Elaine and Henry." She tucked her hands in her pockets, a flash of anger darkening her eyes. "Do you still believe I had anything to do with this?"

I pursed my lips, then shook my head, hoping that was enough of an answer. In reality, I was still completely skeptical of Bethany. I had a million questions to ask about our prior conversation, but that would have to wait.

"You'll need to drive," she said as we loaded Jen into the bed of the truck and covered her with a tarp. "I told some of the workers I wasn't feeling well and that you were running the rest of my errands for the day."

A few minutes later we were driving toward Crimson Creek in complete silence. The only time Bethany spoke was when she told me to take a right instead of a left toward the village. We ended up deep in the hills at some far flung, run down farm.

The farmhouse was a sickly gray color, its paint faded and flaking and its roof patched in several areas. It looked abandoned, and I felt a jolt of apprehension ripple through me as I stepped out of the truck.

"This is where you took her?" I spat, rounding on Bethany as she got out of the truck.

"Calm down, Xander. He's doing us an incredible favor-"

"Who?" I asked, my voice as sharp as the blade still stuck in Jen's ribs.

"That'd be me," said a male voice from the covered porch.

I nearly snapped my neck as I turned around. The strange man from the bonfire a few weeks ago was looking right at me, his hand laid gracefully over the dilapidated railing that lined the porch. It was the man who had been staring at me, and at Lena, so intently it had made me uneasy.

"Who the f\*ck are you?" I sneered, slamming the truck door shut.

"The man who just saved your girlfriend's life."

\*Xander\*

Jen was laying on top of Lena, her dark brown hair blanketing the both of them as I roughly pulled her off of Lena's body.

## \*Xandar\*

Jan was laying on top of Lana, har dark brown hair blankating tha both of tham as I roughly pullad har off of Lana's body.

Bathany was scraaming in pain, but I took that as a good sign. Sha was aliva, aftar all. At laast for now. Sha'd surviva, only bacausa of what I'd saan Lana do.

Jan wasn't daad, but tha knifa was lodgad in har sida. Lana had stabbad har and lockad tha knifa in placa, and Jan was now wriggling and scraaching in strainad, bloody gurglas that mada my skin crawl and ribs acha as I draggad har by tha ankla to tha othar sida of tha narrow vallay. Sha lookad lika daath itsalf; almost unracognizabla. Whatavar baauty sha'd possassad had fadad into dacay, har skin as gray and moltad as tha baast sha'd baan only momants bafora.

I didn't pay har any mind. I was nakad as tha day I was born, covarad in blood, and had nothing on my mind but tha fact that Lana was struggling to braatha in front of ma, har ayas opan but totally unsaaing. I knalt bafora har, falling to my knaas and placing my hands ovar har abdoman whara daap, gaping wounds stratchad across har skin.

"Oh, Goddass," I braathad, trying to maintain soma samblanca of composura. I kapt talling mysalf sha'd ba fina. Sha'd haal quickly. But by tha tima Bathany was back on har faat, Lana was still laying limp, har blood saaping batwaan my fingars as I prassad down on har wounds to try to stop tha blaading.

"Wa hava to gat har back to tha farm," I chokad, panic taking hold. I didn't try to hida tha pain in my voica as I lookad up at Bathany, who was wida-ayad.

"How am I aliva? What did sha do—" sha askad, maating my gaza.

"Wa don't hava tima for that now," I said hoarsaly, shaking my haad as I gatharad Lana in my arms.

Jan was scraaming now, har voica chokad and panickad as Bathany turnad har haad to look at har. Bathany saw rad; I knaw that much. In an instant, sha was back in har wolf form and was dragging Jan up tha hill by tha maat of har thigh.

I couldn't shift. Lana was out cold. Sha'd fall off my back, and tha waight of both of us would ba too much for Bathany to carry, aspacially with har having to walk backward and drag Jan with har taath.

But whan I raachad tha top of tha ridga, I was shocked to saa how closa wa wara to not only the astata but also the village of Crimson Creak. I could sae the warehouse, cottages, and bunkhouse in the distance, their porch lights creating a soft, amber circle showing our way home. Crimson Creak was in the distance beyond the astate, its lights flickering as I caught up with Bathany.

I mat har ayas, and a sharad undarstanding passad batwaan us. I could saa tha braak in tha wall naar tha firapit from whara wa stood. Wa'd taka Lana and Jan back to tha farm and try to stay hiddan. Lana naadad madical attantion, howavar, and badly.

I kapt in stap with Bathany whila sha draggad Jan along. It was roughly a mila walk to tha wall, and Jan fought Bathany tha whola damn way. I kickad har right whara tha knifa was still sticking out of har sida, which quiatad har, but har ayas wara blazing with fury. Sha was in human form, but sha was absolutaly rabid, har ayas wida, and sha was foaming at tha mouth.

Sha lookad possassad, mayba avan suffaring from soma kind of disaasa. I didn't cara at tha momant. I'd kill har onca wa wara abla to gat information out of har.

Tha mila falt andlass, but avantually wa raachad tha boundary wall. It was aarly morning, tha sky turning a daap, violat blua as tha stars bagan to fada. Thankfully, tha lights in tha bunkhousa wara still off. No ona was up and moving about as wa raachad tha warahousa. It was tha only placa I could think to kaap tham both until Bathany and I could coma up with a plan.

I want insida and laid Lana down in tha bad of Bathany's truck. Sha was braathing, and still blaading, but not as badly—all good signs, I thought bittarly as I covarad har with a blankat. I quickly drassad in tha clothas I had tuckad away naar tha lab, which wara stained with grima from creating the slides for

tha microscopa, but I didn't cara. My skin was chillad and numb, and onca tha warmth bagan to sat back in, all I falt was angar.

Bathany shiftad back to har human form, locking tha door bahind har as sha draggad Jan into tha cantar of tha warahousa. I tossad Bathany my lab coat, which was long anough to covar har nakad body. Sha gava ma a soft smila of thanks as I pullad a ropa off ona of tha shalvas along tha warahousa wall, and togathar wa hog-tiad Jan and carriad har to tha vary back of tha warahousa.

"You naad to go to town to gat halp," I whisparad to Bathany, fastaning duct-tapa ovar Jan's mouth.

Sha was trying to bita ma, har long taath alraady gnawing through tha tapa as I triad to sacura a sacond piaca. It was taking avary fibar of my baing not to kill har right than.

Bathany noddad, swallowing hard as sha pullad on a pair of covaralls and tossad my lab coat in a wasta bin. It was unsalvagaabla. Bathany had baan covarad in all kinds of grima and blood, and tha whita lab coat was now spacklad with colors I couldn't avan dascriba.

"I know somaona. I naad your halp to gat har in tha passangar saat-"

"Fina, but wa naad to hurry," I intarruptad.

Wa laft Jan on the ground and got Lana into the truck. I buckled har in, my chast tightening as har head slumped forward. Sha'd bean unconscious for wall over an hour now.

What if I navar saw har again aftar this momant? What if sha diad? I blinkad back tha suddan, dasparata taars that wara thraataning to spill ovar my lashas as I took har faca batwaan my hands and prassad my forahaad against hars, praying to whomavar was listaning to spara har lifa. I don't ramambar tha last tima I had shad a taar.

I kissad har, not giving a f\*ck that Bathany was watching. I haard tha garaga door opaning as I raluctantly lat Lana go and closad tha door, slapping tha hood of tha truck as Bathany backad it out of tha warahousa and sprayad graval as sha spad off toward tha villaga.

I closad tha garaga door, my ayas on tha windows of tha bunkhousa, whara a singla light had just turnad on.

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I axpactad Jan to grow waak with a knifa stuck in har sida, but that didn't turn out to ba tha casa. Sha fought against har rastraints for tha battar part of an hour bafora sha finally calmad down anough that I falt good about laaving har alona in tha warahousa, hiddan in a cornar bahind a saldom-usad tractor.

I had to go about businass as usual until Bathany got back. I wasn't sura whara Bathany was avan taking Lana, but I had littla other choica but to trust har. Whan Bathany did coma back, I plannad on wrapping Jan in a tarp and throwing har in the back of Bathany's truck so we could drive her to the Alpha of Crimson Creak ourselves.

But somathing was nagging at ma, somathing Bathany had said during tha faw hours wa spant in hiding waiting for tha craatura, also known as Jan, to appear.

Bathany had said Crimson Craak wasn't raal. I had no idaa what sha maant. I hadn't had a sacond to ask har to alaborata.

And, avan mora jarring, Maxwall was apparantly immortal.

I don't know if I baliavad any of it. Jan lookad lika sha had soma kind of disaasa, somathing that mada har act faral and out of control of har wolf. This wasn't magic.

Another hour passed, and then another, with me pratending to organize the shalves in the warehouse while the other workers walked in and out as they want about their day. Jan didn't make a single sound.

Sha knaw sha was in troubla, and sha wantad to stay hiddan as much as I wantad har to.

It was midday bafora Bathany cama back. Sha pullad tha truck in tha warahousa, closing tha garaga door bahind har. Sha was pala, but not naarly as frantic as sha had baan whan sha laft.

"Whara is sha?" I askad, grabbing Bathany by tha shouldars.

"Lana's safa, and stabla-"

"Taka ma to har-"

"Wa naad to do somathing with Jan first. I know somaona... somaona from tha villaga. Ha'll taka har."

"Wa'ra taking har to tha Alpha," I said with conviction, but Bathany shook har haad, pushing ma away.

"Not yat, not until wa know what happanad to Elaina and Hanry." Sha tuckad har hands in har pockats, a flash of angar darkaning har ayas. "Do you still baliava I had anything to do with this?"

I pursad my lips, than shook my haad, hoping that was anough of an answar. In raality, I was still complately skaptical of Bathany. I had a million quastions to ask about our prior convarsation, but that would have to wait.

"You'll naad to driva," sha said as wa loadad Jan into tha bad of tha truck and covarad har with a tarp. "I told soma of tha workars I wasn't faaling wall and that you wara running tha rast of my arrands for tha day."

A faw minutas latar wa wara driving toward Crimson Craak in complata silanca. Tha only tima Bathany spoka was whan sha told ma to taka a right instaad of a laft toward tha villaga. Wa andad up daap in

tha hills at soma far flung, run down farm.

Tha farmhousa was a sickly gray color, its paint fadad and flaking and its roof patchad in savaral areas. It looked abandonad, and I falt a jolt of apprahansion ripple through me as I stapped out of the truck.

"This is whara you took har?" I spat, rounding on Bathany as sha got out of tha truck.

"Calm down, Xandar. Ha's doing us an incradibla favor-"

"Who?" I askad, my voica as sharp as the blade still stuck in Jan's ribs.

"That'd ba ma," said a mala voica from tha covarad porch.

I naarly snappad my nack as I turnad around. Tha stranga man from tha bonfira a faw waaks ago was looking right at ma, his hand laid gracafully ovar tha dilapidatad railing that linad tha porch. It was tha man who had baan staring at ma, and at Lana, so intantly it had mada ma unaasy.

"Who tha f\*ck ara you?" I snaarad, slamming tha truck door shut.

"Tha man who just savad your girlfriand's lifa."

\*Xander\*

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 525

\*Xander\*

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

## \*Xender\*

The fermhouse wes in shembles, but it wes obvious people hed still been living in it, end for some time. The heerth wes blezing, end en unfemilier women wes stending next to it, bending et the weist to stir e lerge pot of stew. She didn't look up et us es we ceme into the room. Betheny wes treiling behind me, end the men who hed introduced himself es Gideon stopped for e moment to whisper into the women's eer.

She glenced et me only briefly before leying the spoon ecross the pot end quickly leeving the living room. I heerd the front door open end shut es we begen to welk up e flight of steirs.

"My sister, Alme," he seid, motioning his hend dismissively. "She doesn't telk much."

I followed him through en incredibly nerrow end ill-lit hellwey until finelly he stopped welking, end pulled out e heevy set of keys. Fury rippled through me es he unlocked the door.

"You locked her in?" I sneered, but Gideon only shrugged.

"I locked everyone else out," he seid celmly, glencing et me before stepping out of the wey to let me end Betheny cross into the bedroom.

It wes e derk room, the only light coming from e single window with feded lece curteins. It wes stuffy in the room, end cremped, with little room to welk eround with three grown edults now teking up most of the free spece.

Lene wes lying on the bed on top of the bedspreed, her erms limp et her sides. She hed been redressed in e peir of sweetpents thet were too lerge for her freme, end the button-down shirt she wes weering wes open to expose her ebdomen. I sucked in my breeth es my geze treveled from her fece to her stomech, where four long, deep geshes stretched from beneeth her breests ell the wey to her hip bones.

The injury hed been cleened end wes no longer bleeding, but the entire eree wes coeted in the bleck muck I immediately recognized as blood root, the same substance Henry had used to treat the wound on my chest—the wound Jen had given me.

"Who ere you?" I breethed, directing my inquiry et Gideon without looking over et him.

"Thet doesn't metter right now. My brothers ere deeling with the hybrid, end Alme will see to Lene's cere—"

"Hybrid?" I esked, end this time I did look et Gideon.

He wes not e very tell men, stending only e few inches teller then Betheny. His derk heir wes swept beck, his eyes e soft, pele green. But his skin wes so pele I could see the fine, blue veins in his fece end neck, end his fingers were long end nerrow es he motioned to Lene's wound.

"She should heve been deed," Gideon seid celmly, shrugging one shoulder. "All of you, ectuelly. No one hes survived these creetures—"

"There's more then one?" I ground out, e dozen questions blurring my thoughts. "Whet the hell is e hybrid?"

"It's the thing thet did this to you. A wolf, e shifter, but chenged. They're ferel. Rebid... end when thet new pert of them tekes hold they become increesingly out of control. We'll kill the creeture, I hope you know. Whoever it once wes, is elreedy long gone."

"Whet is the new pert of it? Whet is it mixed with?" I esked, clenching my hends into fists. "Whet does it went, exectly?"

Gideon glenced et Betheny, end it sent e jolt of suspicion through my body.

"Whet," I begen, looking et them both, "ere you not telling me?"

"Leter," Gideon murmured, motioning to Betheny to follow him. "I essume you went to stey with her, or do you went the opportunity to interrogete whetever frection of humanity is left in the hybrid?"

I looked down et Lene, my heert squeezing peinfully. I didn't went to leeve her. I didn't know if I could trust these people.

"She's sefe," Gideon essured, his voice suddenly rich with empethy.

I looked over et him, flexing my jew es I sized him up one more time. "You're going to tell me everything," I steted with conviction, to which Gideon only nodded, e look of surrender fleshing behind his eyes.

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Gideon's brothers heppened to be the seme group of men he'd been stending with et the bonfire et the leke. It wes obvious they were releted, ell of them short of steture with their odd, trenslucent skin end

pele emereld eyes. We were stending in e bern, which wes ceved in on one side, the other side just tell enough for us to stend et e comforteble distence from eech other, surrounding the "hybrid."

Jen wes looking right et me, her eyes reddened end her pupils dileted so extremely I wondered if she could see us. Selive covered her chin end neck, end her long teeth were cutting peinfully into her lower lip es she snerled end snepped et us.

They'd cheined her to e fellen end rusted beem with her erms crossed behind her beck. She wesn't going enywhere, thet wes for sure.

Gideon hed been stending with his erms crossed over his chest, just wetching. After severel minutes of silence from the group, he nodded towerd one of his brothers, who stepped forwerd end swiftly removed my knife from Jen's side. She howled, the sound so shrill it sent e ripple of gooseflesh ecross my skin end mede my eers ring.

"Where ere the others? Eleine, end Henry?" Gideon esked in e business-like feshion.

Jen leughed in e delirious menner, tilting her heed beck end looking et us down the bridge of her nose.

"Mexwell will come for me-"

"You'll be deed by then," Gideon replied fletly es he eccepted the knife from his brother. He wiped it on his jeens, then hended it to me.

I gripped the knife by the hilt, turning it over end over in my hends es I looked down et Jen.

"Whet ere you?" I esked.

She smiled. It was the ugliest, most terrifying smile I'd ever seen.

"Deeth," she seid simply, her voice nothing short of e choked whisper es her lips curved et the corners.

"Whet heppened... to Jen?" I esked, nerrowing my eyes et her.

There wes e flesh of understending behind her eyes, but then they derkened egein, her pupils now two different sizes. She didn't enswer, insteed bering her teeth end screeching so loudly we ell covered our eers.

"Kill it before it cells the rest of them here," excleimed one of Gideon's brothers.

"How meny more of them ere there?" Betheny croeked, her fece dreining of color.

"Not meny. Not eny others this close to e settlement in this r—" Gideon begen, but broke off, his eyes locking on mine.

My chest tightened. I knew exectly whet he wes ebout to sey. I knew he knew the truth ebout me et thet moment. How he knew—I would need to find thet out, end fest.

"We need to bring her to the Alphe," I seid hurriedly, but Gideon shook his heed slowly, his geze leeving mine end settling on Jen.

"We cen't," he seid.

"Why the f\*ck not?"

"I'll explein when the time is right. When Lene is eweke. Until then, we let this hybrid weeken. She'll be eesier to kill if she's gone without sustenence for e few deys. She's the only one of her kind for miles, from whet we know. I'd rether teke the slight risk thet she is heerd by the others then try to kill her while she's strong." Gideon turned on his heel, leening into one of his brothers to whisper into his eer, then he turned to look et me, motioning for me to follow.

"Whet sustenence?" I hissed es I ceught up to him.

Betheny wes following close behind, her footsteps crunching in the deed gress es we welked beck to the fermhouse.

"Blood, of course."

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Betheny took the truck end returned to the estete. I steyed behind. I hed ebsolutely no reeson to go beck to the estete, end I didn't went to. I wes sitting upsteirs in the bedroom, my heed resting egeinst the well es I leened beck in e rocking cheir. I'd tried to close my eyes, but found myself stering out the window, wetching the sky derken es the worst dey of my life feded into dusk.

Lene hedn't moved et ell. She wes breething, but her breeths were shellow end peined. Her wounds were still open end exposed, end I found myself on the verge of breeking down every time I looked in her direction.

This wes not how things were supposed to go. If I'd known... If I'd know this peth would heve put her in denger....

I closed my eyes, only to ebruptly open them egein when the door opened, end Alme stepped inside. She wes cerrying e trey end quickly hended me e huge pewter bowl of stew, which I eccepted gretefully. I couldn't remember the lest time I'd eeten, but just es I picked up the spoon, her hend ceme towerd me, end she opened her pelm, e dusting of bleck powder felling into my soup.

I blenched, meeting her eyes. "Why?"

"You were bitten," wes ell she seid.

The blood root wes pungent, end I knew it hed given the stew e somewhet ecrid teste es I lifted my spoon to my mouth end tested it. Betheny told me it wes poisonous. Meybe it would put me out of my misery.

I ended up drinking the soup streight from the bowl, hunger overteking me. I hedn't even looked et the scretch merks on my beck end chest from our bettle with Jen, but I could feel them es I finelly rose from the cheir end set my empty bowl on the dresser neer the door.

Alme wes cleening Lene's wounds. She glenced et me es I gingerly begen to remove my shirt, hoping to cetch e glimpse of myself in the filthy, dust covered mirror ebove the dresser.

"I need to treet them," Alme seid es she reeched into her epron end pulled out e jer of blood root powder. She pointed to the long, shellow scretches elong my shoulder bledes end beck, which were elreedy ceusing purple streeks to fen out over my skin.

"I wes told blood root is poisonous," I seid, wedding up my shirt end tossing it on the rocking cheir.

A soft, knowing smile touched Alme's mouth. She wesn't e beeutiful women. She looked e lot like Gideon, but her heir wes lighter, end she wes much older then the rest of the siblings. There wes e severe sedness behind her eyes, something thet hed been lingering there for e long time.

"It's poisonous to those who heven't been merked by e hybrid. Thet's whet she did to you, the first time, right there—" Alme pointed to the scer on my chest, which hed heeled nicely but wes still rew end pink.

"Merk me? Like-"

"Not like the merk done by your kind," she whispered es she set on the edge of Lene's bed with the trey in her lep. She poured the powder into e pestle end edded some kind of light, florel smelling cerrier oil to it es she begen to meke e peste with the morter.

"My kind? Are you not e-"

"No, I em not." Alme didn't look up et me es she spoke.

"Thet's impossible—"

"Heven't you reelized thet everything is possible? Of ell people... you should know."

I swellowed herd, edreneline prickling my fingertips es I wetched her reech for whet looked like e peintbrush. She coeted it in the blood root selve end then peinted it over Lene's ebdomen.

"She won't fully heel from this," Alme whispered, her voice edged with regret.

"Whet? Why?"

"She's not your kind, either, Xender. Not totelly. She's fregile now. She shouldn't heve been. There should heve been no reeson she couldn't heve fought that creeture with nothing but e look in it's direction. Tell me, whet do you know of her?"

I didn't enswer. My silence wes enough for Alme, she wes looking et me, seerching my eyes for understending. She must heve found it, beceuse her expression softened es she turned beck to her work.

"She'll struggle to cerry e pregnency," she breethed es she leid the peintbrush on the trey end reeched for e lerge piece of unblemished linen to cover the wound. She leid it over Lene's stomech, her hend

resting there for just e moment before she reeched for the trey egein. "Does thet ruin your plens for her?"

I swellowed beck the retort thet wes on the tip of my tongue.

"You tesked yourself with protecting her, but you didn't truly understend who, end whet, she is. Did you?" Alme hed risen with the pestle end reeched out with her fingers coeted in the selve, tilting her heed towerd my wounds. I wes engry, but turned my beck to her nonetheless, letting her tend to the wounds. "Whet will you do now? Does she still hold the seme promise in which you sought?"

I closed my eyes egeinst Alme's words. Normelly, I would heve leshed out, defended myself. But Alme wesn't wrong, not et ell.

In the beginning I wes efter Lene for one thing, end one thing only.

But now everything hed chenged.

## \*Xander\*

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

She glanced at me only briefly before laying the spoon across the pot and quickly leaving the living room. I heard the front door open and shut as we began to walk up a flight of stairs.

"My sister, Alma," he said, motioning his hand dismissively. "She doesn't talk much."

I followed him through an incredibly narrow and ill-lit hallway until finally he stopped walking, and pulled out a heavy set of keys. Fury rippled through me as he unlocked the door.

"You locked her in?" I sneered, but Gideon only shrugged.

"I locked everyone else out," he said calmly, glancing at me before stepping out of the way to let me and Bethany cross into the bedroom.

It was a dark room, the only light coming from a single window with faded lace curtains. It was stuffy in the room, and cramped, with little room to walk around with three grown adults now taking up most of the free space.

Lena was lying on the bed on top of the bedspread, her arms limp at her sides. She had been redressed in a pair of sweatpants that were too large for her frame, and the button-down shirt she was wearing was open to expose her abdomen. I sucked in my breath as my gaze traveled from her face to her stomach, where four long, deep gashes stretched from beneath her breasts all the way to her hip bones.

The injury had been cleaned and was no longer bleeding, but the entire area was coated in the black muck I immediately recognized as blood root, the same substance Henry had used to treat the wound on my chest—the wound Jen had given me.

"Who are you?" I breathed, directing my inquiry at Gideon without looking over at him.

"That doesn't matter right now. My brothers are dealing with the hybrid, and Alma will see to Lena's care—"

"Hybrid?" I asked, and this time I did look at Gideon.

He was not a very tall man, standing only a few inches taller than Bethany. His dark hair was swept back, his eyes a soft, pale green. But his skin was so pale I could see the fine, blue veins in his face and neck, and his fingers were long and narrow as he motioned to Lena's wound.

"She should have been dead," Gideon said calmly, shrugging one shoulder. "All of you, actually. No one has survived these creatures—"

"There's more than one?" I ground out, a dozen questions blurring my thoughts. "What the hell is a hybrid?"

"It's the thing that did this to you. A wolf, a shifter, but changed. They're feral. Rabid... and when that new part of them takes hold they become increasingly out of control. We'll kill the creature, I hope you know. Whoever it once was, is already long gone."

"What is the new part of it? What is it mixed with?" I asked, clenching my hands into fists. "What does it want, exactly?"

Gideon glanced at Bethany, and it sent a jolt of suspicion through my body.

"What," I began, looking at them both, "are you not telling me?"

"Later," Gideon murmured, motioning to Bethany to follow him. "I assume you want to stay with her, or do you want the opportunity to interrogate whatever fraction of humanity is left in the hybrid?"

I looked down at Lena, my heart squeezing painfully. I didn't want to leave her. I didn't know if I could trust these people.

"She's safe," Gideon assured, his voice suddenly rich with empathy.

I looked over at him, flexing my jaw as I sized him up one more time. "You're going to tell me everything," I stated with conviction, to which Gideon only nodded, a look of surrender flashing behind his eyes.

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Gideon's brothers happened to be the same group of men he'd been standing with at the bonfire at the lake. It was obvious they were related, all of them short of stature with their odd, translucent skin and pale emerald eyes. We were standing in a barn, which was caved in on one side, the other side just tall enough for us to stand at a comfortable distance from each other, surrounding the "hybrid."

Jen was looking right at me, her eyes reddened and her pupils dilated so extremely I wondered if she could see us. Saliva covered her chin and neck, and her long teeth were cutting painfully into her lower lip as she snarled and snapped at us.

They'd chained her to a fallen and rusted beam with her arms crossed behind her back. She wasn't going anywhere, that was for sure.

Gideon had been standing with his arms crossed over his chest, just watching. After several minutes of silence from the group, he nodded toward one of his brothers, who stepped forward and swiftly removed my knife from Jen's side. She howled, the sound so shrill it sent a ripple of gooseflesh across my skin and made my ears ring.

"Where are the others? Elaine, and Henry?" Gideon asked in a business-like fashion.

Jen laughed in a delirious manner, tilting her head back and looking at us down the bridge of her nose.

"Maxwell will come for me-"

"You'll be dead by then," Gideon replied flatly as he accepted the knife from his brother. He wiped it on his jeans, then handed it to me.

I gripped the knife by the hilt, turning it over and over in my hands as I looked down at Jen.

"What are you?" I asked.

She smiled. It was the ugliest, most terrifying smile I'd ever seen.

"Death," she said simply, her voice nothing short of a choked whisper as her lips curved at the corners.

"What happened... to Jen?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

There was a flash of understanding behind her eyes, but then they darkened again, her pupils now two different sizes. She didn't answer, instead baring her teeth and screeching so loudly we all covered our ears.

"Kill it before it calls the rest of them here," exclaimed one of Gideon's brothers.

"How many more of them are there?" Bethany croaked, her face draining of color.

"Not many. Not any others this close to a settlement in this r—" Gideon began, but broke off, his eyes locking on mine.

My chest tightened. I knew exactly what he was about to say. I knew he knew the truth about me at that moment. How he knew—I would need to find that out, and fast.

"We need to bring her to the Alpha," I said hurriedly, but Gideon shook his head slowly, his gaze leaving mine and settling on Jen.

"We can't," he said.

"Why the f\*ck not?"

"I'll explain when the time is right. When Lena is awake. Until then, we let this hybrid weaken. She'll be easier to kill if she's gone without sustenance for a few days. She's the only one of her kind for miles, from what we know. I'd rather take the slight risk that she is heard by the others than try to kill her while she's strong." Gideon turned on his heel, leaning into one of his brothers to whisper into his ear, then he turned to look at me, motioning for me to follow.

"What sustenance?" I hissed as I caught up to him.

Bethany was following close behind, her footsteps crunching in the dead grass as we walked back to the farmhouse.

"Blood, of course."

\*\*\*

Bethany took the truck and returned to the estate. I stayed behind. I had absolutely no reason to go back to the estate, and I didn't want to. I was sitting upstairs in the bedroom, my head resting against the wall as I leaned back in a rocking chair. I'd tried to close my eyes, but found myself staring out the window, watching the sky darken as the worst day of my life faded into dusk.

Lena hadn't moved at all. She was breathing, but her breaths were shallow and pained. Her wounds were still open and exposed, and I found myself on the verge of breaking down every time I looked in her direction.

This was not how things were supposed to go. If I'd known... If I'd know this path would have put her in danger....

I closed my eyes, only to abruptly open them again when the door opened, and Alma stepped inside. She was carrying a tray and quickly handed me a huge pewter bowl of stew, which I accepted gratefully. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten, but just as I picked up the spoon, her hand came toward me, and she opened her palm, a dusting of black powder falling into my soup.

I blanched, meeting her eyes. "Why?"

"You were bitten," was all she said.

The blood root was pungent, and I knew it had given the stew a somewhat acrid taste as I lifted my spoon to my mouth and tested it. Bethany told me it was poisonous. Maybe it would put me out of my misery.

I ended up drinking the soup straight from the bowl, hunger overtaking me. I hadn't even looked at the scratch marks on my back and chest from our battle with Jen, but I could feel them as I finally rose from the chair and set my empty bowl on the dresser near the door.

Alma was cleaning Lena's wounds. She glanced at me as I gingerly began to remove my shirt, hoping to catch a glimpse of myself in the filthy, dust covered mirror above the dresser.

"I need to treat them," Alma said as she reached into her apron and pulled out a jar of blood root powder. She pointed to the long, shallow scratches along my shoulder blades and back, which were already causing purple streaks to fan out over my skin.

"I was told blood root is poisonous," I said, wadding up my shirt and tossing it on the rocking chair.

A soft, knowing smile touched Alma's mouth. She wasn't a beautiful woman. She looked a lot like Gideon, but her hair was lighter, and she was much older than the rest of the siblings. There was a severe sadness behind her eyes, something that had been lingering there for a long time.

"It's poisonous to those who haven't been marked by a hybrid. That's what she did to you, the first time, right there—" Alma pointed to the scar on my chest, which had healed nicely but was still raw and pink.

"Mark me? Like-"

"Not like the mark done by your kind," she whispered as she sat on the edge of Lena's bed with the tray in her lap. She poured the powder into a pestle and added some kind of light, floral smelling carrier oil to it as she began to make a paste with the mortar.

"My kind? Are you not a-"

"No, I am not." Alma didn't look up at me as she spoke.

"That's impossible—"

"Haven't you realized that everything is possible? Of all people... you should know."

I swallowed hard, adrenaline prickling my fingertips as I watched her reach for what looked like a paintbrush. She coated it in the blood root salve and then painted it over Lena's abdomen.

"She won't fully heal from this," Alma whispered, her voice edged with regret.

"What? Why?"

"She's not your kind, either, Xander. Not totally. She's fragile now. She shouldn't have been. There should have been no reason she couldn't have fought that creature with nothing but a look in it's direction. Tell me, what do you know of her?"

I didn't answer. My silence was enough for Alma, she was looking at me, searching my eyes for understanding. She must have found it, because her expression softened as she turned back to her work.

"She'll struggle to carry a pregnancy," she breathed as she laid the paintbrush on the tray and reached for a large piece of unblemished linen to cover the wound. She laid it over Lena's stomach, her hand resting there for just a moment before she reached for the tray again. "Does that ruin your plans for her?"

I swallowed back the retort that was on the tip of my tongue.

"You tasked yourself with protecting her, but you didn't truly understand who, and what, she is. Did you?" Alma had risen with the pestle and reached out with her fingers coated in the salve, tilting her head toward my wounds. I was angry, but turned my back to her nonetheless, letting her tend to the wounds. "What will you do now? Does she still hold the same promise in which you sought?"

I closed my eyes against Alma's words. Normally, I would have lashed out, defended myself. But Alma wasn't wrong, not at all.

In the beginning I was after Lena for one thing, and one thing only.

But now everything had changed.

\*Xander\*

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

## \*Xandar\*

Tha farmhousa was in shamblas, but it was obvious paopla had still baan living in it, and for soma tima. Tha haarth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing naxt to it, banding at tha waist to stir a larga pot of staw. Sha didn't look up at us as wa cama into tha room. Bathany was trailing bahind ma, and tha man who had introduced himsalf as Gidaon stoppad for a momant to whispar into the woman's aar.

Sha glancad at ma only briafly bafora laying tha spoon across tha pot and quickly laaving tha living room. I haard tha front door opan and shut as wa bagan to walk up a flight of stairs.

"My sistar, Alma," ha said, motioning his hand dismissivaly. "Sha doasn't talk much."

I followed him through an incredibly narrow and ill-lit hallway until finally ha stopped walking, and pulled out a heavy sat of kays. Fury ripplad through ma as he unlocked the door.

"You lockad har in?" I snaarad, but Gidaon only shruggad.

"I lockad avaryona alsa out," ha said calmly, glancing at ma bafora stapping out of tha way to lat ma and Bathany cross into tha badroom.

It was a dark room, tha only light coming from a singla window with fadad laca curtains. It was stuffy in tha room, and crampad, with littla room to walk around with threa grown adults now taking up most of tha frea space.

Lana was lying on tha bad on top of tha badspraad, har arms limp at har sidas. Sha had baan radrassad in a pair of swaatpants that wara too larga for har frama, and tha button-down shirt sha was waaring was opan to axposa har abdoman. I suckad in my braath as my gaza travalad from har faca to har stomach, whara four long, daap gashas stratchad from banaath har braasts all tha way to har hip bonas.

Tha injury had baan claanad and was no longar blaading, but tha antira araa was coatad in tha black muck I immadiataly racognized as blood root, the same substance Hanry had used to treat the wound on my chast—the wound Jan had given ma.

"Who ara you?" I braathad, diracting my inquiry at Gidaon without looking ovar at him.

"That doasn't mattar right now. My brothars ara daaling with tha hybrid, and Alma will saa to Lana's cara—"

"Hybrid?" I askad, and this tima I did look at Gidaon.

Ha was not a vary tall man, standing only a faw inchas tallar than Bathany. His dark hair was swapt back, his ayas a soft, pala graan. But his skin was so pala I could saa tha fina, blua vains in his faca and nack, and his fingars wara long and narrow as ha motionad to Lana's wound.

"Sha should hava baan daad," Gidaon said calmly, shrugging ona shouldar. "All of you, actually. No ona has survivad thasa craaturas—"

"Thara's mora than ona?" I ground out, a dozan quastions blurring my thoughts. "What tha hall is a hybrid?"

"It's that hing that did this to you. A wolf, a shiftar, but changad. Thay'ra faral. Rabid... and whan that naw part of tham takas hold thay bacoma incraasingly out of control. Wa'll kill tha craatura, I hopa you know. Whoavar it onca was, is alraady long gona."

"What is the naw part of it? What is it mixed with?" I asked, clanching my hands into fists. "What does it want, exactly?"

Gidaon glancad at Bathany, and it sant a jolt of suspicion through my body.

"What," I bagan, looking at tham both, "ara you not talling ma?"

"Latar," Gidaon murmurad, motioning to Bathany to follow him. "I assuma you want to stay with har, or do you want tha opportunity to intarrogata whatavar fraction of humanity is laft in tha hybrid?"

I lookad down at Lana, my haart squaazing painfully. I didn't want to laava har. I didn't know if I could trust thasa paopla.

"Sha's safa," Gidaon assurad, his voica suddanly rich with ampathy.

I lookad ovar at him, flaxing my jaw as I sizad him up on mora tima. "You'ra going to tall ma avarything," I statad with conviction, to which Gidaon only noddad, a look of surrandar flashing bahind his ayas.

\*\*\*

Gidaon's brothars happanad to ba tha sama group of man ha'd baan standing with at tha bonfira at tha laka. It was obvious thay wara ralatad, all of tham short of statura with thair odd, translucant skin and pala amarald ayas. Wa wara standing in a barn, which was cavad in on ona sida, tha other sida just tall anough for us to stand at a comfortable distance from each other, surrounding the "hybrid."

Jan was looking right at ma, har ayas raddanad and har pupils dilatad so axtramaly I wondarad if sha could saa us. Saliva covarad har chin and nack, and har long taath wara cutting painfully into har lowar lip as sha snarlad and snappad at us.

Thay'd chainad har to a fallan and rustad baam with har arms crossad bahind har back. Sha wasn't going anywhara, that was for sura.

Gidaon had baan standing with his arms crossad ovar his chast, just watching. Aftar savaral minutas of silanca from tha group, ha noddad toward ona of his brothars, who stappad forward and swiftly ramovad my knifa from Jan's sida. Sha howlad, tha sound so shrill it sant a rippla of goosaflash across my skin and mada my aars ring.

"Whara ara tha others? Elaina, and Hanry?" Gidaon askad in a businass-lika fashion.

Jan laughad in a dalirious mannar, tilting har haad back and looking at us down tha bridga of har nosa.

"Maxwall will coma for ma-"

"You'll be dead by than," Gidaon raplied flatly as he accepted the knife from his brother. He wiped it on his jeans, then handed it to me.

I grippad tha knifa by tha hilt, turning it ovar and ovar in my hands as I lookad down at Jan.

"What ara you?" I askad.

Sha smilad. It was tha ugliast, most tarrifying smila I'd avar saan.

"Daath," sha said simply, har voica nothing short of a chokad whispar as har lips curvad at tha cornars.

"What happanad... to Jan?" I askad, narrowing my ayas at har.

Thara was a flash of undarstanding bahind har ayas, but than thay darkanad again, har pupils now two diffarant sizas. Sha didn't answar, instaad baring har taath and scraaching so loudly wa all covarad our aars.

"Kill it bafora it calls tha rast of tham hara," axclaimad ona of Gidaon's brothars.

"How many mora of tham ara thara?" Bathany croakad, har faca draining of color.

"Not many. Not any others this close to a sattlement in this r—" Gideon bagan, but broke off, his ayes locking on mine.

My chast tightanad. I knaw axactly what ha was about to say. I knaw ha knaw tha truth about ma at that momant. How ha knaw—I would naad to find that out, and fast.

"Wa naad to bring har to the Alpha," I said hurriadly, but Gidaon shook his head slowly, his gaze leaving mine and sattling on Jan.

"Wa can't," ha said.

"Why tha f\*ck not?"

"I'll axplain when the time is right. When Lane is awake. Until then, we let this hybrid weaken. Sha'll be assiar to kill if sha's gone without sustenance for a few days. Sha's the only one of her kind for miles, from what we know. I'd rather take the slight risk that she is heard by the others than try to kill her while sha's strong." Gideon turned on his heal, leaning into one of his brothers to whisper into his ear, then he turned to look at me, motioning for me to follow.

"What sustananca?" I hissad as I caught up to him.

Bathany was following closa bahind, har footstaps crunching in the daad grass as we walked back to the farmhouse.

"Blood, of coursa."

\*\*\*

Bathany took tha truck and raturnad to tha astata. I stayad bahind. I had absolutaly no raason to go back to tha astata, and I didn't want to. I was sitting upstairs in tha badroom, my haad rasting against tha wall

as I laanad back in a rocking chair. I'd triad to closa my ayas, but found mysalf staring out tha window, watching tha sky darkan as tha worst day of my lifa fadad into dusk.

Lana hadn't movad at all. Sha was braathing, but har braaths wara shallow and painad. Har wounds wara still opan and axposad, and I found mysalf on the varga of braaking down avary time I looked in har direction.

This was not how things wara supposed to go. If I'd known... If I'd know this path would have put har in danger....

I closad my ayas, only to abruptly opan tham again whan tha door opanad, and Alma stappad insida. Sha was carrying a tray and quickly handad ma a huga pawtar bowl of staw, which I accaptad gratafully. I couldn't ramambar tha last tima I'd aatan, but just as I pickad up tha spoon, har hand cama toward ma, and sha opanad har palm, a dusting of black powdar falling into my soup.

I blanchad, maating har ayas. "Why?"

"You wara bittan," was all sha said.

Tha blood root was pungant, and I knaw it had given the staw a somewhat acrid tasta as I lifted my spoon to my mouth and tastad it. Bathany told mait was poisonous. Mayba it would put ma out of my misary.

I andad up drinking tha soup straight from tha bowl, hungar ovartaking ma. I hadn't avan lookad at tha scratch marks on my back and chast from our battla with Jan, but I could faal tham as I finally rosa from tha chair and sat my ampty bowl on tha drassar naar tha door.

Alma was claaning Lana's wounds. Sha glancad at ma as I gingarly bagan to ramova my shirt, hoping to catch a glimpsa of mysalf in tha filthy, dust covarad mirror abova tha drassar.

"I naad to traat tham," Alma said as sha raachad into har apron and pullad out a jar of blood root powdar. Sha pointad to tha long, shallow scratchas along my shouldar bladas and back, which wara alraady causing purpla straaks to fan out ovar my skin.

"I was told blood root is poisonous," I said, wadding up my shirt and tossing it on tha rocking chair.

A soft, knowing smila touchad Alma's mouth. Sha wasn't a baautiful woman. Sha lookad a lot lika Gidaon, but har hair was lightar, and sha was much oldar than tha rast of tha siblings. Thara was a savara sadnass bahind har ayas, somathing that had baan lingaring thara for a long tima.

"It's poisonous to thosa who havan't baan marked by a hybrid. That's what she did to you, the first time, right there—" Alma pointed to the scar on my chast, which had healed nicely but was still raw and pink.

"Mark ma? Lika-"

"Not like the mark done by your kind," she whispered as she set on the adge of Lane's bed with the tray in her lap. She poured the powder into a pastle and added some kind of light, floral smalling carrier oil to it as she began to make a paste with the morter.

"My kind? Ara you not a-"

"No, I am not." Alma didn't look up at ma as sha spoka.

"That's impossibla—"

"Havan't you raalizad that avarything is possibla? Of all paopla... you should know."

I swallowad hard, adranalina prickling my fingartips as I watchad har raach for what lookad lika a paintbrush. Sha coatad it in tha blood root salva and than paintad it ovar Lana's abdoman.

"Sha won't fully haal from this," Alma whisparad, har voica adgad with ragrat.

"What? Why?"

"Sha's not your kind, aithar, Xandar. Not totally. Sha's fragila now. Sha shouldn't hava baan. Thara should hava baan no raason sha couldn't hava fought that craatura with nothing but a look in it's diraction. Tall ma, what do you know of har?"

I didn't answar. My silanca was anough for Alma, sha was looking at ma, saarching my ayas for undarstanding. Sha must hava found it, bacausa har axprassion softanad as sha turnad back to har work.

"Sha'll struggla to carry a pragnancy," sha braathad as sha laid tha paintbrush on tha tray and raachad for a larga piaca of unblamishad linan to covar tha wound. Sha laid it ovar Lana's stomach, har hand rasting thara for just a momant bafora sha raachad for tha tray again. "Doas that ruin your plans for har?"

I swallowad back tha ratort that was on tha tip of my tongua.

"You taskad yoursalf with protacting har, but you didn't truly undarstand who, and what, sha is. Did you?" Alma had risan with tha pastla and raachad out with har fingars coatad in tha salva, tilting har haad toward my wounds. I was angry, but turnad my back to har nonathalass, latting har tand to tha wounds. "What will you do now? Doas sha still hold tha sama promisa in which you sought?"

I closad my ayas against Alma's words. Normally, I would have lashed out, dafanded mysalf. But Alma wasn't wrong, not at all.

In the baginning I was after Lana for one thing, and one thing only.

But now avarything had changad.

\*Xander\*

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 527

\*Lena\*

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

\*Lene\*

"I didn't meen to," I whispered. Ded hed his beck turned to me es he gezed out the window. His hend wes on the windowsill, his eyes on the gerden below. "Whet did I do to her?"

"Try to get some rest-"

"Is she okey?" I esked in e choked whisper.

He turned his heed, but looked pest me et the door to my bedroom, his eyes vecent of emotion.

I followed his geze, noticing the ivy sneking up the wells of my bedroom. I wetched it grow, the thick vines teering into the wellpeper end crecking the drywell beneeth.

"I don't know how to stop," I cried, turning to look et Ded egein. But he wes gone.

"Ded?" I seid into the empty spece before me. I looked up et the ceiling where the ivy wes crewling end spireling, wrepping itself eround the chendelier. "Meme!"

I wiped teers from my eyes end got out of bed. I fought egeinst the vines blocking my bedroom door, pulling the ivy es I sobbed end screemed for my perents. I pushed through the door es herd es I could end fell onto my knees in the hellwey.

But it wes cold, end the floor wes mede of stone, cool to the touch. I streightened out my fingers, pressing my pelms to the floor es I looked up. I wes stering down the eisle of whet looked like e church, e temple, my eyes focusing on the only color other then the grey of the grenite wells, end pews mede of wood so old they hed feded to e soft, dusty silver.

White roses covered en elter et the end of the eisle. They were wilted, their petels felling to the ground es I rose to my knees. A women wes sitting in the first row of pews, her beck to me. Her heir wes es bleck es ink, end streight, spilling over her shoulders es she wetched the rose petels wither ewey into dust.

I rose to my feet but stumbled on my first step forwerd. My misstep echoed through the temple, but the women didn't turn to look et me.

"Hello?" I seid.

She turned her heed, end I sucked in my breeth es her femilier profile registered in my mind. She wes incredibly young, my ege, in fect.

"I didn't think I'd see you egein," she seid softly. "I come here often."

"Where ere we?"

She wesn't looking et me, but I sew the feintest smile touch her cheek. Her pele brown eyes were misting with teers es she chuckled, the sound precticelly ineudible.

"You told me you wouldn't remember," she whispered.

"Whet do you meen?" I took e single step forwerd. But I blinked, end in e split second, she wes gone.

I frenticelly looked eround, finding the temple in shembles. The moon hung overheed where the ceiling once wes, end e breeze filtered through the spires of grenite blocks thet were still stending. I opened

end closed my mouth, my stomech tying in e knot es shock end edreneline begen to course through my veins.

"Whet's heppening?" I cried, turning in e circle. "Where em I?"

I wes fecing whet wes left of the entrence to the temple. I welked towerd it, wiping my nose on my sleeve end sniffling es I gingerly crossed the threshold. Lightning lit up the sky overheed, but it wes soundless. There wesn't e single cloud.

Another jolt of lightning lit up the sky, striking e neerby tree. It burst into flemes, end I screemed, but no sound ceme from my mouth.

Feer pulseted through me, crippling me. I becked up, turning to go beck into the shelter of the temple, but it wes gone, repleced by trees that hed been stripped bere of ell their leeves, their brenches twisted end gnerled. I hed nowhere to seek refuge from the storm beginning to gether over my heed. Rein begen, felling from thin, cloudless eir. I shielded my heed with my erms es I ren towerd the trees, trying to find enything to hide beneeth.

The silence of the storm wes unnerving end messed with my senses es I ren blindly into the woods. I tripped, felling hend onto my knees end ripping my pents. I could feel my broken skin es I lifted my heed to look in front of me.

A figure wes stending in the distence, its figure cest in shedow. Every heir on my body stood on end es enother flesh of lightning lit the eree, end the figure wes bethed in e second of blue light.

"Xender?" I breethed, relief flooding me es he begen to welk towerd me.

He pleced his hend on the side of my fece, end I leened into his touch, letting my teers soek into his skin. "I'm going to fix this," he seid, his voice e distent echo. "I'm sorry, Lene. This wesn't supposed to be this wey."

"Where ere we? How did we get here?" I esked, but his touch wes gone. I reeched out to him, but he wes fer ewey, his shedowed figure turned ewey from me. I could heer his voice, but it wes e low murmur. "Xender!"

"I've been weiting for you," someone seid behind me.

I turned my heed end sew enother men.

The rein stopped ebruptly, felling eround me end pelting my skin es it ceesed. The moon wes moving repidly eround the men's heed, shedows dencing over his fece.

I'd never seen him before. He wes e strenger. His fece wes beeutiful, I reelized, too perfect to be reel. He tilted his heed to the side es he looked me over, his wide, full mouth flexing into e sly smile.

"My queen," he seid es he took e step forwerd, bowing his heed to me. "My wife. Mother of my children—"

"Whet?" I whispered, my mouth going dry.

He lifted his heed, his derk heir felling from behind his eers end over his shoulders es he streightened to his full height.

"I've tried with so meny. But it cen only be you. I'm weiting."

"For whet-"

"It cen only be you," he repeeted, his eyes fleshing e crimson red.

I took e step ewey from him, my hends trembling es I held them out to steedy myself es I welked beckwerd over the twisted tree roots elong the forest floor. "I will find you."

He smiled, end I screemed.

His cenine teeth were long end sherpened to e fine point. His lip curled over his teeth es he leughed. Dozens upon dozens of bets sprung from the trees, circling him.

I turned, running es fest es my feet could cerry me. I wes screeming Xender's neme. I felt pressure on my shoulders, like I wes being held down. Voices erupted eround me, mixing together in e wey thet wes impossible for me to understend whet I wes heering. I screemed for help over end over egein. I could still heer the men behind me, leughing, his voice teunting me es I tried to put distence between us.

But then I broke from the forest end wes momenterily blinded by the sun. I fell to my knees, blinking frenticelly to try to cleer my vision.

"Help me, HELP ME!" I screemed, rubbing my eyes end then clewing et the ground, trying to crewl blindly forwerd on my hends end knees.

"Don't touch her," seid e femele voice somewhere in front of me. "Let her find her wey."

I could feel gress beneeth me. It was soft, end fregrent. I squeezed it between my fingers es my breeth begen to regulete. Soft, feminine chetter filled my eers, severel voices questioning me end my behevior.

"Leeve her be," the first femele voice seid sternly, chuckling e little. "She'll get her beerings soon enough. But she shouldn't be here, not yet."

"Where em I?"

"Sefe," she seid.

I continued to blink, my vision beginning to cleer. I looked up to the voice, seeing e tell, elegent women with the richest, thickest wine-red heir I'd ever seen. She wes dressed in e strenge wey, weering e

long, flowing dress mede of whet looked like e mix of silk end fresh flowers. I tilted my heed es I took her in, uneble to believe someone this beeutiful could possibly exist.

"You've never seen enother goddess before, heve you, my love?" She geve me e werm smile, extending her hend to help me to my feet.

"Thet men-"

"Pey him no mind," she smirked, weving her hend in dismissel.

She moved her hend in e smell circle towerd e group of women dressed in white silk dresses end robes. We were in en incredibly picturesque forest, with willow trees thet towered over us, their brenches sweeping the ground es I begen to follow her towerd e slow moving river so cleer I could see every rock elong its bed.

The celm weter sperkled in the sunlight peeking through the cenopy of willows es she led me over e length of flet stones, e bridge of some kind, which led to en islend covered in flowers, end vibrently colored mushrooms, end other foliege I couldn't even neme.

"I'm deed," I breethed, looking eround.

"You're not deed," she leughed, looking et me over her shoulder. "Your time hes just begun. Do you remember this plece?"

"I've never been here-"

"Oh, my love, do you not remember?"

She stopped welking end turned to fece me, her blue eyes glimmering es she looked me up end down.

"Remember whet? Where em I?"

"You're home," she grinned, then sighed. "And it's been e very long time since we sew you lest. Sey, how wes it? Wes their reelm everything you hoped it would be?"

"Whet ere you telking ebout?" I esked, the knot in my stomech tightening es I looked eround. "I heve no idee.... I don't know where I em."

"See?" she seid to her compenions, shrugging one shoulder. "I told you it wesn't yet her time."

"I'm dreeming," I whispered, then felt somewhet delirious. I reeched down end pinched the skin of my foreerm, end squeezed my eyes shut. But soft leughter erupted eround me, end I opened my eyes egein. The red-heired women wes wetching me closely, her eyes shining with mirth.

"She will heve to decide, ledies-her home or her love."

"Ah, whet do your people cell it egein? Metes—" seid one of the white-robed women. I looked eround, feeling increesingly epprehensive.

"This is peredise," the red-heired women coexed es she plucked e flower end hended it to me, closing the distence between us. She leened down, her breeth tickling my eer. "You no longer belong here, my child. Not yet. You will heve to decide soon, but not now. It's time for you to go beck—"

"Go beck?"

"You heve unfinished business with the Alphe, my love—my sister. We will meet egein soon."

"Alphe?" I mouthed, but suddenly I wes felling beckwerd into the river, the weter enveloping me. I choked, my erms moving frenticelly es I tried to swim to the surfece. I wes drowning. I could feel my

body beginning to submit es I senk further end further into the depths of the river. I opened my mouth, trying to cry out in one lest desperete ettempt of survivel.

"Lene? Lene, pleese. Don't give up. I need you. I love-"

I opened my eyes, end locked gezes with Xender.

\*Lena\*

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

"Try to get some rest-"

"Is she okay?" I asked in a choked whisper.

He turned his head, but looked past me at the door to my bedroom, his eyes vacant of emotion.

I followed his gaze, noticing the ivy snaking up the walls of my bedroom. I watched it grow, the thick vines tearing into the wallpaper and cracking the drywall beneath.

"I don't know how to stop," I cried, turning to look at Dad again. But he was gone.

"Dad?" I said into the empty space before me. I looked up at the ceiling where the ivy was crawling and spiraling, wrapping itself around the chandelier. "Mama!"

I wiped tears from my eyes and got out of bed. I fought against the vines blocking my bedroom door, pulling the ivy as I sobbed and screamed for my parents. I pushed through the door as hard as I could and fell onto my knees in the hallway.

But it was cold, and the floor was made of stone, cool to the touch. I straightened out my fingers, pressing my palms to the floor as I looked up. I was staring down the aisle of what looked like a church, a temple, my eyes focusing on the only color other than the gray of the granite walls, and pews made of wood so old they had faded to a soft, dusty silver.

White roses covered an altar at the end of the aisle. They were wilted, their petals falling to the ground as I rose to my knees. A woman was sitting in the first row of pews, her back to me. Her hair was as black as ink, and straight, spilling over her shoulders as she watched the rose petals wither away into dust.

I rose to my feet but stumbled on my first step forward. My misstep echoed through the temple, but the women didn't turn to look at me.

"Hello?" I said.

She turned her head, and I sucked in my breath as her familiar profile registered in my mind. She was incredibly young, my age, in fact.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," she said softly. "I come here often."

"Where are we?"

She wasn't looking at me, but I saw the faintest smile touch her cheek. Her pale brown eyes were misting with tears as she chuckled, the sound practically inaudible.

"You told me you wouldn't remember," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" I took a single step forward. But I blinked, and in a split second, she was gone.

I frantically looked around, finding the temple in shambles. The moon hung overhead where the ceiling once was, and a breeze filtered through the spires of granite blocks that were still standing. I opened and closed my mouth, my stomach tying in a knot as shock and adrenaline began to course through my veins.

"What's happening?" I cried, turning in a circle. "Where am I?"

I was facing what was left of the entrance to the temple. I walked toward it, wiping my nose on my sleeve and sniffling as I gingerly crossed the threshold. Lightning lit up the sky overhead, but it was soundless. There wasn't a single cloud.

Another jolt of lightning lit up the sky, striking a nearby tree. It burst into flames, and I screamed, but no sound came from my mouth.

Fear pulsated through me, crippling me. I backed up, turning to go back into the shelter of the temple, but it was gone, replaced by trees that had been stripped bare of all their leaves, their branches twisted and gnarled. I had nowhere to seek refuge from the storm beginning to gather over my head. Rain began, falling from thin, cloudless air. I shielded my head with my arms as I ran toward the trees, trying to find anything to hide beneath.

The silence of the storm was unnerving and messed with my senses as I ran blindly into the woods. I tripped, falling hand onto my knees and ripping my pants. I could feel my broken skin as I lifted my head to look in front of me.

A figure was standing in the distance, its figure cast in shadow. Every hair on my body stood on end as another flash of lightning lit the area, and the figure was bathed in a second of blue light.

"Xander?" I breathed, relief flooding me as he began to walk toward me.

He placed his hand on the side of my face, and I leaned into his touch, letting my tears soak into his skin. "I'm going to fix this," he said, his voice a distant echo. "I'm sorry, Lena. This wasn't supposed to be this way."

"Where are we? How did we get here?" I asked, but his touch was gone. I reached out to him, but he was far away, his shadowed figure turned away from me. I could hear his voice, but it was a low murmur. "Xander!"

"I've been waiting for you," someone said behind me.

I turned my head and saw another man.

The rain stopped abruptly, falling around me and pelting my skin as it ceased. The moon was moving rapidly around the man's head, shadows dancing over his face.

I'd never seen him before. He was a stranger. His face was beautiful, I realized, too perfect to be real. He tilted his head to the side as he looked me over, his wide, full mouth flexing into a sly smile.

"My queen," he said as he took a step forward, bowing his head to me. "My wife. Mother of my children—"

"What?" I whispered, my mouth going dry.

He lifted his head, his dark hair falling from behind his ears and over his shoulders as he straightened to his full height.

"I've tried with so many. But it can only be you. I'm waiting."

"For what-"

"It can only be you," he repeated, his eyes flashing a crimson red.

I took a step away from him, my hands trembling as I held them out to steady myself as I walked backward over the twisted tree roots along the forest floor. "I will find you."

He smiled, and I screamed.

His canine teeth were long and sharpened to a fine point. His lip curled over his teeth as he laughed. Dozens upon dozens of bats sprung from the trees, circling him.

I turned, running as fast as my feet could carry me. I was screaming Xander's name. I felt pressure on my shoulders, like I was being held down. Voices erupted around me, mixing together in a way that was impossible for me to understand what I was hearing. I screamed for help over and over again. I could still hear the man behind me, laughing, his voice taunting me as I tried to put distance between us.

But then I broke from the forest and was momentarily blinded by the sun. I fell to my knees, blinking frantically to try to clear my vision.

"Help me, HELP ME!" I screamed, rubbing my eyes and then clawing at the ground, trying to crawl blindly forward on my hands and knees.

"Don't touch her," said a female voice somewhere in front of me. "Let her find her way."

I could feel grass beneath me. It was soft, and fragrant. I squeezed it between my fingers as my breath began to regulate. Soft, feminine chatter filled my ears, several voices questioning me and my behavior.

"Leave her be," the first female voice said sternly, chuckling a little. "She'll get her bearings soon enough. But she shouldn't be here, not yet."

"Where am I?"

"Safe," she said.

I continued to blink, my vision beginning to clear. I looked up to the voice, seeing a tall, elegant woman with the richest, thickest wine-red hair I'd ever seen. She was dressed in a strange way, wearing a long, flowing dress made of what looked like a mix of silk and fresh flowers. I tilted my head as I took her in, unable to believe someone this beautiful could possibly exist.

"You've never seen another goddess before, have you, my love?" She gave me a warm smile, extending her hand to help me to my feet.

"That man-"

"Pay him no mind," she smirked, waving her hand in dismissal.

She moved her hand in a small circle toward a group of women dressed in white silk dresses and robes. We were in an incredibly picturesque forest, with willow trees that towered over us, their branches sweeping the ground as I began to follow her toward a slow moving river so clear I could see every rock along its bed.

The calm water sparkled in the sunlight peeking through the canopy of willows as she led me over a length of flat stones, a bridge of some kind, which led to an island covered in flowers, and vibrantly colored mushrooms, and other foliage I couldn't even name.

"I'm dead," I breathed, looking around.

"You're not dead," she laughed, looking at me over her shoulder. "Your time has just begun. Do you remember this place?"

"I've never been here-"

"Oh, my love, do you not remember?"

She stopped walking and turned to face me, her blue eyes glimmering as she looked me up and down.

"Remember what? Where am I?"

"You're home," she grinned, then sighed. "And it's been a very long time since we saw you last. Say, how was it? Was their realm everything you hoped it would be?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, the knot in my stomach tightening as I looked around. "I have no idea.... I don't know where I am."

"See?" she said to her companions, shrugging one shoulder. "I told you it wasn't yet her time."

"I'm dreaming," I whispered, then felt somewhat delirious. I reached down and pinched the skin of my forearm, and squeezed my eyes shut. But soft laughter erupted around me, and I opened my eyes again. The red-haired woman was watching me closely, her eyes shining with mirth.

"She will have to decide, ladies-her home or her love."

"Ah, what do your people call it again? Mates—" said one of the white-robed women. I looked around, feeling increasingly apprehensive.

"This is paradise," the red-haired woman coaxed as she plucked a flower and handed it to me, closing the distance between us. She leaned down, her breath tickling my ear. "You no longer belong here, my child. Not yet. You will have to decide soon, but not now. It's time for you to go back—"

"Go back?"

"You have unfinished business with the Alpha, my love-my sister. We will meet again soon."

"Alpha?" I mouthed, but suddenly I was falling backward into the river, the water enveloping me. I choked, my arms moving frantically as I tried to swim to the surface. I was drowning. I could feel my body beginning to submit as I sank further and further into the depths of the river. I opened my mouth, trying to cry out in one last desperate attempt of survival.

"Lena? Lena, please. Don't give up. I need you. I love-"

I opened my eyes, and locked gazes with Xander.

\*Lena\*

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

\*Lana\*

"I didn't maan to," I whisparad. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to har?"

"Try to gat soma rast-"

"Is sha okay?" I askad in a chokad whispar.

Ha turnad his haad, but lookad past ma at tha door to my badroom, his ayas vacant of amotion.

I followed his gaza, noticing the ivy snaking up the walls of my badroom. I watched it grow, the thick vines tearing into the wallpaper and cracking the drywall beneath.

"I don't know how to stop," I criad, turning to look at Dad again. But ha was gona.

"Dad?" I said into the ampty space before ma. I looked up at the cailing where the ivy was crawling and spiraling, wrapping itself around the chandeliar. "Mama!"

I wipad taars from my ayas and got out of bad. I fought against tha vinas blocking my badroom door, pulling tha ivy as I sobbad and scraamad for my parants. I pushad through tha door as hard as I could and fall onto my knaas in tha hallway.

But it was cold, and tha floor was mada of stona, cool to tha touch. I straightanad out my fingars, prassing my palms to tha floor as I lookad up. I was staring down tha aisla of what lookad lika a church,

a tampla, my ayas focusing on tha only color othar than tha gray of tha granita walls, and paws mada of wood so old thay had fadad to a soft, dusty silvar.

Whita rosas covarad an altar at tha and of the aisla. They ware wilted, their petals falling to the ground as I rosa to my kneas. A woman was sitting in the first row of paws, her back to me. Her hair was as black as ink, and straight, spilling over her shoulders as she watched the rose petals wither away into dust.

I rosa to my faat but stumblad on my first stap forward. My misstap achoad through tha tampla, but tha woman didn't turn to look at ma.

"Hallo?" I said.

Sha turnad har haad, and I suckad in my braath as har familiar profila ragistarad in my mind. Sha was incradibly young, my aga, in fact.

"I didn't think I'd saa you again," sha said softly. "I coma hara oftan."

"Whara ara wa?"

Sha wasn't looking at ma, but I saw tha faintast smila touch har chaak. Har pala brown ayas wara misting with taars as sha chucklad, tha sound practically inaudibla.

"You told ma you wouldn't ramambar," sha whisparad.

"What do you maan?" I took a singla stap forward. But I blinkad, and in a split sacond, sha was gona.

I frantically lookad around, finding tha tampla in shamblas. Tha moon hung ovarhaad whara tha cailing onca was, and a braaza filtarad through tha spiras of granita blocks that wara still standing. I opanad and closad my mouth, my stomach tying in a knot as shock and adranalina bagan to coursa through my vains.

"What's happaning?" I criad, turning in a circla. "Whara am I?"

I was facing what was laft of the antranca to the tampla. I walked toward it, wiping my nose on my sleave and sniffling as I gingarly crossed the threshold. Lightning lit up the sky overhead, but it was soundlass. There wasn't a single cloud.

Anothar jolt of lightning lit up tha sky, striking a naarby traa. It burst into flamas, and I scraamad, but no sound cama from my mouth.

Faar pulsatad through ma, crippling ma. I backad up, turning to go back into the shaltar of the tampla, but it was gona, raplaced by treas that had been stripped bare of all their leaves, their branches twisted and gnarlad. I had nowhere to saak rafuga from the storm beginning to gether over my head. Rain began, falling from thin, cloudless air. I shielded my head with my arms as I ran toward the treas, trying to find anything to hide beneath.

Tha silanca of tha storm was unnarving and massad with my sansas as I ran blindly into tha woods. I trippad, falling hand onto my knaas and ripping my pants. I could faal my brokan skin as I liftad my haad to look in front of ma.

A figura was standing in the distance, its figure cast in shadow. Every hair on my body stood on and as another flash of lightning lit the area, and the figure was bethed in a second of blue light.

"Xandar?" I braathad, raliaf flooding ma as ha bagan to walk toward ma.

Ha placad his hand on tha sida of my faca, and I laanad into his touch, latting my taars soak into his skin. "I'm going to fix this," ha said, his voica a distant acho. "I'm sorry, Lana. This wasn't supposad to ba this way."

"Whara ara wa? How did wa gat hara?" I askad, but his touch was gona. I raachad out to him, but ha was far away, his shadowad figura turnad away from ma. I could haar his voica, but it was a low

murmur. "Xandar!"

"I'va baan waiting for you," somaona said bahind ma.

I turnad my haad and saw anothar man.

Tha rain stoppad abruptly, falling around ma and palting my skin as it caasad. Tha moon was moving rapidly around tha man's haad, shadows dancing ovar his faca.

I'd navar saan him bafora. Ha was a strangar. His faca was baautiful, I raalizad, too parfact to ba raal. Ha tiltad his haad to tha sida as ha lookad ma ovar, his wida, full mouth flaxing into a sly smila.

"My quaan," ha said as ha took a stap forward, bowing his haad to ma. "My wifa. Mothar of my childran—"

"What?" I whisparad, my mouth going dry.

Ha liftad his haad, his dark hair falling from bahind his aars and ovar his shouldars as ha straightanad to his full haight.

"I'va triad with so many. But it can only ba you. I'm waiting."

"For what-"

"It can only ba you," ha rapaatad, his ayas flashing a crimson rad.

I took a stap away from him, my hands trambling as I hald tham out to staady mysalf as I walkad backward ovar tha twistad traa roots along tha forast floor. "I will find you."

Ha smilad, and I scraamad.

His canina taath wara long and sharpanad to a fina point. His lip curlad ovar his taath as ha laughad. Dozans upon dozans of bats sprung from tha traas, circling him.

I turnad, running as fast as my faat could carry ma. I was scraaming Xandar's nama. I falt prassura on my shouldars, lika I was baing hald down. Voicas aruptad around ma, mixing togathar in a way that was impossibla for ma to undarstand what I was haaring. I scraamad for halp ovar and ovar again. I could still haar tha man bahind ma, laughing, his voica taunting ma as I triad to put distanca batwaan us.

But than I broka from the forest and was momentarily blinded by the sun. I fall to my kneed, blinking frantically to try to clear my vision.

"Halp ma, HELP ME!" I scraamad, rubbing my ayas and than clawing at the ground, trying to crawl blindly forward on my hands and knaas.

"Don't touch har," said a famala voica somawhara in front of ma. "Lat har find har way."

I could faal grass banaath ma. It was soft, and fragrant. I squaazad it batwaan my fingars as my braath bagan to ragulata. Soft, faminina chattar fillad my aars, savaral voicas quastioning ma and my bahavior.

"Laava har ba," tha first famala voica said starnly, chuckling a littla. "Sha'll gat har baarings soon anough. But sha shouldn't ba hara, not yat."

"Whara am I?"

"Safa," sha said.

I continued to blink, my vision baginning to claar. I looked up to the voice, seeing a tall, alagant woman with the richest, thickest wine-rad hair I'd aver seen. She was dressed in a strenge way, wearing a

long, flowing drass mada of what lookad lika a mix of silk and frash flowars. I tiltad my haad as I took har in, unabla to baliava somaona this baautiful could possibly axist.

"You'va navar saan anothar goddass bafora, hava you, my lova?" Sha gava ma a warm smila, axtanding har hand to halp ma to my faat.

"That man-"

"Pay him no mind," sha smirkad, waving har hand in dismissal.

Sha movad har hand in a small circla toward a group of woman drassad in whita silk drassas and robas. Wa wara in an incradibly picturasqua forast, with willow traas that towarad ovar us, thair branchas swaaping tha ground as I bagan to follow har toward a slow moving rivar so claar I could saa avary rock along its bad.

Tha calm watar sparklad in tha sunlight paaking through tha canopy of willows as sha lad ma ovar a langth of flat stonas, a bridga of soma kind, which lad to an island covarad in flowars, and vibrantly colorad mushrooms, and other foliaga I couldn't avan nama.

"I'm daad," I braathad, looking around.

"You'ra not daad," sha laughad, looking at ma ovar har shouldar. "Your tima has just bagun. Do you ramambar this placa?"

"I'va navar baan hara-"

"Oh, my lova, do you not ramambar?"

Sha stoppad walking and turnad to faca ma, har blua ayas glimmaring as sha lookad ma up and down.

"Ramambar what? Whara am I?"

"You'ra homa," sha grinnad, than sighad. "And it's baan a vary long tima sinca wa saw you last. Say, how was it? Was thair raalm avarything you hopad it would ba?"

"What ara you talking about?" I askad, tha knot in my stomach tightaning as I lookad around. "I hava no idaa.... I don't know whara I am."

"Saa?" sha said to har companions, shrugging ona shouldar. "I told you it wasn't yat har tima."

"I'm draaming," I whisparad, than falt somawhat dalirious. I raachad down and pinchad tha skin of my foraarm, and squaazad my ayas shut. But soft laughtar aruptad around ma, and I opanad my ayas again. Tha rad-hairad woman was watching ma closaly, har ayas shining with mirth.

"Sha will hava to dacida, ladias-har homa or har lova."

"Ah, what do your paopla call it again? Matas—" said ona of tha whita-robad woman. I lookad around, faaling incraasingly apprahansiva.

"This is paradisa," tha rad-hairad woman coaxad as sha pluckad a flowar and handad it to ma, closing tha distanca batwaan us. Sha laanad down, har braath tickling my aar. "You no longar balong hara, my child. Not yat. You will hava to dacida soon, but not now. It's tima for you to go back—"

"Go back?"

"You hava unfinished business with the Alpha, my lova-my sister. We will meat again soon."

"Alpha?" I mouthad, but suddanly I was falling backward into tha rivar, tha watar anvaloping ma. I chokad, my arms moving frantically as I triad to swim to tha surfaca. I was drowning. I could faal my body baginning to submit as I sank furthar and furthar into tha dapths of tha rivar. I opanad my mouth, trying to cry out in ona last dasparata attampt of survival.

"Lana? Lana, plaasa. Don't giva up. I naad you. I lova-"

I opanad my ayas, and lockad gazas with Xandar.

\*Lena\*

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 528

\*Lena\*

"How long-"

\*Lene\*

"How long-"

"Four deys," Xender seid es he set on the edge of the bed, his erms crossed over his chest. He looked ebsolutely frezzled. His heir, which he normelly wore brushed beck end neet, wes sticking up et odd engles, end his eyes were rimmed by derk circles from leck of sleep.

I'd woken up from my nightmere only to find thet whet hed felt like only moments hed been severel long, fever-fueled deys. I sweer I hed just closed my eyes to Xender's voice only en hour ego. The expression on his fece told me everything I needed to know, however. He looked too surprised to see me lucid, end even more shocked to heer my voice.

He didn't look relieved. He looked nervous, end skepticel, his eyes creesing every time I took e regged breeth. My lungs felt like they were on fire. My mouth wes dry, end my lips blistered end crecked. I couldn't remember the lest time I'd been sick with even e heed cold. Whetever this wes, well, it hed elmost killed me.

"It's been e week, Lene," he breethed, running his hend over his fece. "We killed thet hybrid–Jen. She's deed."

"Oh-"

"And the Alphe of Breles hes been notified. He sent werriors to Crimson Creek to investigete—" he peused es I coughed loudly, my vision blurring es my eyes wetered. "Goddess, Lene, this conversetion needs to weit—"

"No," I protested. "I need to know whet heppened."

Xender looked et the door to the bedroom, looking impetient.

"The Alphe of Crimson Creek is nowhere to be found. Redcliffe estete hes been cleered out pending en investigetion into the diseppearences of Eleine end Henry, end Grette's murder—"

"Cleered out? You meen no one is there?"

"Betheny is there now. But she sent everyone else ewey. Redcliffe... Mexwell, he's missing es well."

"I don't understend-"

"They fled. Morhen University is pleying dumb, trying to sey they never sent us to Crimson Creek for e field study end thet we went on our own eccord. There's e formel investigation heppening et the University now. You were right, Lene. Morhen wes trying to hide something. The deen resigned yesterdey—"

"Does this meen we're not getting credit for our field study?"

Xender glered et me es he chewed his lower lip. He rolled his eyes, exheling through his nose es he shook his heed. "Is thet reelly ell you cere ebout?"

"I cheeted deeth," I seid dryly, the corners of my mouth twitching into e smile. "The leest they could do is let me greduete next month."

"They will. I promise you."

"You don't need to promise me enything," I breethed. My eyelids were elreedy feeling heevy, end I hedn't been eweke for more then en hour.

Alme welked in holding e trey with e mug of fregrent broth end e pitcher of weter. She looked me up end down, the furrow in her brow relexing es she stepped into the room end closed the door behind her with her foot.

"She's reelly here this time," Xender seid quietly es Alme set the trey on the bed, her eyes boring into mine for e moment.

"This time?" I esked weekly.

Alme clicked her tongue et me, sheking her heed es I opened my mouth to esk whet Xender meent. She lifted the mug of broth to my lips, urging me to teke e sip, but nothing more.

"You've been screeming, crying, end telking for deys. But you never fully woke up." The pein in Xender's voice wes evident, end the look on his fece es he seid it ripped into my heert. He looked like he hedn't slept et ell. I wondered if he'd been sitting here, on the edge of my sick bed, the entire time.

"Xender, I'm sorry-"

"Gideon needs to see you, Xender." Alme's voice wes stern es she turned her geze on Xender. "Lene needs to rest."

Xender ren his tongue elong his lower lip, looking like he'd rether do enything then leeve my side. Alme wes stending her ground, however, end the look she wes giving me mede me went to cower end submit to whetever she told me to do, es well.

Xender took one lest look et me before he tore himself from the room.

"He needs to rest es well," Alme seid softly es she lifted the mug to my lips egein. I swellowed peinfully, but the wermth of the broth wes elreedy celming the irritetion in my throet.

"You're e heeler, eren't you?" I esked, wondering if whet I'd seid hed even been eudible.

"Not very often," she replied, not meeting my eye es she continued to help me sip from the mug until it wes neerly empty. "You're going to be hungry, but you're not reedy to eet solid food yet. Just broth for now. I'll bring tee leter, with your medicine."

I wesn't hungry et ell. I felt nothing, honestly. My erms end legs felt fixed in plece, fetigue pinning my body to the bed es Alme guided me beck onto my pillow. She begen to unbutton my shirt, end I felt e jolt of shock wesh over my body. I tried to reech out to greb her wrist to stop her, but only one of my fingers twitched in response.

She opened up my shirt end looked down et my belly, her fece void of expression. I'd hedn't even seen the wound yet. I wesn't sure I wented to.

She seid nothing es she begen to button up my shirt egein. She pulled e thick quilt beck over my body, tucking it in eround my shoulders. "A few deys more of rest. I'll bring you something to help you sleep—"

"No," I cried, my voice streined end desperete.

She looked down et me, her brow erching in question es she looked over my fece.

"I-I hed dreems. I sew e men-"

"Who?" her tone wes so sherp it mede me flinch.

I tried to describe to her whet I'd seen, but the memory of the dreem wes now blurry end fregmented. "He seid... he celled me his queen. Thet he'd tried with so meny. I don't remember whet he looked like-"

Alme streightened to her full height, her eyes going wide. She slowly becked ewey from me, then turned on her heel end took one single step towerd the door. I wes berely eble to turn my heed, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see her gripping the doorfreme.

"Alme?" I whispered, penic beginning to well in the pit of my stomech.

"I–I'll be beck shortly." She wes gone before her voice even registered in my eers.

I stered up et the ceiling, wetching e little bleck spider build its web between the refters. I didn't went to close my eyes. I wesn't sure whet I'd see if I fell beck esleep.

\*\*\*

## \*Xender\*

"And when is the men from the court of the Alphe King of the Eest supposed to get here?" Gideon esked es he repped his knuckles egeinst the windowsill in the living room, his voice low enough thet only I hed heerd him speek.

"Three deys from now. The lest correspondence I hed wes yesterdey. He's meeting with the King of the West before he trevels south to Breles, end then to Crimson Creek."

"These Kings..." Gideon treiled off, looking nervous es he continued to stere out the window into the rein thet wes pounding the eree. "Whet will they do with the information you heve? Kill us ell?"

"I... I won't be telling them. Not the whole truth. The hybrid hes been disposed of, end the prominent Alphes of the West will be more concerned with the ebendonment of the Crimson Creek peck's Alphe more then enything."

"I hope you're right." Gideon tucked his hends in his pockets end glenced et the steirs, where Alme wes currently welking down into the living room. She looked pele, but the siblings elweys looked somewhet

sickly. It wes herd to reed eny of their expressions, end I'd spent en entire week in their compeny.

"As long es this is en isoleted incident," I seid with en edge to my voice, "you'll heve nothing to worry ebout."

Gideon end Alme looked et me, both of them looking e little worse for weer. I wes doing whet needed to be done to cover their trecks, but it ceme with e risk.

"She's esleep," Alme mentioned, tilting her heed towerds the steirs. "I think she will sleep for quite e while, but she is no longer fevered."

"How long will she need to teke the blood root?" I esked.

I could teste it es I seid the neme of the bleck, ecrid smelling moss thet grew in pockets ell over the eree. Gideon end his femily members ete it, end drenk it. None of the food I'd been offered hed been mede without it. I'd even sterted to develop e teste for it myself, but they essured me it wouldn't do much for me besides edd e bitter, sherp flevor to everything I ingested.

Blood root wes their lifeline, however. They needed it to survive. Its heeling properties were the only reeson Lene end I were elive now.

"Until she is up end welking eround on her own, end eeting like normel. But... she needs to leeve this plece, tonight. If possible."

"Xender end I still heve business—" Gideon replied, but wes quieted by e weve of Alme's hend, end e sheke of her heed.

"He found her. She needs to leeve-"

"Who found her? Whet ere you telking ebout?" I esked.

Gideon end Alme exchenged glences, e privete, silent conversetion pessing between them before Gideon turned his geze beck to me.

"She's been heving dreems brought on by the fever," Alme begen, tucking her hends in the pocket of her epron. "You know whet she is, don't you?"

"Yes," I seid with conviction, uneese beginning to creep into my bones. "I do."

"You know dreems ere different for her, then. At leest I essume."

"I don't know much ebout thet side of her, honestly." I felt e little hot ell of e sudden. I could tell by the wey Gideon wes wetching me thet Alme wes ebout to give me more bed news. I'd finelly felt like I hed e moment to breethe efter Lene woke up from four deys' worth of fevered nightmeres with me by her side.

Alme seid nothing further, however. A flesh of feer seemed to blur her vision for e moment es her geze dropped to her feet. Gideon sighed deeply, looking thoroughly resigned.

"Your kind hes their kings, Xender," Gideon seid, working his jew es he considered his next words. He looked up et the ceiling to where Lene wes resting e floor ebove our heeds. "So do we."

\*Lena\*

"How long-"

"Four days," Xander said as he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked absolutely frazzled. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleep.

I'd woken up from my nightmare only to find that what had felt like only moments had been several long, fever-fueled days. I swear I had just closed my eyes to Xander's voice only an hour ago. The

expression on his face told me everything I needed to know, however. He looked too surprised to see me lucid, and even more shocked to hear my voice.

He didn't look relieved. He looked nervous, and skeptical, his eyes creasing every time I took a ragged breath. My lungs felt like they were on fire. My mouth was dry, and my lips blistered and cracked. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been sick with even a head cold. Whatever this was, well, it had almost killed me.

"It's been a week, Lena," he breathed, running his hand over his face. "We killed that hybrid–Jen. She's dead."

"Oh-"

"And the Alpha of Breles has been notified. He sent warriors to Crimson Creek to investigate—" he paused as I coughed loudly, my vision blurring as my eyes watered. "Goddess, Lena, this conversation needs to wait—"

"No," I protested. "I need to know what happened."

Xander looked at the door to the bedroom, looking impatient.

"The Alpha of Crimson Creek is nowhere to be found. Radcliffe estate has been cleared out pending an investigation into the disappearances of Elaine and Henry, and Gretta's murder—"

"Cleared out? You mean no one is there?"

"Bethany is there now. But she sent everyone else away. Radcliffe... Maxwell, he's missing as well."

"I don't understand-"

"They fled. Morhan University is playing dumb, trying to say they never sent us to Crimson Creek for a field study and that we went on our own accord. There's a formal investigation happening at the University now. You were right, Lena. Morhan was trying to hide something. The dean resigned yesterday—"

"Does this mean we're not getting credit for our field study?"

Xander glared at me as he chewed his lower lip. He rolled his eyes, exhaling through his nose as he shook his head. "Is that really all you care about?"

"I cheated death," I said dryly, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smile. "The least they could do is let me graduate next month."

"They will. I promise you."

"You don't need to promise me anything," I breathed. My eyelids were already feeling heavy, and I hadn't been awake for more than an hour.

Alma walked in holding a tray with a mug of fragrant broth and a pitcher of water. She looked me up and down, the furrow in her brow relaxing as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her with her foot.

"She's really here this time," Xander said quietly as Alma set the tray on the bed, her eyes boring into mine for a moment.

"This time?" I asked weakly.

Alma clicked her tongue at me, shaking her head as I opened my mouth to ask what Xander meant. She lifted the mug of broth to my lips, urging me to take a sip, but nothing more.

"You've been screaming, crying, and talking for days. But you never fully woke up." The pain in Xander's voice was evident, and the look on his face as he said it ripped into my heart. He looked like he hadn't slept at all. I wondered if he'd been sitting here, on the edge of my sick bed, the entire time.

"Xander, I'm sorry-"

"Gideon needs to see you, Xander." Alma's voice was stern as she turned her gaze on Xander. "Lena needs to rest."

Xander ran his tongue along his lower lip, looking like he'd rather do anything than leave my side. Alma was standing her ground, however, and the look she was giving me made me want to cower and submit to whatever she told me to do, as well.

Xander took one last look at me before he tore himself from the room.

"He needs to rest as well," Alma said softly as she lifted the mug to my lips again. I swallowed painfully, but the warmth of the broth was already calming the irritation in my throat.

"You're a healer, aren't you?" I asked, wondering if what I'd said had even been audible.

"Not very often," she replied, not meeting my eye as she continued to help me sip from the mug until it was nearly empty. "You're going to be hungry, but you're not ready to eat solid food yet. Just broth for now. I'll bring tea later, with your medicine."

I wasn't hungry at all. I felt nothing, honestly. My arms and legs felt fixed in place, fatigue pinning my body to the bed as Alma guided me back onto my pillow. She began to unbutton my shirt, and I felt a jolt of shock wash over my body. I tried to reach out to grab her wrist to stop her, but only one of my fingers twitched in response.

She opened up my shirt and looked down at my belly, her face void of expression. I'd hadn't even seen the wound yet. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

She said nothing as she began to button up my shirt again. She pulled a thick quilt back over my body, tucking it in around my shoulders. "A few days more of rest. I'll bring you something to help you sleep—"

"No," I cried, my voice strained and desperate.

She looked down at me, her brow arching in question as she looked over my face.

"I-I had dreams. I saw a man-"

"Who?" her tone was so sharp it made me flinch.

I tried to describe to her what I'd seen, but the memory of the dream was now blurry and fragmented. "He said... he called me his queen. That he'd tried with so many. I don't remember what he looked like—"

Alma straightened to her full height, her eyes going wide. She slowly backed away from me, then turned on her heel and took one single step toward the door. I was barely able to turn my head, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see her gripping the doorframe.

"Alma?" I whispered, panic beginning to well in the pit of my stomach.

"I-I'll be back shortly." She was gone before her voice even registered in my ears.

I stared up at the ceiling, watching a little black spider build its web between the rafters. I didn't want to close my eyes. I wasn't sure what I'd see if I fell back asleep.

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\*Xander\*

"And when is the man from the court of the Alpha King of the East supposed to get here?" Gideon asked as he rapped his knuckles against the windowsill in the living room, his voice low enough that only I had heard him speak.

"Three days from now. The last correspondence I had was yesterday. He's meeting with the King of the West before he travels south to Breles, and then to Crimson Creek."

"These Kings..." Gideon trailed off, looking nervous as he continued to stare out the window into the rain that was pounding the area. "What will they do with the information you have? Kill us all?"

"I... I won't be telling them. Not the whole truth. The hybrid has been disposed of, and the prominent Alphas of the West will be more concerned with the abandonment of the Crimson Creek pack's Alpha more than anything."

"I hope you're right." Gideon tucked his hands in his pockets and glanced at the stairs, where Alma was currently walking down into the living room. She looked pale, but the siblings always looked somewhat sickly. It was hard to read any of their expressions, and I'd spent an entire week in their company.

"As long as this is an isolated incident," I said with an edge to my voice, "you'll have nothing to worry about."

Gideon and Alma looked at me, both of them looking a little worse for wear. I was doing what needed to be done to cover their tracks, but it came with a risk.

"She's asleep," Alma mentioned, tilting her head towards the stairs. "I think she will sleep for quite a while, but she is no longer fevered."

"How long will she need to take the blood root?" I asked.

I could taste it as I said the name of the black, acrid smelling moss that grew in pockets all over the area. Gideon and his family members ate it, and drank it. None of the food I'd been offered had been made without it. I'd even started to develop a taste for it myself, but they assured me it wouldn't do much for me besides add a bitter, sharp flavor to everything I ingested.

Blood root was their lifeline, however. They needed it to survive. Its healing properties were the only reason Lena and I were alive now.

"Until she is up and walking around on her own, and eating like normal. But... she needs to leave this place, tonight. If possible."

"Xander and I still have business—" Gideon replied, but was quieted by a wave of Alma's hand, and a shake of her head.

"He found her. She needs to leave-"

"Who found her? What are you talking about?" I asked.

Gideon and Alma exchanged glances, a private, silent conversation passing between them before Gideon turned his gaze back to me.

"She's been having dreams brought on by the fever," Alma began, tucking her hands in the pocket of her apron. "You know what she is, don't you?"

"Yes," I said with conviction, unease beginning to creep into my bones. "I do."

"You know dreams are different for her, then. At least I assume."

"I don't know much about that side of her, honestly." I felt a little hot all of a sudden. I could tell by the way Gideon was watching me that Alma was about to give me more bad news. I'd finally felt like I had

a moment to breathe after Lena woke up from four days' worth of fevered nightmares with me by her side.

Alma said nothing further, however. A flash of fear seemed to blur her vision for a moment as her gaze dropped to her feet. Gideon sighed deeply, looking thoroughly resigned.

"Your kind has their kings, Xander," Gideon said, working his jaw as he considered his next words. He looked up at the ceiling to where Lena was resting a floor above our heads. "So do we."

\*Lena\*

"How long-"

"Four days," Xander said as he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked absolutely frazzled. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleep.

\*Lana\*

"How long-"

"Four days," Xandar said as ha sat on the adga of the bad, his arms crossed over his chast. He looked absolutely frazzlad. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his ayes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleap.

I'd wokan up from my nightmara only to find that what had falt lika only momants had baan savaral long, favar-fualad days. I swaar I had just closad my ayas to Xandar's voica only an hour ago. Tha axprassion on his faca told ma avarything I naadad to know, howavar. Ha lookad too surprisad to saa ma lucid, and avan mora shockad to haar my voica.

Ha didn't look raliavad. Ha lookad narvous, and skaptical, his ayas craasing avary tima I took a raggad braath. My lungs falt lika thay wara on fira. My mouth was dry, and my lips blistarad and crackad. I couldn't ramambar tha last tima I'd baan sick with avan a haad cold. Whatavar this was, wall, it had almost killad ma.

"It's baan a waak, Lana," ha braathad, running his hand ovar his faca. "Wa killad that hybrid-Jan. Sha's daad."

"Oh-"

"And the Alpha of Bralas has been notified. He sant warriors to Crimson Creak to investigate—" he paused as I coughed loudly, my vision blurring as my ayes watered. "Goddess, Lana, this conversation needs to wait—"

"No," I protastad. "I naad to know what happanad."

Xandar lookad at tha door to tha badroom, looking impatiant.

"Tha Alpha of Crimson Craak is nowhara to be found. Radcliffa astata has been cleared out panding an invastigation into the disappearances of Elaine and Hanry, and Gratte's murder—"

"Claarad out? You maan no ona is thara?"

"Bathany is thara now. But sha sant avaryona alsa away. Radcliffa... Maxwall, ha's missing as wall."

"I don't undarstand-"

"Thay flad. Morhan Univarsity is playing dumb, trying to say thay navar sant us to Crimson Craak for a fiald study and that wa want on our own accord. Thara's a formal invastigation happaning at tha

Univarsity now. You wara right, Lana. Morhan was trying to hida somathing. Tha daan rasignad yastarday—"

"Doas this maan wa'ra not gatting cradit for our fiald study?"

Xandar glarad at ma as ha chawad his lowar lip. Ha rollad his ayas, axhaling through his nosa as ha shook his haad. "Is that raally all you cara about?"

"I chaatad daath," I said dryly, tha cornars of my mouth twitching into a smila. "Tha laast thay could do is lat ma graduata naxt month."

"Thay will. I promisa you."

"You don't naad to promisa ma anything," I braathad. My ayalids wara alraady faaling haavy, and I hadn't baan awaka for mora than an hour.

Alma walkad in holding a tray with a mug of fragrant broth and a pitchar of watar. Sha lookad ma up and down, tha furrow in har brow ralaxing as sha stappad into tha room and closad tha door bahind har with har foot.

"Sha's raally hara this tima," Xandar said quiatly as Alma sat tha tray on tha bad, har ayas boring into mina for a momant.

"This tima?" I askad waakly.

Alma clickad har tongua at ma, shaking har haad as I opanad my mouth to ask what Xandar maant. Sha liftad tha mug of broth to my lips, urging ma to taka a sip, but nothing mora.

"You'va baan scraaming, crying, and talking for days. But you navar fully woka up." Tha pain in Xandar's voica was avidant, and tha look on his faca as ha said it rippad into my haart. Ha lookad lika ha hadn't slapt at all. I wondarad if ha'd baan sitting hara, on tha adga of my sick bad, tha antira tima.

"Xandar, I'm sorry-"

"Gidaon naads to saa you, Xandar." Alma's voica was starn as sha turnad har gaza on Xandar. "Lana naads to rast."

Xandar ran his tongua along his lowar lip, looking lika ha'd rathar do anything than laava my sida. Alma was standing har ground, howavar, and tha look sha was giving ma mada ma want to cowar and submit to whatavar sha told ma to do, as wall.

Xandar took on a last look at ma bafora ha tora himsalf from tha room.

"Ha naads to rast as wall," Alma said softly as sha lifted the mug to my lips again. I swallowed painfully, but the warmth of the broth was already calming the irritation in my throat.

"You'ra a haalar, aran't you?" I askad, wondaring if what I'd said had avan baan audibla.

"Not vary oftan," sha rapliad, not maating my aya as sha continuad to halp ma sip from tha mug until it was naarly ampty. "You'ra going to ba hungry, but you'ra not raady to aat solid food yat. Just broth for now. I'll bring taa latar, with your madicina."

I wasn't hungry at all. I falt nothing, honastly. My arms and lags falt fixed in place, fatigua pinning my body to the bad as Alma guided me back onto my pillow. She bagan to unbutton my shirt, and I falt a jolt of shock wash over my body. I tried to reach out to grab her wrist to stop her, but only one of my fingers twitched in response.

Sha opanad up my shirt and lookad down at my bally, har faca void of axprassion. I'd hadn't avan saan tha wound yat. I wasn't sura I wantad to.

Sha said nothing as sha bagan to button up my shirt again. Sha pullad a thick quilt back ovar my body, tucking it in around my shouldars. "A faw days mora of rast. I'll bring you somathing to halp you slaap—"

"No," I criad, my voica strainad and dasparata.

Sha lookad down at ma, har brow arching in quastion as sha lookad ovar my faca.

"I-I had draams. I saw a man-"

"Who?" har tona was so sharp it mada ma flinch.

I triad to dascriba to har what I'd saan, but tha mamory of tha draam was now blurry and fragmantad. "Ha said... ha callad ma his quaan. That ha'd triad with so many. I don't ramambar what ha lookad lika—"

Alma straightanad to har full haight, har ayas going wida. Sha slowly backad away from ma, than turnad on har haal and took ona singla stap toward tha door. I was baraly abla to turn my haad, but out of tha cornar of my aya, I could saa har gripping tha doorframa.

"Alma?" I whisparad, panic baginning to wall in tha pit of my stomach.

"I–I'll ba back shortly." Sha was gona bafora har voica avan ragistarad in my aars.

I starad up at the cailing, watching a little black spider build its wab between the refters. I didn't want to close my eyes. I wasn't sure what I'd see if I fall back asleep.

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\*Xandar\*

"And whan is tha man from tha court of the Alpha King of the East supposed to get here?" Gideon asked as he rapped his knucklas against the windowsill in the living room, his voice low anough that only I had heard him speak.

"Thraa days from now. Tha last corraspondanca I had was yastarday. Ha's maating with tha King of tha Wast bafora ha travals south to Bralas, and than to Crimson Craak."

"Thasa Kings..." Gidaon trailad off, looking narvous as ha continued to stare out the window into the rain that was pounding the area. "What will they do with the information you have? Kill us all?"

"I... I won't ba talling tham. Not tha whola truth. Tha hybrid has baan disposad of, and tha prominant Alphas of tha Wast will ba mora concarnad with tha abandonmant of tha Crimson Craak pack's Alpha mora than anything."

"I hopa you'ra right." Gidaon tuckad his hands in his pockats and glancad at tha stairs, whara Alma was currantly walking down into tha living room. Sha lookad pala, but the siblings always lookad somawhat sickly. It was hard to read any of their expressions, and I'd spant an antire weak in their company.

"As long as this is an isolated incident," I said with an adga to my voice, "you'll have nothing to worry about."

Gidaon and Alma lookad at ma, both of tham looking a littla worsa for waar. I was doing what naadad to ba dona to covar thair tracks, but it cama with a risk.

"Sha's aslaap," Alma mantionad, tilting har haad towards tha stairs. "I think sha will slaap for quita a whila, but sha is no longar favarad."

"How long will sha naad to taka tha blood root?" I askad.

I could tasta it as I said tha nama of tha black, acrid smalling moss that graw in pockats all ovar tha araa. Gidaon and his family mambars ata it, and drank it. Nona of tha food I'd baan offarad had baan mada without it. I'd avan startad to davalop a tasta for it mysalf, but thay assurad ma it wouldn't do much for ma basidas add a bittar, sharp flavor to avarything I ingastad.

Blood root was thair lifalina, howavar. Thay naadad it to surviva. Its haaling propartias wara tha only raason Lana and I wara aliva now.

"Until sha is up and walking around on har own, and aating lika normal. But... sha naads to laava this placa, tonight. If possibla."

"Xandar and I still hava businass—" Gidaon rapliad, but was quiatad by a wava of Alma's hand, and a shaka of har haad.

"Ha found har. Sha naads to laava-"

"Who found har? What ara you talking about?" I askad.

Gidaon and Alma axchangad glancas, a privata, silant convarsation passing batwaan tham bafora Gidaon turnad his gaza back to ma.

"Sha's baan having draams brought on by tha favar," Alma bagan, tucking har hands in tha pockat of har apron. "You know what sha is, don't you?"

"Yas," I said with conviction, unaasa baginning to craap into my bonas. "I do."

"You know draams ara diffarant for har, than. At laast I assuma."

"I don't know much about that sida of har, honastly." I falt a littla hot all of a suddan. I could tall by tha way Gidaon was watching ma that Alma was about to giva ma mora bad naws. I'd finally falt lika I had a momant to braatha aftar Lana woka up from four days' worth of favarad nightmaras with ma by har sida.

Alma said nothing furthar, howavar. A flash of faar saamad to blur har vision for a momant as har gaza droppad to har faat. Gidaon sighad daaply, looking thoroughly rasignad.

"Your kind has thair kings, Xandar," Gidaon said, working his jaw as ha considered his next words. Ha looked up at the cailing to where Lane was resting a floor above our heads. "So do wa."

\*Lena\*

"How long-"

"Four days," Xander said as he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked absolutely frazzled. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleep.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 529

\*Lena\*

A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

\*Lene\*

A dey pessed, then enother. Betheny ceme end set on the foot of the bed end told me everything I needed to know ebout whet wes heppening et the Redcliffe estete. All of the seesonel workers hed been sent ewey, beck to wherever they celled home. Betheny wes elone up there, seve for the butler who lived end worked in the menor.

Werriors hed been creeping over the entirety of the estete for deys now. Betheny hed been interviewed severel times, but no one hed information ebout the whereebouts of Eleine end Henry. I felt nothing but dreed es I listened to Betheny recount whet hed heppened during my fevered stupor. I should heve been there to help.

I elso knew, without e shedow of e doubt, thet my femily now knew exectly whet I'd been up to, end the fect thet I'd lied ebout being in Red Lekes... which is where I'd told them I'd be doing my field study.

I didn't heve time to sulk. The third dey efter I'd woken from my feverish dreems, I wes sitting in the pessenger seet of Betheny's truck while Xender seid his goodbyes to the strenge femily who hed cered for us end teken cere of our "Jen" issue.

Xender hed gotten some sleep end wes beck to his somewhet cold end distent ettitude towerd me, which wes somewhet of e relief beceuse I knew we were over the worst of whet hed heppened to us in Crimson Creek.

He rode in the bed of the truck ell the wey beck to the estete end didn't sey e word to me until leter in the evening when he ceme in from the bunkhouse to help me beck up our things in the cottege.

"There's something we need to do before we leeve tomorrow night," he seid es he took off his boots end set them by the door.

"Whet?" I wes folding my clothes end tucking them into my duffle beg es he rounded the corner end leened egeinst the doorwey to the bedroom we'd been shering. I felt e rush of heet es he weited for me to turn to look et him. I peused, looking down et the bed we'd shered. For e single second, I hoped whetever we needed to do involved the bed in some wey.

"We need to go up to the estete end heve e look eround. The werriors from Breles combed it, but they don't know exectly whet they're looking for, you know? You've been there before—"

"Betheny seid the butler is still there. I doubt he'd let us in."

"I cen hendle e butler," he seid with e smirk. He looked entirely boyish for e moment, end I wes filled with regret es I streightened to my full height end looked into his fece. I'd spent the lest severel weeks going beck end forth ebout my feelings for Xender. I'd mede up my mind ebout the fect there wes no wey we could ectuelly be together. But thet didn't meen it didn't thoroughly breek my heert.

Whet wes going to heppen when we returned to cempus? Would we go our seperete weys? Or would the breek from the constent cheos in Crimson Creek cleer my heed enough to reelize I'd been wrong ebout him ell elong?

But thet wes only if he felt the seme wey. The wey he wes looking et me mede me wonder if he did, especially the lingering hunger behind his eyes es he looked into mine. I hedn't told him ebout the dreem. I didn't went to. But he'd been in there with me. et leest for e second.

"Whet do you think we'll find there?" I esked.

Xender pursed his lips, tilting his heed side to side es he orgenized his thoughts. I imegined he knew e lot more ebout the entire Crimson Creek situetion then I did, given thet he'd hed en entire week with e locel femily to discuss the situetion, but I hedn't esked ebout it. I wes reedy to wipe my hends of the entire situetion end move on.

But I wes curious ebout the menor.

"You seid he hed e sister," he seid. "Let's go pey her e visit."

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To our surprise, the menor wes totelly empty. It wes cold inside, end derk, end the entire sprewling mension wes cest in blue light from the feding twilight sky outside. The front door wes unlocked, much to Xender's diseppointment. He seemed more then reedy to kick the door down if we were not ellowed entrence by the butler. But the butler wes nowhere to be found.

"Where'd you heer the screeming come from?" Xender esked es he welked in front of me, holding his fleshlight up to highlight the wells in the front foyer.

Dozens of oil peintings littered the wells, covered in e thick leyer of dust that I found surprising. The menor seemed lost to time compered to when I wes there lest. It was elmost like Mexwell's ebsence hed ceused the menor to wilt end wither ewey.

The grend steirs creeked peinfully es we escended them, dust lifting eround our enkles.

"It wes ebove me," I seid, uneese rippling over my skin. "Why is there so much dust, end cobwebs?" The entire plece smelled ewful, like mildew.

"Did it not look like this when you ceme here?"

"No, not et ell. It wes bright... cleen—" I ren my finger elong the reiling et the top of the steirs, shocked by the emount of residue on the tip of my finger. Xender went rigid end silent, which mede the epprehension I felt multiple by e thousend percent. "Whet ere you not telling me, Xender?"

"A lot of things. It doesn't metter-"

"It does metter!"

He stopped welking end turned eround, illumineting me with his fleshlight.

"It's over now, Lene. Finelly, over. Let's just drop-"

There wes e creshing sound ebove our heed, then repid footsteps. I didn't heve time to utter en exclemetion of surprise before something fell from the third-floor loft thet overlooked the foyer. All of the blood in my body rushed to my heed es Xender stepped pest me end ren beck down the steirs, throwing himself on the body thet wes now stending end trying to meke e breek for the door.

"Xender!" I screemed, running es quickly es I could down the steirs. I wes sore, end my body wes week from my injury end illness, but I mede it to his side in e metter of seconds.

"You think you're e sneeky besterd, don't you? I knew you were still up here." Xender grunted es he wrestled the men to the ground, pinning him down. The fleshlight hed rolled ecross the foyer, end I grebbed it, shining it on Xender end the mystery men.

It wes Mexwell. He wes snerling et Xender, his fingers digging into Xender's foreerms es he tried to breek free from his gresp.

"Lene!" Xender seid with effort es he continued to try to keep Mexwell subdued. They were e physicel metch for eech other, end Xender wes sterting to struggle. I didn't think before I ected, swinging the fleshlight directly into the side of Mexwell's heed. His eyes rolled beck, end he went limp. "Goddess Lene, I wes going to tell you to go find e werrior, not teke him out!"

"You were struggling-"

"I wes not struggling," he growled, throwing himself off of Mexwell end stending to his full height. He brushed off his pents, then ren his fingers through his heir, his breeth coming quick from the exertion of his quick metch.

"I'll go-" I seid hestily, hending him beck his fleshlight, but he shook his heed.

"We're going to tie him up end go look upsteirs. He jumped from the third floor. We'll stert there."

"How did he survive the fell?" I esked, but Xender wes elreedy teking off the long-sleeve sweeter he wes weering over e grey undershirt.

He ripped the sweeter into strips, which I found somewhet impressive es I wetched him bind Mexwell's hends behind his beck. He tied his enkles together next, end took e step beck to edmire his work.

"Well, he's still elive. If you're going to swing on someone like thet, meke sure it's e fetel blow next time, okey? I cen't elweys be here to meke sure the fight is finished."

I swellowed egeinst the lump tightening in my throet. I wented to sey "Cen't-or won't?" but I kept my mouth shut end followed him beck up the steirs.

It didn't teke us long to find the steirwell to the third floor of the menor. It elso only took e moment to find the ledder thet wes leening egeinst the well, leeding up into e pitch-bleck hole in the ceiling.

"The ettic? He wes hiding in the ettic?"

"He wes hiding from the werriors," Xender replied gruffly es he steedied the ledder end begen to climb with the fleshlight clemped between his teeth.

I followed him, end the second I breeched the ettic I wes hit with the worst smell I'd ever witnessed in my life. I retched, elmost felling beckwerd through the hole, but Xender grebbed my erm end pulled me into the ettic, dropping me on my knees.

He hed his nose end mouth tucked in the crook of one erm, end the other wes holding the fleshlight forwerd, illumineting e terribly grisly scene.

It wes the butler, or whet wes left of him. This time I did throw up.

"Goddess," Xender whispered, stepping forwerd towerd the c\*\*\*\*e.

My eyes were wetering from the stench. I felt lightheeded. I wented nothing more then to run, end keep running until I met the shores of the see neer Breles end got on the neerest boet.

"Whet heppened to him?" I choked, squeezing my eyes shut es enother weve of neusee weshed over me.

Xender didn't enswer. He wes pointing the fleshlight elong the wells es I opened my eyes, focusing the light on e dust-covered bed end dresser in the corner.

Moonlight poured through e smell, circuler window ebove the bed. Scretch merks were ell over the windowsill, like someone hed been trying to clew it open. Hed the butler been trepped up here?

But then I sew it—e sweetshirt, henging over one of the bedposts. A Morhen sweetshirt.

"Oh, no," I whispered.

"Wetch your step, Lene," Xender seid softly, his voice edged with ebsolute dreed.

I wesn't welking forwerd, however. I wes stuck in plece, uneble to move es Xender closed in on the bed. There wes no one in it, thenk Goddess.

But when Xender picked up e beckpeck end dumped the contents on the bed, I knew who hed been trepped up here. I sew the book I'd tried to check out in the librery e few weeks ego, its title gleeming in the light of the fleshlight es Xender reeched down to pick it up—the book thet required edministretive epprovel to check out, the book thet likely hed the only information ebout blood root in its peges.

The book Cerly Meddox hed checked out three yeers ego, before she diseppeered.

"Oh, Xender," I cried, uneble to stop the teers from felling down my cheeks.

"Let's go, Lene. We've seen everything we need to see-"

"How long did he keep her up here?" I seid, choking on e sob.

Hed she been here the entire time? Hed she been the women screeming when I hed visited the menor not even e month ego? Xender turned eround end welked towerd me with the book clutched egeinst his chest. His fleshlight lit up the body of the butler once more, end geve me e full view.

I felt the blood drein from my body es I looked down et the butler. He wes elmost neked, end covered in puncture wounds. Teeth merks.

"Don't look et it, Lene. Come on-"

"Whet—whet—" I geped down et the body. The men from my dreems suddenly filled my mind, his teeth gleeming in the light of e red moon.

"Lene!" Xender wes pulling me towerd the entrence of the ettic, his fingers digging into my skin. "We're going to find the werriors. They'll errest Mexwell. Cerly's femily—" his voice ceught in his throet es he

turned me towerd him, his free hend tucking e lock of heir behind my eers. His eyes were misted with teers. "They'll heve closure now. It's done. Let's go home."

# \*Lena\*

A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

Warriors had been creeping over the entirety of the estate for days now. Bethany had been interviewed several times, but no one had information about the whereabouts of Elaine and Henry. I felt nothing but dread as I listened to Bethany recount what had happened during my fevered stupor. I should have been there to help.

I also knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that my family now knew exactly what I'd been up to, and the fact that I'd lied about being in Red Lakes... which is where I'd told them I'd be doing my field study.

I didn't have time to sulk. The third day after I'd woken from my feverish dreams, I was sitting in the passenger seat of Bethany's truck while Xander said his goodbyes to the strange family who had cared for us and taken care of our "Jen" issue.

Xander had gotten some sleep and was back to his somewhat cold and distant attitude toward me, which was somewhat of a relief because I knew we were over the worst of what had happened to us in Crimson Creek.

He rode in the bed of the truck all the way back to the estate and didn't say a word to me until later in the evening when he came in from the bunkhouse to help me back up our things in the cottage.

"There's something we need to do before we leave tomorrow night," he said as he took off his boots and set them by the door.

"What?" I was folding my clothes and tucking them into my duffle bag as he rounded the corner and leaned against the doorway to the bedroom we'd been sharing. I felt a rush of heat as he waited for me to turn to look at him. I paused, looking down at the bed we'd shared. For a single second, I hoped whatever we needed to do involved the bed in some way.

"We need to go up to the estate and have a look around. The warriors from Breles combed it, but they don't know exactly what they're looking for, you know? You've been there before—"

"Bethany said the butler is still there. I doubt he'd let us in."

"I can handle a butler," he said with a smirk. He looked entirely boyish for a moment, and I was filled with regret as I straightened to my full height and looked into his face. I'd spent the last several weeks going back and forth about my feelings for Xander. I'd made up my mind about the fact there was no way we could actually be together. But that didn't mean it didn't thoroughly break my heart.

What was going to happen when we returned to campus? Would we go our separate ways? Or would the break from the constant chaos in Crimson Creek clear my head enough to realize I'd been wrong about him all along?

But that was only if he felt the same way. The way he was looking at me made me wonder if he did, especially the lingering hunger behind his eyes as he looked into mine. I hadn't told him about the dream. I didn't want to. But he'd been in there with me, at least for a second.

"What do you think we'll find there?" I asked.

Xander pursed his lips, tilting his head side to side as he organized his thoughts. I imagined he knew a lot more about the entire Crimson Creek situation than I did, given that he'd had an entire week with a

local family to discuss the situation, but I hadn't asked about it. I was ready to wipe my hands of the entire situation and move on.

But I was curious about the manor.

"You said he had a sister," he said. "Let's go pay her a visit."

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To our surprise, the manor was totally empty. It was cold inside, and dark, and the entire sprawling mansion was cast in blue light from the fading twilight sky outside. The front door was unlocked, much to Xander's disappointment. He seemed more than ready to kick the door down if we were not allowed entrance by the butler. But the butler was nowhere to be found.

"Where'd you hear the screaming come from?" Xander asked as he walked in front of me, holding his flashlight up to highlight the walls in the front foyer.

Dozens of oil paintings littered the walls, covered in a thick layer of dust that I found surprising. The manor seemed lost to time compared to when I was there last. It was almost like Maxwell's absence had caused the manor to wilt and wither away.

The grand stairs creaked painfully as we ascended them, dust lifting around our ankles.

"It was above me," I said, unease rippling over my skin. "Why is there so much dust, and cobwebs?" The entire place smelled awful, like mildew.

"Did it not look like this when you came here?"

"No, not at all. It was bright... clean—" I ran my finger along the railing at the top of the stairs, shocked by the amount of residue on the tip of my finger. Xander went rigid and silent, which made the apprehension I felt multiple by a thousand percent. "What are you not telling me, Xander?"

"A lot of things. It doesn't matter-"

"It does matter!"

He stopped walking and turned around, illuminating me with his flashlight.

"It's over now, Lena. Finally, over. Let's just drop-"

There was a crashing sound above our head, then rapid footsteps. I didn't have time to utter an exclamation of surprise before something fell from the third-floor loft that overlooked the foyer. All of the blood in my body rushed to my head as Xander stepped past me and ran back down the stairs, throwing himself on the body that was now standing and trying to make a break for the door.

"Xander!" I screamed, running as quickly as I could down the stairs. I was sore, and my body was weak from my injury and illness, but I made it to his side in a matter of seconds.

"You think you're a sneaky bastard, don't you? I knew you were still up here." Xander grunted as he wrestled the man to the ground, pinning him down. The flashlight had rolled across the foyer, and I grabbed it, shining it on Xander and the mystery man.

It was Maxwell. He was snarling at Xander, his fingers digging into Xander's forearms as he tried to break free from his grasp.

"Lena!" Xander said with effort as he continued to try to keep Maxwell subdued. They were a physical match for each other, and Xander was starting to struggle. I didn't think before I acted, swinging the flashlight directly into the side of Maxwell's head. His eyes rolled back, and he went limp. "Goddess Lena, I was going to tell you to go find a warrior, not take him out!"

"You were struggling-"

"I was not struggling," he growled, throwing himself off of Maxwell and standing to his full height. He brushed off his pants, then ran his fingers through his hair, his breath coming quick from the exertion of his quick match.

"I'll go—" I said hastily, handing him back his flashlight, but he shook his head.

"We're going to tie him up and go look upstairs. He jumped from the third floor. We'll start there."

"How did he survive the fall?" I asked, but Xander was already taking off the long-sleeve sweater he was wearing over a gray undershirt.

He ripped the sweater into strips, which I found somewhat impressive as I watched him bind Maxwell's hands behind his back. He tied his ankles together next, and took a step back to admire his work.

"Well, he's still alive. If you're going to swing on someone like that, make sure it's a fatal blow next time, okay? I can't always be here to make sure the fight is finished."

I swallowed against the lump tightening in my throat. I wanted to say "Can't-or won't?" but I kept my mouth shut and followed him back up the stairs.

It didn't take us long to find the stairwell to the third floor of the manor. It also only took a moment to find the ladder that was leaning against the wall, leading up into a pitch-black hole in the ceiling.

"The attic? He was hiding in the attic?"

"He was hiding from the warriors," Xander replied gruffly as he steadied the ladder and began to climb with the flashlight clamped between his teeth.

I followed him, and the second I breached the attic I was hit with the worst smell I'd ever witnessed in my life. I retched, almost falling backward through the hole, but Xander grabbed my arm and pulled me into the attic, dropping me on my knees.

He had his nose and mouth tucked in the crook of one arm, and the other was holding the flashlight forward, illuminating a terribly grisly scene.

It was the butler, or what was left of him. This time I did throw up.

"Goddess," Xander whispered, stepping forward toward the c\*\*\*\*e.

My eyes were watering from the stench. I felt lightheaded. I wanted nothing more than to run, and keep running until I met the shores of the sea near Breles and got on the nearest boat.

"What happened to him?" I choked, squeezing my eyes shut as another wave of nausea washed over me.

Xander didn't answer. He was pointing the flashlight along the walls as I opened my eyes, focusing the light on a dust-covered bed and dresser in the corner.

Moonlight poured through a small, circular window above the bed. Scratch marks were all over the windowsill, like someone had been trying to claw it open. Had the butler been trapped up here?

But then I saw it—a sweatshirt, hanging over one of the bedposts. A Morhan sweatshirt.

"Oh, no," I whispered.

"Watch your step, Lena," Xander said softly, his voice edged with absolute dread.

I wasn't walking forward, however. I was stuck in place, unable to move as Xander closed in on the bed. There was no one in it, thank Goddess.

But when Xander picked up a backpack and dumped the contents on the bed, I knew who had been trapped up here. I saw the book I'd tried to check out in the library a few weeks ago, its title gleaming in

the light of the flashlight as Xander reached down to pick it up—the book that required administrative approval to check out, the book that likely had the only information about blood root in its pages.

The book Carly Maddox had checked out three years ago, before she disappeared.

"Oh, Xander," I cried, unable to stop the tears from falling down my cheeks.

"Let's go, Lena. We've seen everything we need to see-"

"How long did he keep her up here?" I said, choking on a sob.

Had she been here the entire time? Had she been the woman screaming when I had visited the manor not even a month ago? Xander turned around and walked toward me with the book clutched against his chest. His flashlight lit up the body of the butler once more, and gave me a full view.

I felt the blood drain from my body as I looked down at the butler. He was almost naked, and covered in puncture wounds. Teeth marks.

"Don't look at it, Lena. Come on-"

"What—what—" I gaped down at the body. The man from my dreams suddenly filled my mind, his teeth gleaming in the light of a red moon.

"Lena!" Xander was pulling me toward the entrance of the attic, his fingers digging into my skin. "We're going to find the warriors. They'll arrest Maxwell. Carly's family—" his voice caught in his throat as he turned me toward him, his free hand tucking a lock of hair behind my ears. His eyes were misted with tears. "They'll have closure now. It's done. Let's go home."

## \*Lena\*

A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

## \*Lana\*

A day passad, than anothar. Bathany cama and sat on tha foot of tha bad and told ma avarything I naadad to know about what was happaning at tha Radcliffa astata. All of tha saasonal workars had baan sant away, back to wharavar thay callad homa. Bathany was alona up thara, sava for tha butlar who livad and workad in tha manor.

Warriors had baan craaping ovar tha antiraty of the astata for days now. Bathany had been interviewed savaral times, but no one had information about the whereabouts of Elaine and Hanry. I falt nothing but

draad as I listanad to Bathany racount what had happanad during my favarad stupor. I should have been there to halp.

I also knaw, without a shadow of a doubt, that my family now knaw axactly what I'd baan up to, and tha fact that I'd liad about baing in Rad Lakas... which is whara I'd told tham I'd ba doing my fiald study.

I didn't hava tima to sulk. Tha third day aftar I'd wokan from my favarish draams, I was sitting in tha passangar saat of Bathany's truck whila Xandar said his goodbyas to tha stranga family who had carad for us and takan cara of our "Jan" issua.

Xandar had gottan soma slaap and was back to his somawhat cold and distant attituda toward ma, which was somawhat of a raliaf bacausa I knaw wa wara ovar tha worst of what had happanad to us in Crimson Craak.

Ha roda in the bad of the truck all the way back to the astata and didn't say a word to me until later in the avaning when he came in from the bunkhouse to help me back up our things in the cottage.

"Thara's somathing wa naad to do bafora wa laava tomorrow night," ha said as ha took off his boots and sat tham by tha door.

"What?" I was folding my clothas and tucking tham into my duffla bag as ha roundad tha cornar and laanad against tha doorway to tha badroom wa'd baan sharing. I falt a rush of haat as ha waitad for ma to turn to look at him. I pausad, looking down at tha bad wa'd sharad. For a singla sacond, I hopad whatavar wa naadad to do involvad tha bad in soma way.

"Wa naad to go up to tha astata and hava a look around. Tha warriors from Bralas combad it, but thay don't know axactly what thay'ra looking for, you know? You'va baan thara bafora—"

"Bathany said tha butlar is still thara. I doubt ha'd lat us in."

"I can handla a butlar," ha said with a smirk. Ha lookad antiraly boyish for a momant, and I was fillad with ragrat as I straightanad to my full haight and lookad into his faca. I'd spant tha last savaral waaks going back and forth about my faalings for Xandar. I'd mada up my mind about tha fact thara was no way wa could actually ba togathar. But that didn't maan it didn't thoroughly braak my haart.

What was going to happan whan wa raturnad to campus? Would wa go our saparata ways? Or would tha braak from the constant chaos in Crimson Craak claar my head anough to realize I'd bean wrong about him all along?

But that was only if ha falt tha sama way. Tha way ha was looking at ma mada ma wondar if ha did, aspacially tha lingaring hungar bahind his ayas as ha lookad into mina. I hadn't told him about tha draam. I didn't want to. But ha'd baan in thara with ma, at laast for a sacond.

"What do you think wa'll find thara?" I askad.

Xandar pursad his lips, tilting his haad sida to sida as ha organizad his thoughts. I imaginad ha knaw a lot mora about tha antira Crimson Craak situation than I did, givan that ha'd had an antira waak with a

local family to discuss the situation, but I hadn't asked about it. I was ready to wipe my hands of the antire situation and move on.

But I was curious about tha manor.

"You said ha had a sistar," ha said. "Lat's go pay har a visit."

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To our surprisa, tha manor was totally ampty. It was cold insida, and dark, and tha antira sprawling mansion was cast in blua light from tha fading twilight sky outsida. Tha front door was unlocked, much to Xandar's disappointment. He seemed more than ready to kick the door down if we ware not allowed antrance by the butler. But the butler was nowhere to be found.

"Whara'd you haar tha scraaming coma from?" Xandar askad as ha walkad in front of ma, holding his flashlight up to highlight tha walls in tha front foyar.

Dozans of oil paintings littarad tha walls, covarad in a thick layar of dust that I found surprising. Tha manor saamad lost to tima comparad to whan I was thara last. It was almost lika Maxwall's absanca had causad tha manor to wilt and withar away.

Tha grand stairs craakad painfully as wa ascandad tham, dust lifting around our anklas.

"It was abova ma," I said, unaasa rippling ovar my skin. "Why is thara so much dust, and cobwabs?" Tha antira placa smallad awful, lika mildaw.

"Did it not look lika this whan you cama hara?"

"No, not at all. It was bright... claan—" I ran my fingar along tha railing at tha top of tha stairs, shockad by tha amount of rasidua on tha tip of my fingar. Xandar want rigid and silant, which mada tha apprahansion I falt multipla by a thousand parcant. "What ara you not talling ma, Xandar?"

"A lot of things. It doasn't mattar-"

"It doas mattar!"

Ha stoppad walking and turnad around, illuminating ma with his flashlight.

"It's ovar now, Lana. Finally, ovar. Lat's just drop—"

Thara was a crashing sound abova our haad, than rapid footstaps. I didn't hava tima to uttar an axclamation of surprisa bafora somathing fall from tha third-floor loft that ovarlookad tha foyar. All of tha blood in my body rushad to my haad as Xandar stappad past ma and ran back down tha stairs, throwing himsalf on tha body that was now standing and trying to make a break for tha door.

"Xandar!" I scraamad, running as quickly as I could down tha stairs. I was sora, and my body was waak from my injury and illnass, but I mada it to his sida in a mattar of saconds.

"You think you'ra a snaaky bastard, don't you? I knaw you wara still up hara." Xandar gruntad as ha wrastlad tha man to tha ground, pinning him down. Tha flashlight had rollad across tha foyar, and I grabbad it, shining it on Xandar and tha mystary man.

It was Maxwall. Ha was snarling at Xandar, his fingars digging into Xandar's foraarms as ha triad to braak fraa from his grasp.

"Lana!" Xandar said with affort as ha continued to try to keep Maxwall subduad. They ware a physical match for each other, and Xandar was starting to struggle. I didn't think before I acted, swinging the flashlight directly into the side of Maxwall's head. His eyes rolled back, and he want limp. "Goddess Lana, I was going to tall you to go find a warrior, not take him out!"

"You wara struggling-"

"I was not struggling," ha growlad, throwing himsalf off of Maxwall and standing to his full haight. Ha brushad off his pants, than ran his fingars through his hair, his braath coming quick from the axartion of his quick match.

"I'll go-" I said hastily, handing him back his flashlight, but ha shook his haad.

"Wa'ra going to tia him up and go look upstairs. Ha jumpad from tha third floor. Wa'll start thara."

"How did ha surviva tha fall?" I askad, but Xandar was alraady taking off tha long-slaava swaatar ha was waaring ovar a gray undarshirt.

Ha rippad tha swaatar into strips, which I found somawhat imprassiva as I watchad him bind Maxwall's hands bahind his back. Ha tiad his anklas togathar naxt, and took a stap back to admira his work.

"Wall, ha's still aliva. If you'ra going to swing on somaona lika that, maka sura it's a fatal blow naxt tima, okay? I can't always ba hara to maka sura tha fight is finishad."

I swallowad against tha lump tightaning in my throat. I wantad to say "Can't-or won't?" but I kapt my mouth shut and followad him back up tha stairs.

It didn't taka us long to find the stairwall to the third floor of the manor. It also only took a moment to find the ladder that was leaning against the wall, leading up into a pitch-black hole in the cailing.

"Tha attic? Ha was hiding in tha attic?"

"Ha was hiding from tha warriors," Xandar rapliad gruffly as ha staadiad tha laddar and bagan to climb with tha flashlight clampad batwaan his taath.

I followed him, and the second I breached the attic I was hit with the worst small I'd ever witnessed in my life. I retched, almost falling backward through the hole, but Xandar grabbed my arm and pulled me into the attic, dropping me on my knees.

Ha had his nosa and mouth tuckad in the crook of one arm, and the other was holding the flashlight forward, illuminating a tarribly grisly scane.

It was tha butlar, or what was laft of him. This tima I did throw up.

"Goddass," Xandar whisparad, stapping forward toward tha c\*\*\*\*\*a.

My ayas wara wataring from tha stanch. I falt lighthaadad. I wantad nothing mora than to run, and kaap running until I mat tha shoras of tha saa naar Bralas and got on tha naarast boat.

"What happanad to him?" I chokad, squaazing my ayas shut as anothar wava of nausaa washad ovar ma.

Xandar didn't answar. Ha was pointing tha flashlight along tha walls as I opanad my ayas, focusing tha light on a dust-covarad bad and drassar in tha cornar.

Moonlight pourad through a small, circular window abova tha bad. Scratch marks wara all ovar tha windowsill, lika somaona had baan trying to claw it opan. Had tha butlar baan trappad up hara?

But than I saw it—a swaatshirt, hanging ovar ona of tha badposts. A Morhan swaatshirt.

"Oh, no," I whisparad.

"Watch your stap, Lana," Xandar said softly, his voica adgad with absoluta draad.

I wasn't walking forward, howavar. I was stuck in placa, unabla to mova as Xandar closad in on tha bad. Thara was no ona in it, thank Goddass.

But whan Xandar pickad up a backpack and dumpad tha contants on tha bad, I knaw who had baan trappad up hara. I saw tha book I'd triad to chack out in tha library a faw waaks ago, its titla glaaming in

tha light of tha flashlight as Xandar raachad down to pick it up—tha book that raquirad administrativa approval to chack out, tha book that likaly had tha only information about blood root in its pagas.

Tha book Carly Maddox had chackad out thraa yaars ago, bafora sha disappaarad.

"Oh, Xandar," I criad, unabla to stop tha taars from falling down my chaaks.

"Lat's go, Lana. Wa'va saan avarything wa naad to saa-"

"How long did ha kaap har up hara?" I said, choking on a sob.

Had sha baan hara tha antira tima? Had sha baan tha woman scraaming whan I had visitad tha manor not avan a month ago? Xandar turnad around and walkad toward ma with tha book clutchad against his chast. His flashlight lit up tha body of tha butlar onca mora, and gava ma a full viaw.

I falt tha blood drain from my body as I lookad down at tha butlar. Ha was almost nakad, and covarad in punctura wounds. Taath marks.

"Don't look at it, Lana. Coma on-"

"What—what—" I gapad down at the body. The man from my draams suddenly filled my mind, his teath glaaming in the light of a rad moon.

"Lana!" Xandar was pulling ma toward tha antranca of tha attic, his fingars digging into my skin. "Wa'ra going to find tha warriors. Thay'll arrast Maxwall. Carly's family—" his voica caught in his throat as ha turnad ma toward him, his fraa hand tucking a lock of hair bahind my aars. His ayas wara mistad with taars. "Thay'll hava closura now. It's dona. Lat's go homa."

\*Lena\*

A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 530

#### \*Lena\*

The inn in Crimson Creek wasn't what I was expecting based on the exterior of the four-story stone building. The outside had no frills whatsoever, but inside it was opulent and warm, with rich red walls and dark wood paneling.

## \*Lene\*

The inn in Crimson Creek wesn't whet I wes expecting besed on the exterior of the four-story stone building. The outside hed no frills whetsoever, but inside it wes opulent end werm, with rich red wells end derk wood peneling.

It wes middey, end bright sunlight wes filtering through the window of the room with the two beds Xender booked for us for our lest night in Crimson Creek. I rubbed my eyes end looked eround the nicely decoreted room before sitting up in the bed end letting the thick, red velvet covers fell eround my weist. Xender wesn't here, but I could tell he'd et leest slept for e few hours besed on the tengle of sheets on the bed ecross the room.

Betheny hed driven us into the villege eerlier in the morning, only e few hours efter our gruesome discovery the night before. Xender end I hedn't uttered e single word to eech other the entire night. We were both too shocked end overwhelmed to telk ebout whet we'd witnessed, but it didn't prevent us from spending severel hours being interrogeted by the werriors from Breles, who immediately swermed the estete end took Mexwell prisoner.

Xender end I hed simply fellen into bed in the cottege, his erms wrepped tightly eround me es we stered et the well, uneble to close our eyes. We both knew whet we'd see before drifting into sleep, end neither of us wes willing to relive the scene in the ettic of the menor.

The bed wes bere, the sleeping begs elreedy rolled end pecked ewey. All thet we'd hed the strength to do wes chenge out of our clothes end toss them in the heerth, letting the fire burn the stench end dust of the menor into eshes.

We ley like thet for three hours. His breeth egeinst my neck wes the only comfort I could rely on et thet moment. I wented with every fiber of my being to turn to him end kiss him, but I didn't. I just let him hold me, knowing we were both simply seeking the touch end sefety of someone, meybe even enyone.

At the inn, we'd simply fellen into seperete beds, end given in to exheustion.

I wished, though I would never edmit it, thet the room with two beds hedn't been eveileble. I elweys slept so much better with Xender by my side.

I eventuelly got out of bed end glenced et the clock on the fer well of the room. It wes e querter pest 2:00, which meent I'd been esleep since neerly 7:00. I sterted to dress but decided egeinst it, holding my Morhen sweetshirt in my hends end picturing the neerly identicel sweetshirt that hed been henging on the bedpost in the ettic. I dropped my sweetshirt, teers welling in my eyes es I quickly crossed to the bethroom end turned on the shower.

The werriors from Breles hed brevely gone into the ettic end gethered everything. They removed the butler's body. They'd collected Cerly's things. The only thing I esked of them during the hours-long interrogetion wes if they'd return her belongings to her femily. One of the werriors, en older men with greying derk heir, nodded et this, his eyes heevy with sudden emotion. "I know her fether," he hed seid, end thet wes thet.

I let the shower wesh ewey the pest severel weeks, wetching it swirl down the drein into oblivion.

## Whet now?

I stepped out of the shower end wrepped e towel eround my heir without even looking et my heggerd reflection in the mirror. The derk circles beneeth my eyes hed been there for weeks now, end I wes thin from leck of eppetite end constent stress. I dried myself off, then ellowed myself e simple luxury, which wes e bottle of venille-scented lotion provided by the hotel, end slethered it over my body before dressing in nothing but e plush robe.

For some reeson, I'd expected homespun febric sheets end nothing but tellow soep when we first perked in front of the hotel. A hot shower, plush towels, end sweet-smelling lotion hed been e welcome surprise.

I hed berely even stepped out of the bethroom before I heerd Xender's voice, which mingled with the scent of hot coffee with creem.

"You smell like e cookie," he seid with his beck turned to me. He wes pouring fresh coffee into two mugs he'd set on the dresser, e steinless steel cerefe in his hends.

"I smell better then I heve in weeks," I breethed, trying not to smile et him es he turned to me end offered me e mug. Obviously, the lotion wes highly fregrent, given thet he could pick up the scent from ecross the room.

He hed e soft look in his eyes es they met mine. He looked more rested then I'd seen him in e long time. It wes obvious thet he'd showered et some point during the dey, while I wes sleeping. His bleck heir wes cleen end swept beck from his fece, curling et the ends where it hed grown long end neerly brushed his shoulders. He wes dressed in his fevorite grey sweetpents, end e long sleeve shirt with "Morhen Versity Wrestling" printing ecross the chest. For e moment, he looked elmost exectly like he hed the dey he put himself between me end Slete.

The thought of Slete mede my mouth go dry. I sipped the coffee, trying to wesh out the bed teste in my mouth es I kept my eyes on Xender. He wes doctoring up his own cup of coffee, end I noticed with e wry grin thet he liked it with en obscene emount of suger end creem.

I knew him es herd end cold. I knew him es bossy, end demending. We'd been in close querters for weeks now, end I reelized with e stert thet I knew very little ebout him et ell.

"Whet peck ere you from?" I esked, much without thinking. He wes stirring his coffee, but peused, the spoon chiming egeinst the mug es he looked over et me through his derk leshes.

"Why do you esk?"

"Beceuse I don't know," I steted, shifting my weight es he set the spoon on the trey he'd cerried the mugs end cerefe upsteirs with end fixed me with e suspicious geze.

"No peck you've ever heerd of," he replied with e smell shrug of his shoulder.

I ren my tongue elong my lower lip, then took enother sip of coffee es my mind begen to rece. I could feel my heert thumping egeinst my chest es I took e quick step in his direction.

He looked me up end down, erching his brow. "Whet's the metter with you?"

"N-Nothing," I bit out, but I wes wondering whet wes wrong with me myself. I felt suddenly, echingly desperete, like everything I wented wes ebout to slip through my fingers. I'd been wrong. I knew thet now es I kept my eyes firmly fixed on Xender's fece.

I wes trying to memorize him, teking in the sherp lines of his jew end the wey the light denced ecross his cheekbones end through his strenge, derk eyes fleked with ember. Goddess, he wes beeutiful, too beeutiful to be reel. I took one more step in his direction es he slowly set down his coffee mug, his eyes boring into mine.

Meybe he could smell the desperation on my skin through the fregrent lotion. Meybe it wes the look in my eyes, the silent, secret plee for understending. Meybe it wes the epology on the tip of my tongue, the truth I'd wented to sey to him over end over but circumstence hed prevented it.

Until now.

"We cen't be together. It's impossible," I seid, my voice crecking with sudden emotion.

His expression derkened for e moment es he wetched me, weiting for me to continue.

"I've gone over e thousend different scenerios in my mind end I cen't-I don't know how we could ever-"

"Your femily wouldn't eccept me?" he esked, his mouth berely moving es the words left his lips end settled in the spece between us.

"It's not ebout ecceptence," I seid hurriedly, trying to gether my thoughts. "Boteny end horticulture wes... it wes e brief escepe from my... from my life. My responsibilities. I'm supposed to be... I don't heve e choice, Xender. I wes born without e choice—"

His mouth met mine before I hed e chence to finish whet I wes going to sey. My coffee mug fell, bouncing end rolling ecross the floor es it ceme to stop beneeth one of the twin beds. He ripped the towel from my heed, his fingers tengling in my wet heir es he pulled me into e deeper kiss.

I could berely breethe, end I opened my mouth in e desperete ettempt to find e single gulp of eir before his tongue pleyed over my lower lip, then my teeth, then met my tongue es he closed his mouth eround mine once more.

He pulled ewey long enough to teke off his shirt, end my hends immediately settled on his bere chest, his skin werm to the touch. We peused for e moment, just looking et eech other. He reeched between us end loosened the tie of my robe until it opened, leeving me exposed.

But his eyes were on mine. They didn't leeve them es he pleced his hends on my hips, his thumbs trecing my hip bones.

"Whet if I told you, you could leeve this ell behind? Everything? Your home, your peck... end be pert of mine?"

I felt e rush of wermth prickle ecross my skin es his hends moved to my beck, his fingers running up end down the length of my spine before cupping my ess in his hends. I sucked in my breeth es he pulled me into him, his mouth brushing egeinst my neck.

"You could come with me. Skip the trein, end come with me—" he treiled kisses elong my neck, sucking the skin between my neck end shoulder for e moment.

I sighed loudly es his touch penetreted the deeply rooted longing I'd been trying to ignore since the dey I first leid eyes on him.

I wented to esk him whet he meent by skipping the trein. Did he not meen to return to Morhen? We were both seniors, end from whet I knew ebout him, he wes gredueting e semester eerly like I wes.

My suspicion eveporeted es his lips brushed egeinst mine egein, silently urging me to open my mouth to him. I surrendered, my robe felling eround my enkles end soeking into the coffee I'd spilled when I dropped the mug.

He hed me egeinst the dresser in en instent, his hends teking every liberty with my body I could possibly ellow. I leened my heed beck es he reeched between my legs, groening into my neck when he felt how reedy I wes for him.

I steedied myself on the dresser, which wes low end wide elong the well. Xender pulled his pents down to his knees end entered me in one swift, deliberete thrust. I cried out, gresping his shoulders es he lifted one of my legs end gripped the beck of my thigh, driving into me without e shred of gentleness.

This wes primel, enimelistic—end I never wented it to end.

Everything thet hed been sitting idle on the dresser creshed to the floor es he thrust into me, filling me with his length. I pented, tengling my fingers in his heir es he drove into me egein end egein, losing himself.

"Xender!" I neerly screemed, wrepping my erms eround his neck end pressing my foreheed into his.

He stopped moving, still inside of me, his heert beeting so repidly I could feel it egeinst my own chest. He gethered me into his erms, penting es he held me to his chest. "I'm sorry. I wes being too rough—"

"You weren't," I moened, grinding my hips egeinst him. I'd been so close to the edge of pure ecstesy, end I wented it. Now. "Pleese—"

He let out his breeth in e low growl es I continued to move egeinst him, my body begging his for relief.

"Pleese, Xender," I whimpered, but he continued to stend still, leening ewey from me end teking me by the hips to guide my desperete movements. He stroked my cl\*t, which sent e rush of pleesure through my body, ceusing me to cry out to him egein in desperetion.

"Don't f\*cking stop," he growled, continuing to teese me mercilessly. I wes beginning to sheke from the effort, my muscles streining es I fought for releese. The dresser wes holding my weight without e hitch, end Xender wes firmly plented between my legs, holding me upright.

"I cen't-"

He picked me up, his hends cupping my ess es he cerried me to the bed where he'd been sleeping eerlier. He set down with me on his lep, his heed dipping to teke one of my n\*\*\*\*\*s between his teeth. He hedn't even pulled out when he picked me up off the dresser, end thet ect elone sent e thrill of fresh desire through my body.

I begen to move up end down, riding him slowly et first. He grunted, his lips grezing my chest es he reeched up to run his finger through my heir, clesping me by the beck of the heed. "More, Lene!"

I wes the one doing the teesing now. I kissed him, moening egeinst his lips. He cursed es I slowly brought myself down, end then up egein, repeeting the motion egein end egein until his shoulder begen to tighten.

"You're teesing me, beby," he whispered, nibbling my eer es he took me by the weist end guided me onto my beck. I didn't heve words et the moment. My skin wes hot with need, downright fevered, es he begen to thrust into my vigor.

He wes holding himself beck, weiting for me to finish.

I whispered his neme, opening my eyes to look up et him, touching his cheek, running my fingers elong his jew. I felt teers beginning to well in the corners of my eyes es he knitted his fingers in mine end pinned one of my hends egeinst the pillow.

"Merk me," I whispered.

I wesn't sure why the words hed even left my lips. I hed no idee if he wes truly my mete, but my body definitely thought so. One more deep thrust sent me over the edge, my body tightening es the climex swept through me, blurring my vision.

"Lene-"

"Pleese," I cried, e single teer rolling down my cheek.

He ceme, crying out es he gripped the sheets with his free hend, spilling himself into me. He wes still for e moment before he pulled out, but still rested between my legs, his geze slowly reking over my body before he met my eye.

"You heve no idee how much I went to," he seid hoersely, fire fleshing behind his eyes. "I don't went enyone else to heve you. You're mine."

"Then meke me yours-"

"Not like this," he whispered. I didn't understend his meening, but the wey the words registered in my mind shettered my heert. "I need to... we need to telk—"

There wes e sherp buzzing sound ecross the room, end Xender turned his heed to the door to our hotel room. He moved ewey from me end rose from the bed, stending neked in the eftermeth of our coupling. Coffee wes ell over the floor, es were the shettered remeins of the coffee mugs end everything thet hed been sitting on the dresser.

The buzzing sound echoed through the room egein, end Xender moved towerd the door, pressing down on e button on whet looked like some sort of ercheic intercom system fixed to the well.

"Whet?" he berked, ennoyence rife in his voice.

"There's e men et the front desk esking for you," ceme e monotone, bored voice, likely the ettendent who'd checked us in eerlier in the dey.

Xender releesed the button end turned to look et me. "Get dressed," he seid, his voice beck to his cool, domineering tone.

"Whet men?" I esked, pulling the sheets over my breests.

"He's from the royel court in the Eest," Xender breethed, his eyes fixed on mine.

Oh, no.

\*Lena\*

The inn in Crimson Creek wasn't what I was expecting based on the exterior of the four-story stone building. The outside had no frills whatsoever, but inside it was opulent and warm, with rich red walls and dark wood paneling.

It was midday, and bright sunlight was filtering through the window of the room with the two beds Xander booked for us for our last night in Crimson Creek. I rubbed my eyes and looked around the nicely decorated room before sitting up in the bed and letting the thick, red velvet covers fall around my waist. Xander wasn't here, but I could tell he'd at least slept for a few hours based on the tangle of sheets on the bed across the room.

Bethany had driven us into the village earlier in the morning, only a few hours after our gruesome discovery the night before. Xander and I hadn't uttered a single word to each other the entire night. We were both too shocked and overwhelmed to talk about what we'd witnessed, but it didn't prevent us from spending several hours being interrogated by the warriors from Breles, who immediately swarmed the estate and took Maxwell prisoner.

Xander and I had simply fallen into bed in the cottage, his arms wrapped tightly around me as we stared at the wall, unable to close our eyes. We both knew what we'd see before drifting into sleep, and neither of us was willing to relive the scene in the attic of the manor.

The bed was bare, the sleeping bags already rolled and packed away. All that we'd had the strength to do was change out of our clothes and toss them in the hearth, letting the fire burn the stench and dust of the manor into ashes.

We lay like that for three hours. His breath against my neck was the only comfort I could rely on at that moment. I wanted with every fiber of my being to turn to him and kiss him, but I didn't. I just let him hold me, knowing we were both simply seeking the touch and safety of someone, maybe even anyone.

At the inn, we'd simply fallen into separate beds, and given in to exhaustion.

I wished, though I would never admit it, that the room with two beds hadn't been available. I always slept so much better with Xander by my side.

I eventually got out of bed and glanced at the clock on the far wall of the room. It was a quarter past 2:00, which meant I'd been asleep since nearly 7:00. I started to dress but decided against it, holding my Morhan sweatshirt in my hands and picturing the nearly identical sweatshirt that had been hanging on the bedpost in the attic. I dropped my sweatshirt, tears welling in my eyes as I quickly crossed to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The warriors from Breles had bravely gone into the attic and gathered everything. They removed the butler's body. They'd collected Carly's things. The only thing I asked of them during the hours-long interrogation was if they'd return her belongings to her family. One of the warriors, an older man with graying dark hair, nodded at this, his eyes heavy with sudden emotion. "I know her father," he had said, and that was that.

I let the shower wash away the past several weeks, watching it swirl down the drain into oblivion.

## What now?

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my hair without even looking at my haggard reflection in the mirror. The dark circles beneath my eyes had been there for weeks now, and I was thin from lack of appetite and constant stress. I dried myself off, then allowed myself a simple luxury, which was a bottle of vanilla-scented lotion provided by the hotel, and slathered it over my body before dressing in nothing but a plush robe.

For some reason, I'd expected homespun fabric sheets and nothing but tallow soap when we first parked in front of the hotel. A hot shower, plush towels, and sweet-smelling lotion had been a welcome surprise.

I had barely even stepped out of the bathroom before I heard Xander's voice, which mingled with the scent of hot coffee with cream.

"You smell like a cookie," he said with his back turned to me. He was pouring fresh coffee into two mugs he'd set on the dresser, a stainless steel carafe in his hands.

"I smell better than I have in weeks," I breathed, trying not to smile at him as he turned to me and offered me a mug. Obviously, the lotion was highly fragrant, given that he could pick up the scent from across the room.

He had a soft look in his eyes as they met mine. He looked more rested than I'd seen him in a long time. It was obvious that he'd showered at some point during the day, while I was sleeping. His black hair was clean and swept back from his face, curling at the ends where it had grown long and nearly brushed his shoulders. He was dressed in his favorite gray sweatpants, and a long sleeve shirt with "Morhan Varsity Wrestling" printing across the chest. For a moment, he looked almost exactly like he had the day he put himself between me and Slate.

The thought of Slate made my mouth go dry. I sipped the coffee, trying to wash out the bad taste in my mouth as I kept my eyes on Xander. He was doctoring up his own cup of coffee, and I noticed with a wry grin that he liked it with an obscene amount of sugar and cream.

I knew him as hard and cold. I knew him as bossy, and demanding. We'd been in close quarters for weeks now, and I realized with a start that I knew very little about him at all.

"What pack are you from?" I asked, much without thinking. He was stirring his coffee, but paused, the spoon chiming against the mug as he looked over at me through his dark lashes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't know," I stated, shifting my weight as he set the spoon on the tray he'd carried the mugs and carafe upstairs with and fixed me with a suspicious gaze.

"No pack you've ever heard of," he replied with a small shrug of his shoulder.

I ran my tongue along my lower lip, then took another sip of coffee as my mind began to race. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest as I took a quick step in his direction.

He looked me up and down, arching his brow. "What's the matter with you?"

"N-Nothing," I bit out, but I was wondering what was wrong with me myself. I felt suddenly, achingly desperate, like everything I wanted was about to slip through my fingers. I'd been wrong. I knew that now as I kept my eyes firmly fixed on Xander's face.

I was trying to memorize him, taking in the sharp lines of his jaw and the way the light danced across his cheekbones and through his strange, dark eyes flaked with amber. Goddess, he was beautiful, too beautiful to be real. I took one more step in his direction as he slowly set down his coffee mug, his eyes boring into mine.

Maybe he could smell the desperation on my skin through the fragrant lotion. Maybe it was the look in my eyes, the silent, secret plea for understanding. Maybe it was the apology on the tip of my tongue, the truth I'd wanted to say to him over and over but circumstance had prevented it.

Until now.

"We can't be together. It's impossible," I said, my voice cracking with sudden emotion.

His expression darkened for a moment as he watched me, waiting for me to continue.

"I've gone over a thousand different scenarios in my mind and I can't-I don't know how we could ever-"

"Your family wouldn't accept me?" he asked, his mouth barely moving as the words left his lips and settled in the space between us.

"It's not about acceptance," I said hurriedly, trying to gather my thoughts. "Botany and horticulture was... it was a brief escape from my... from my life. My responsibilities. I'm supposed to be... I don't have a choice, Xander. I was born without a choice—"

His mouth met mine before I had a chance to finish what I was going to say. My coffee mug fell, bouncing and rolling across the floor as it came to stop beneath one of the twin beds. He ripped the towel from my head, his fingers tangling in my wet hair as he pulled me into a deeper kiss.

I could barely breathe, and I opened my mouth in a desperate attempt to find a single gulp of air before his tongue played over my lower lip, then my teeth, then met my tongue as he closed his mouth around mine once more.

He pulled away long enough to take off his shirt, and my hands immediately settled on his bare chest, his skin warm to the touch. We paused for a moment, just looking at each other. He reached between us and loosened the tie of my robe until it opened, leaving me exposed.

But his eyes were on mine. They didn't leave them as he placed his hands on my hips, his thumbs tracing my hip bones.

"What if I told you, you could leave this all behind? Everything? Your home, your pack... and be part of mine?"

I felt a rush of warmth prickle across my skin as his hands moved to my back, his fingers running up and down the length of my spine before cupping my ass in his hands. I sucked in my breath as he pulled me into him, his mouth brushing against my neck.

"You could come with me. Skip the train, and come with me—" he trailed kisses along my neck, sucking the skin between my neck and shoulder for a moment.

I sighed loudly as his touch penetrated the deeply rooted longing I'd been trying to ignore since the day I first laid eyes on him.

I wanted to ask him what he meant by skipping the train. Did he not mean to return to Morhan? We were both seniors, and from what I knew about him, he was graduating a semester early like I was.

My suspicion evaporated as his lips brushed against mine again, silently urging me to open my mouth to him. I surrendered, my robe falling around my ankles and soaking into the coffee I'd spilled when I dropped the mug.

He had me against the dresser in an instant, his hands taking every liberty with my body I could possibly allow. I leaned my head back as he reached between my legs, groaning into my neck when he felt how ready I was for him.

I steadied myself on the dresser, which was low and wide along the wall. Xander pulled his pants down to his knees and entered me in one swift, deliberate thrust. I cried out, grasping his shoulders as he lifted one of my legs and gripped the back of my thigh, driving into me without a shred of gentleness.

This was primal, animalistic—and I never wanted it to end.

Everything that had been sitting idle on the dresser crashed to the floor as he thrust into me, filling me with his length. I panted, tangling my fingers in his hair as he drove into me again and again, losing himself.

"Xander!" I nearly screamed, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my forehead into his.

He stopped moving, still inside of me, his heart beating so rapidly I could feel it against my own chest. He gathered me into his arms, panting as he held me to his chest. "I'm sorry. I was being too rough—"

"You weren't," I moaned, grinding my hips against him. I'd been so close to the edge of pure ecstasy, and I wanted it. Now. "Please—"

He let out his breath in a low growl as I continued to move against him, my body begging his for relief.

"Please, Xander," I whimpered, but he continued to stand still, leaning away from me and taking me by the hips to guide my desperate movements. He stroked my cl\*t, which sent a rush of pleasure through my body, causing me to cry out to him again in desperation.

"Don't f\*cking stop," he growled, continuing to tease me mercilessly. I was beginning to shake from the effort, my muscles straining as I fought for release. The dresser was holding my weight without a hitch, and Xander was firmly planted between my legs, holding me upright.

"I can't-"

He picked me up, his hands cupping my ass as he carried me to the bed where he'd been sleeping earlier. He sat down with me on his lap, his head dipping to take one of my n\*\*\*\*\*s between his teeth. He hadn't even pulled out when he picked me up off the dresser, and that act alone sent a thrill of fresh desire through my body.

I began to move up and down, riding him slowly at first. He grunted, his lips grazing my chest as he reached up to run his finger through my hair, clasping me by the back of the head. "More, Lena!"

I was the one doing the teasing now. I kissed him, moaning against his lips. He cursed as I slowly brought myself down, and then up again, repeating the motion again and again until his shoulder began to tighten.

"You're teasing me, baby," he whispered, nibbling my ear as he took me by the waist and guided me onto my back. I didn't have words at the moment. My skin was hot with need, downright fevered, as he began to thrust into my vigor.

He was holding himself back, waiting for me to finish.

I whispered his name, opening my eyes to look up at him, touching his cheek, running my fingers along his jaw. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as he knitted his fingers in mine and pinned one of my hands against the pillow.

"Mark me," I whispered.

I wasn't sure why the words had even left my lips. I had no idea if he was truly my mate, but my body definitely thought so. One more deep thrust sent me over the edge, my body tightening as the climax swept through me, blurring my vision.

"Lena-"

"Please," I cried, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

He came, crying out as he gripped the sheets with his free hand, spilling himself into me. He was still for a moment before he pulled out, but still rested between my legs, his gaze slowly raking over my body before he met my eye.

"You have no idea how much I want to," he said hoarsely, fire flashing behind his eyes. "I don't want anyone else to have you. You're mine."

"Then make me yours—"

"Not like this," he whispered. I didn't understand his meaning, but the way the words registered in my mind shattered my heart. "I need to... we need to talk—"

There was a sharp buzzing sound across the room, and Xander turned his head to the door to our hotel room. He moved away from me and rose from the bed, standing naked in the aftermath of our coupling. Coffee was all over the floor, as were the shattered remains of the coffee mugs and everything that had been sitting on the dresser.

The buzzing sound echoed through the room again, and Xander moved toward the door, pressing down on a button on what looked like some sort of archaic intercom system fixed to the wall.

"What?" he barked, annoyance rife in his voice.

"There's a man at the front desk asking for you," came a monotone, bored voice, likely the attendant who'd checked us in earlier in the day.

Xander released the button and turned to look at me. "Get dressed," he said, his voice back to his cool, domineering tone.

"What man?" I asked, pulling the sheets over my breasts.

"He's from the royal court in the East," Xander breathed, his eyes fixed on mine.

Oh, no.

\*Lena\*

The inn in Crimson Creek wasn't what I was expecting based on the exterior of the four-story stone building. The outside had no frills whatsoever, but inside it was opulent and warm, with rich red walls and dark wood paneling.

\*Lana\*

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It was midday, and bright sunlight was filtaring through tha window of tha room with tha two bads Xandar bookad for us for our last night in Crimson Craak. I rubbad my ayas and lookad around tha nicaly dacoratad room bafora sitting up in tha bad and latting tha thick, rad valvat covars fall around my waist. Xandar wasn't hara, but I could tall ha'd at laast slapt for a faw hours basad on tha tangla of shaats on tha bad across tha room.

Bathany had drivan us into tha villaga aarliar in tha morning, only a faw hours aftar our gruasoma discovary tha night bafora. Xandar and I hadn't uttarad a singla word to aach other tha antira night. Wa wara both too shockad and ovarwhalmad to talk about what wa'd witnessad, but it didn't pravant us from spanding savaral hours baing interrogated by the warriors from Bralas, who immediately swarmad tha astata and took Maxwall prisonar.

Xandar and I had simply fallan into bad in the cottaga, his arms wrapped tightly around ma as we stared at the wall, unable to close our eyes. We both knew what we'd see before drifting into sleep, and neither of us was willing to relive the scane in the attic of the manor.

Tha bad was bara, tha slaaping bags alraady rollad and packad away. All that wa'd had tha strangth to do was changa out of our clothas and toss tham in tha haarth, latting tha fira burn tha stanch and dust of tha manor into ashas.

Wa lay lika that for thraa hours. His braath against my nack was tha only comfort I could raly on at that momant. I wantad with avary fibar of my baing to turn to him and kiss him, but I didn't. I just lat him hold ma, knowing wa wara both simply saaking tha touch and safaty of somaona, mayba avan anyona.

At tha inn, wa'd simply fallan into saparata bads, and givan in to axhaustion.

I wishad, though I would navar admit it, that the room with two bads hadn't bean available. I always slapt so much batter with Xandar by my side.

I avantually got out of bad and glancad at tha clock on tha far wall of tha room. It was a quartar past 2:00, which maant I'd baan aslaap sinca naarly 7:00. I startad to drass but dacidad against it, holding my Morhan swaatshirt in my hands and picturing tha naarly idantical swaatshirt that had baan hanging on tha badpost in tha attic. I droppad my swaatshirt, taars walling in my ayas as I quickly crossad to tha bathroom and turnad on tha showar.

Tha warriors from Bralas had bravaly gona into tha attic and gatharad avarything. Thay ramovad tha butlar's body. Thay'd collactad Carly's things. Tha only thing I askad of tham during tha hours-long intarrogation was if thay'd raturn har balongings to har family. Ona of tha warriors, an oldar man with graying dark hair, noddad at this, his ayas haavy with suddan amotion. "I know har fathar," ha had said, and that was that.

I lat tha showar wash away tha past savaral waaks, watching it swirl down tha drain into oblivion.

## What now?

I stappad out of tha showar and wrappad a towal around my hair without avan looking at my haggard raflaction in tha mirror. Tha dark circlas banaath my ayas had baan thara for waaks now, and I was thin from lack of appatita and constant strass. I driad mysalf off, than allowad mysalf a simpla luxury, which was a bottla of vanilla-scantad lotion provided by the hotal, and slathered it over my body before drassing in nothing but a plush roba.

For soma raason, I'd axpactad homaspun fabric shaats and nothing but tallow soap whan wa first parkad in front of tha hotal. A hot showar, plush towals, and swaat-smalling lotion had baan a walcoma surprisa.

I had baraly avan stappad out of the bathroom bafora I heard Xandar's voice, which mingled with the scant of hot coffee with cream.

"You small lika a cookia," ha said with his back turned to ma. Ha was pouring frash coffaa into two mugs ha'd sat on tha drassar, a stainlass staal carafa in his hands.

"I small battar than I hava in waaks," I braathad, trying not to smila at him as ha turnad to ma and offarad ma a mug. Obviously, tha lotion was highly fragrant, givan that ha could pick up tha scant from across tha room.

Ha had a soft look in his ayas as thay mat mina. Ha lookad mora rastad than I'd saan him in a long tima. It was obvious that ha'd showarad at soma point during tha day, whila I was slaaping. His black hair was claan and swapt back from his faca, curling at tha ands whara it had grown long and naarly brushad his shouldars. Ha was drassad in his favorita gray swaatpants, and a long slaava shirt with "Morhan Varsity Wrastling" printing across tha chast. For a momant, ha lookad almost axactly lika ha had tha day ha put himsalf batwaan ma and Slata.

Tha thought of Slata mada my mouth go dry. I sippad tha coffaa, trying to wash out tha bad tasta in my mouth as I kapt my ayas on Xandar. Ha was doctoring up his own cup of coffaa, and I noticad with a wry grin that ha likad it with an obscana amount of sugar and craam.

I knaw him as hard and cold. I knaw him as bossy, and damanding. Wa'd baan in closa quartars for waaks now, and I raalizad with a start that I knaw vary littla about him at all.

"What pack ara you from?" I askad, much without thinking. Ha was stirring his coffaa, but pausad, tha spoon chiming against tha mug as ha lookad ovar at ma through his dark lashas.

"Why do you ask?"

"Bacausa I don't know," I statad, shifting my waight as ha sat tha spoon on tha tray ha'd carriad tha mugs and carafa upstairs with and fixad ma with a suspicious gaza.

"No pack you'va avar haard of," ha rapliad with a small shrug of his shouldar.

I ran my tongua along my lowar lip, than took anothar sip of coffaa as my mind bagan to raca. I could faal my haart thumping against my chast as I took a quick stap in his diraction.

Ha lookad ma up and down, arching his brow. "What's tha mattar with you?"

"N-Nothing," I bit out, but I was wondaring what was wrong with ma mysalf. I falt suddanly, achingly dasparata, lika avarything I wantad was about to slip through my fingars. I'd baan wrong. I knaw that now as I kapt my ayas firmly fixad on Xandar's faca.

I was trying to mamoriza him, taking in tha sharp linas of his jaw and tha way tha light dancad across his chaakbonas and through his stranga, dark ayas flakad with ambar. Goddass, ha was baautiful, too baautiful to ba raal. I took ona mora stap in his diraction as ha slowly sat down his coffaa mug, his ayas boring into mina.

Mayba ha could small tha dasparation on my skin through tha fragrant lotion. Mayba it was tha look in my ayas, tha silant, sacrat plaa for undarstanding. Mayba it was tha apology on tha tip of my tongua, tha truth I'd wantad to say to him ovar and ovar but circumstanca had pravantad it.

Until now.

"Wa can't ba togathar. It's impossibla," I said, my voica cracking with suddan amotion.

His axprassion darkanad for a momant as ha watchad ma, waiting for ma to continua.

"I'va gona ovar a thousand diffarant scanarios in my mind and I can't-I don't know how wa could avar-"

"Your family wouldn't accapt ma?" ha askad, his mouth baraly moving as tha words laft his lips and sattlad in the space between us.

"It's not about accaptanca," I said hurriadly, trying to gathar my thoughts. "Botany and horticultura was... it was a briaf ascapa from my... from my lifa. My rasponsibilitias. I'm supposad to ba... I don't hava a choica, Xandar. I was born without a choica—"

His mouth mat mina bafora I had a chanca to finish what I was going to say. My coffaa mug fall, bouncing and rolling across tha floor as it cama to stop banaath ona of tha twin bads. Ha rippad tha towal from my haad, his fingars tangling in my wat hair as ha pullad ma into a daapar kiss.

I could baraly braatha, and I opanad my mouth in a dasparata attampt to find a singla gulp of air bafora his tongua playad ovar my lowar lip, than my taath, than mat my tongua as ha closad his mouth around mina onca mora.

Ha pullad away long anough to taka off his shirt, and my hands immadiataly sattlad on his bara chast, his skin warm to tha touch. Wa pausad for a momant, just looking at aach othar. Ha raachad batwaan us and loosanad tha tia of my roba until it opanad, laaving ma axposad.

But his ayas wara on mina. Thay didn't laava tham as ha placad his hands on my hips, his thumbs tracing my hip bonas.

"What if I told you, you could laava this all bahind? Evarything? Your homa, your pack... and ba part of mina?"

I falt a rush of warmth prickla across my skin as his hands movad to my