

Kings Breeder 531

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 531

Xander

The inn had a modest restaurant on the first floor, decorated in a similar fashion to the rooms above. I was sitting at a round table in a far, quiet corner of the restaurant, a huge platter of roast beef with gravy, sourdough bread, and roasted vegetables laid out between me and the ambassador sent from the East.

Xender

The inn had a modest restaurant on the first floor, decorated in a similar fashion to the rooms above. I was sitting at a round table in a far, quiet corner of the restaurant, a huge platter of roast beef with gravy, sourdough bread, and roasted vegetables laid out between me and the ambassador sent from the East.

He was a young man, likely only a few years younger than myself, with rich dark hair and slightly tilted emerald green eyes. He bore the characteristics of the royal eastern family, with his sharp nose and high cheekbones, and a strong jaw and chin. I eyed him curiously as he forked a piece of roast beef from the platter and dropped it on his plate, letting out a long sigh as he blinked down at his food.

"Long trip?" I asked, sipping from my pint of bitter, dark ale.

George, the great-nephew of the former Alpha King of the East, looked up at me through his thick, dark lashes as a wry smile touched his lips.

"Absolute hell, if I'm being honest. I always forget how long it takes to get anywhere in Fineldi." He took a bite of the roast and sighed again, shaking his head. "I feel like I haven't eaten in days."

"Same," I said, filling my own plate and stealing a glance toward the foyer.

Lene was in for the shock of her life when she came downstairs to meet us, and I was looking forward to watching her emotions play over her face.

"My partner will be joining us in a moment. She needs to... uhm, finish drying her hair."

"I didn't know your field partner was a woman," he said with a c**k of his brow.

I shrugged, hoping the heat still gripping my body from what Lene and I had been up to only half an hour before wasn't evident on my face.

"She's the best botanist Morhen has to offer," I smiled, despite my efforts to remain neutral.

"Well, don't tell my cousin that," George grinned, swiping a piece of meat through the gravy on his plate. "She's a botanist as well, but her field study is in Red Lakes."

I ran my tongue along my bottom lip, arching my brow and nodding my head in response. Oh, hell. This was going to be interesting.

"You might know her, actually. Selene Grey."

"I don't think I do. My course of study is in pharmaceuticals."

"She'd be hard to miss," he said with a little chuckle. "But I haven't seen her since this time last year. The whole damn family still congregates in Avondele every December—"

I was watching him closely as he spoke. I was feeling a little anxious now, wondering when Lene was going to walk down the stairs. Any minute she'd round the corner of the foyer, and she'd either run or come face to face with the truth.

"Did you come here on your own?" I asked.

George shook his head, but then considered my question and shrugged. "Cherlie is in Breles meeting with their Alphe. I'm meant to run whatever information the warriors have gathered pertaining to the investigation back to them at the end of my stay." He glanced up at me quickly before settling his gaze back down on his food. "Prince Cherlie, that is."

"I gathered as much," I said lightly, giving him a crooked smile.

Based on George's casual demeanor, I'd already assumed he wasn't in line for any title, but he was still related to the retired Alphe King of Velorie, Ethen Grey. He would have grown up with the princes, as well as Alphe King Rowen, and Troy, the Alphe of Poldesse.

I could have asked him about his ties, but I knew it would take an hour for him to go over every branch on his enormous family tree. He was tied to the West as well, through the marriage of Alphe King Rowen and Queen Henne, whose family hailed from Red Lakes and whose father was the Alphe King of the West, of Fineldi.

Ethen Grey's reign was substantial based on the way he had connected the entirety of the peck lands through marriages and offspring, cementing a hereditary monopoly that would rule for generations to come. It was incredible, really, how much that man had accomplished in just under fifty years of rule.

We ate in silence for a few minutes as I gathered my thoughts. I glanced at George as I reached for my beer, noticing the thin gold band on his ring finger. He noticed my gaze and smiled, his cheeks going ruddy as he flexed his hand.

"My wife isn't here with me, unfortunately. She's pregnant, and wasn't feeling up to a month-long boat ride to the West."

"Congratulations," I said earnestly, giving him a smile.

He smiled in return, his eyes misting for a moment before he brought his beer to his lips. "Thank you, it was a surprise, to be honest. I'm still coming to terms with it."

"It couldn't be so much of a surprise," I quipped, leaning back in my chair. I was warmed, and comfortably full, and thankful for the distracting conversation.

"Well, Joy and I were... well, you know. I'd known her all my life. She's from Suntre, and her family vacationed with mine in Avondele every winter. We were in love, but didn't know we were mates until she turned twenty-one last year. I married her the day after her birthday."

"Really?" I said with a little laugh.

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and chuckling as the memory drifted behind his eyes. "We eloped. I thought Ethen—the former Alphe King, as you know—I thought he was going to kill us both."

"You're alive, so I'm guessing the family accepted your decision eventually?"

"Yes," he grinned, leaning back in a similar fashion to myself. "They're tough, but when it came down to it, all they wanted was our happiness. It was my great aunt who silenced any complaints, actually."

He could only be talking about one person. Rosalie, the White Queen.

I felt a glimmer of hope settle in my stomach.

"This will be my last errand as the royal ambassador, actually. Joy and I are moving with her parents and their pack to the southern jungle—"

I almost spit out my beer, but swallowed it, giving him a quizzical eye. "The southern jungle?"

"Joy's mother was from Dienny, if you can believe it. Her parents raised the kids that survived, and now what was left of the people in Dienny have outgrown the island of Suntre. They've been building a new settlement on the shore of the southern jungle for a few years now. It'll be ready for the pack this coming spring."

Dienny. Lycenne. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, trying to stabilize my thundering heart.

"You've heard the tales, I assume?" George shrugged, catching on to my discomfort.

Oh, if he only knew...

"Xander!"

I turned to Lene's voice, seeing her standing in the foyer, her eyes narrowed at me. I stood abruptly, biting the inside of my cheek as her gaze turned to George.

There it was—panic. She confirmed with her expression what I'd already known for a long time. George opened his mouth, a surprised but genuine smile playing over his face, but then he stilled, his brow knitted in marked confusion. She was staring right at him, her face twisted in a scowl.

"This is Lene," I said, clearing my throat as I motioned for her to come join us at our table.

"Oh," George said, narrowing his eyes at her as she sheepishly walked forward, her cheeks flaming with a deep, frustrated blush.

She set down, pulling a plate in front of her and began piling it with roast beef. I watched her for a moment, trying not to laugh as she did everything but make eye contact with George. I wanted to ask what her deal was, but I knew it'd be fruitless. She wasn't going to tell me the truth, no matter the situation.

"Crimson Creek, huh?" George said, giving Lene a stern look that made my skin prickle with adrenaline.

"A far cry from—"

"What news from the Alphe of Breles?" she interrupted sharply, forking a piece of roast into her mouth.

George sucked on his lower lip, his eyes fixed firmly on hers for a moment before he surrendered to whatever game they were playing via the mind-link, I assumed, and turned his attention back to me with a resigned sigh.

"The woman you sent word of? Jen? She's missing. But based on the evidence gathered from those in the village and the estate, she is the prime suspect of the murder of the woman named Grette and is wanted for information pertaining to the disappearance of the groundskeeper and farmhand." George sipped his beer, his gaze flicking to Lene before he met my eye again. "Something unusual was discovered, however. The warriors went out into the hills outside of the estate and found the remains of an old settlement in a nearby valley. It should have been long abandoned, but there were signs of activity in the area."

I'd been there. I'd gone with Eleine that day she went with me to collect samples of blood root.

Lene turned her gaze to me, her eyes shining in the dim light of the restaurant's chandelier.

"I know of that place. I didn't get close enough to investigate," I replied.

"Probably a good thing. There were signs of it being some kind of... sacrificial altar, of sorts. I have the report, and will be taking it back to Breles when I leave Crimson Creek in a few days."

"Do you have samples of the blood root?" Lene asked, dumping an obscene amount of gravy on her plate.

"Of what?"

"Blood root," she repeated, looking annoyed.

"It's a plant that grows around the village," I sighed, glancing at Lene. "We have samples of it. Slides, ready for the microscope."

"If you feel it would aid in the investigation, I will take it with me," George said, glancing between us, his brow furrowing with suspicion. "Are you two together?"

"No!" Lene and I said, a little too loudly.

A smile touched the corner of his mouth, but he hid it well.

After we finished eating, George said, "Well, I'm sure you've given your own reports to the warriors," leaning back in his chair. "Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

Lene stood from the table, looking flushed. She shook her head, and then turned on her heel and walked briskly away and out of sight as she rounded the foyer.

"She's in a horrible mood," George huffed, toying with the remains of the food on his plate.

"Is she always like this?" I asked, meeting his eyes.

Understanding passed between us, and he nodded, pursing his lips.

Silence blanketed the table for a moment, but then I leaned forward.

“Listen, I have something I need to tell you, that the royal family needs to know. But... it needs to be off the record.”

“Why?” George asked, looking intrigued.

I let out my breath, still gazing directly at him.

“I think the peck lends here in danger. There’s someone I need you to meet—the family, here in town. But you have to promise me their identity won’t be involved in the report.”

George narrowed his eyes at me as I took a breath.

“They’re not like us,” I said. “They’re not from this realm.”

Xander

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“Absolute hell, if I’m being honest. I always forget how long it takes to get anywhere in Finaldi.” He took a bite of the roast and sighed again, shaking his head. “I feel like I haven’t eaten in days.”

“Same,” I said, filling my own plate and stealing a glance toward the foyer.

Lena was in for the shock of her life when she came downstairs to meet us, and I was looking forward to watching her emotions play over her face.

“My partner will be joining us in a moment. She needs to... uhm, finish drying her hair.”

“I didn’t know your field partner was a woman,” he said with a c**k of his brow.

I shrugged, hoping the heat still gripping my body from what Lena and I had been up to only half an hour before wasn’t evident on my face.

“She’s the best botanist Morhan has to offer,” I smiled, despite my efforts to remain neutral.

“Well, don’t tell my cousin that,” George grinned, swiping a piece of meat through the gravy on his plate. “She’s a botanist as well, but her field study is in Red Lakes.”

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“She’d be hard to miss,” he said with a little chuckle. “But I haven’t seen her since this time last year. The whole damn family still congregates in Avondale every December—”

I was watching him closely as he spoke. I was feeling a little anxious now, wondering when Lena was going to walk down the stairs. Any minute she’d round the corner of the foyer, and she’d either run or come face to face with the truth.

“Did you come here on your own?” I asked.

George shook his head, but then considered my question and shrugged. “Charlie is in Breles meeting with their Alpha. I’m meant to run whatever information the warriors have gathered pertaining to the investigation back to them at the end of my stay.” He glanced up at me quickly before settling his gaze back down on his food. “Prince Charlie, that is.”

“I gathered as much,” I said lightly, giving him a crooked smile.

Based on George’s casual demeanor, I’d already assumed he wasn’t in line for any title, but he was still related to the retired Alpha King of Valoria, Ethan Gray. He would have grown up with the princes, as well as Alpha King Rowan, and Troy, the Alpha of Poldesse.

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Ethan Gray’s reign was substantial based on the way he had connected the entirety of the pack lands through marriages and offspring, cementing a hereditary monopoly that would rule for generations to come. It was incredible, really, how much that man had accomplished in just under fifty years of rule.

We ate in silence for a few minutes as I gathered my thoughts. I glanced at George as I reached for my beer, noticing the thin gold band on his ring finger. He noticed my gaze and smiled, his cheeks going ruddy as he flexed his hand.

“My wife isn’t here with me, unfortunately. She’s pregnant, and wasn’t feeling up to a month-long boat ride to the West.”

“Congratulations,” I said earnestly, giving him a smile.

He smiled in return, his eyes misting for a moment before he brought his beer to his lips. “Thank you, it was a surprise, to be honest. I’m still coming to terms with it.”

“It couldn’t be so much of a surprise,” I quipped, leaning back in my chair. I was warmed, and comfortably full, and thankful for the distracting conversation.

“Well, Joy and I were... well, you know. I’d known her all my life. She’s from Suntra, and her family vacationed with mine in Avondale every winter. We were in love, but didn’t know we were mates until she turned twenty-one last year. I married her the day after her birthday.”

“Really?” I said with a little laugh.

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and chuckling as the memory drifted behind his eyes. “We eloped. I thought Ethan—the former Alpha King, as you know—I thought he was going to kill us both.”

“You’re alive, so I’m guessing the family accepted your decision eventually?”

“Yes,” he grinned, leaning back in a similar fashion to myself. “They act tough, but when it came down to it, all they wanted was our happiness. It was my great aunt who silenced any complaints, actually.”

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“This will be my last errand as a royal ambassador, actually. Joy and I are moving with her parents and their pack to the southern jungle—”

I almost spit out my beer, but swallowed it, giving him a quizzical eye. “The southern jungle?”

“Joy’s mother was from Dianny, if you can believe it. Her parents raised the kids that survived, and now what was left of the people in Dianny have outgrown the island of Suntra. They’ve been building a new settlement on the shore of the southern jungle for a few years now. It’ll be ready for the pack this coming spring.”

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“You’ve heard the tales, I assume?” George shrugged, catching on to my discomfort.

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“This is Lena,” I said, clearing my throat as I motioned for her to come join us at our table.

“Oh,” George said, narrowing his eyes at her as she sheepishly walked forward, her cheeks flaming with a deep, frustrated blush.

She sat down, pulling a plate in front of her and began piling it with roast beef. I watched her for a moment, trying not to laugh as she did everything but make eye contact with George. I wanted to ask what her deal was, but I knew it’d be fruitless. She wasn’t going to tell me the truth, no matter the situation.

“Crimson Creek, huh?” George said, giving Lena a stern look that made my skin prickle with adrenaline. “A far cry from—”

“What news from the Alpha of Breles?” she interrupted sharply, forking a piece of roast into her mouth.

George sucked on his lower lip, his eyes fixed firmly on hers for a moment before he surrendered to whatever game they were playing via the mind-link, I assumed, and turned his attention back to me with a resigned sigh.

“The woman you sent word of? Jen? She’s missing. But based on the evidence gathered from those in the village and the estate, she is the prime suspect of the murder of the woman named Gretta and is wanted for information pertaining to the disappearance of the groundskeeper and farmhand.” George sipped his beer, his gaze flicking to Lena before he met my eye again. “Something unusual was discovered, however. The warriors went out into the hills outside of the estate and found the remains of an old settlement in a nearby valley. It should have been long abandoned, but there were signs of activity in the area.”

I’d been there. I’d gone with Elaine that day she went with me to collect samples of blood root.

Lena turned her gaze to me, her eyes shining in the dim light of the restaurant’s chandelier.

“I know of that place. I didn’t get close enough to investigate,” I replied.

“Probably a good thing. There were signs of it being some kind of... sacrificial altar, of sorts. I have the report, and will be taking it back to Breles when I leave Crimson Creek in a few days.”

“Do you have samples of the blood root?” Lena asked, dumping an obscene amount of gravy on her plate.

“Of what?”

“Blood root,” she repeated, looking annoyed.

“It’s a plant that grows around the village,” I sighed, glaring at Lena. “We have samples of it. Slides, ready for the microscope.”

“If you feel it would aid in the investigation, I will take it with me,” George said, glancing between us, his brow furrowing with suspicion. “Are you two together?”

“No!” Lena and I said, a little too loudly.

A smile touched the corner of his mouth, but he hid it well.

After we finished eating, George said, “Well, I’m sure you’ve given your own reports to the warriors,” leaning back in his chair. “Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

Lena stood from the table, looking flushed. She shook her head, and then turned on her heel and walked briskly away and out of sight as she rounded the foyer.

“She’s in a horrible mood,” George huffed, toying with the remains of the food on his plate.

“Is she always like this?” I asked, meeting his eyes.

Understanding passed between us, and he nodded, pursing his lips.

Silence blanketed the table for a moment, but then I leaned forward.

“Listen, I have something I need to tell you, that the royal family needs to know. But... it needs to be off the record.”

“Why?” George asked, looking intrigued.

I let out my breath, still gazing directly at him.

“I think the pack lands are in danger. There’s someone I need you to meet—a family, here in town. But you have to promise me their identity won’t be involved in the report.”

George narrowed his eyes at me as I took a breath.

“They’re not like us,” I said. “They’re not from this realm.”

Xander

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Xandar

The inn had a modast rastaurant on tha first floor, dacorataed in a similar fashion to tha rooms abova. I was sitting at a round tabla in a far, quiet cornar of tha rastaurant, a huga plattar of roast baaf with gravy, sourdough braad, and roastad vagatablas laid out batwaan ma and tha ambassador sant from tha East.

Ha was a young man, likaly only a faw yaars youngar than mysalf, with rich dark hair and slightly tiltad amarald graan ayas. Ha bora tha characteristics of tha royal aastarn family, with his sharp nosa and high chaakbonas, and a strong jaw and chin. I ayad him curiously as ha forkad a piaca of roast baaf from tha plattar and droppad it on his plata, latting out a long sigh as ha blinkad down at his food.

“Long trip?” I askad, sipping from my pint of bittar, dark ala.

Gaorga, a graat-naphaw of tha formar Alpha King of tha East, lookad up at ma through his thick, dark lashed as a wry smila touchad his lips.

“Absoluta hall, if I’m baing honast. I always forgat how long it takas to gat anywhara in Finaldi.” Ha took a bita of tha roast and sighad again, shaking his haad. “I faal lika I havan’t aatan in days.”

“Sama,” I said, filling my own plata and staaling a glanca toward tha foyar.

Lana was in for tha shock of har lifa whan sha cama downstairs to maat us, and I was looking forward to watching har amotions play ovar har faca.

“My partnar will ba joining us in a momant. Sha naads to... uhm, finish drying har hair.”

“I didn’t know your fiald partnar was a woman,” ha said with a c**k of his brow.

I shruggad, hoping tha haat still gripping my body from what Lana and I had baan up to only half an hour bafora wasn't avidant on my faca.

"Sha's tha bast botanist Morhan has to offar," I smilad, daspita my afforts to remain neutral.

"Wall, don't tall my cousin that," Gaorga grinnad, swiping a piaca of maat through tha gravy on his plata. "Sha's a botanist as wall, but har fiald study is in Rad Lakas."

I ran my tongua along my bottom lip, arching my brow and nodding my haad in raspona. Oh, hall. This was going to ba intarasting.

"You might know har, actually. Salana Gray."

"I don't think I do. My coursa of study is in pharmacauticals."

"Sha'd ba hard to miss," ha said with a littla chuckla. "But I havan't saan har sinca this tima last yaar. Tha whola damn family still congragatas in Avondala avary Dacambar—"

I was watching him closaly as ha spoka. I was faaling a littla anxious now, wondaring whan Lana was going to walk down tha stairs. Any minuta sha'd round tha corner of tha foyar, and sha'd aithar run or coma faca to faca with tha truth.

"Did you coma hara on your own?" I askad.

Gaorga shook his haad, but than considarad my quastion and shruggad. "Charlia is in Bralas maating with thair Alpha. I'm maant to run whatavar information tha warriors hava gatharad partaining to tha invastigation back to tham at tha and of my stay." Ha glancad up at ma quickly bafora sattling his gaza back down on his food. "Princa Charlia, that is."

"I gatharad as much," I said lightly, giving him a crookad smila.

Basad on Gaorga's casual damaanor, I'd alraady assumad ha wasn't in lina for any titla, but ha was still ralatat to tha ratirad Alpha King of Valoria, Ethan Gray. Ha would hava grown up with tha princas, as wall as Alpha King Rowan, and Troy, tha Alpha of Poldassa.

I could hava askad him about his tias, but I knaw it would taka an hour for him to go ovar avary branch on his anormous family traa. Ha was tiad to tha Wast as wall, through tha marriaga of Alpha King Rowan and Quaana Hanna, whosa family hailad from Rad Lakas and whosa fathar was tha Alpha King of tha Wast, of Finaldi.

Ethan Gray's reign was substantial basad on tha way ha had connectad tha antiraty of tha pack lands through marriagas and offspring, camanting a haraditary monopoly that would rula for ganarations to coma. It was incredibla, raally, how much that man had accomplishad in just undar fifty yaars of rula.

Wa ata in silanca for a faw minutas as I gatharad my thoughts. I glancad at Gaorga as I raachad for my baar, noticing tha thin gold band on his ring fingar. Ha noticad my gaza and smilad, his chaaks going ruddy as ha flaxad his hand.

"My wifa isn't hara with ma, unfortunataly. Sha's pragnant, and wasn't faaling up to a month-long boat rida to tha Wast."

“Congratulations,” I said earnestly, giving him a smile.

He smiled in return, his eyes misting for a moment before he brought his beer to his lips. “Thank you, it was a surprise, to be honest. I’m still coming to terms with it.”

“It couldn’t be so much of a surprise,” I quipped, leaning back in my chair. I was warm, and comfortably full, and thankful for the distracting conversation.

“Well, Joy and I were... well, you know. I’d known her all my life. She’s from Suntra, and her family vacationed with mine in Avondale every winter. We were in love, but didn’t know we were mates until she turned twenty-one last year. I married her the day after her birthday.”

“Really?” I said with a little laugh.

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and chuckling as the memory drifted behind his eyes. “Well, a lot. I thought Ethan—the former Alpha King, as you know—I thought he was going to kill us both.”

“You’re alive, so I’m guessing the family accepted your decision eventually?”

“Yes,” he grinned, leaning back in a similar fashion to myself. “They act tough, but when it came down to it, all they wanted was our happiness. It was my great aunt who silenced any complaints, actually.”

He could only be talking about one person. Rosalia, the White Queen.

I felt a glimmer of hope settle in my stomach.

“This will be my last errand as a royal ambassador, actually. Joy and I are moving with her parents and their pack to the southern jungle—”

I almost spit out my beer, but swallowed it, giving him a quizzical eye. “The southern jungle?”

“Joy’s mother was from Dianny, if you can believe it. Her parents raised the kids that survived, and now what was left of the people in Dianny have outgrown the island of Suntra. They’ve been building a new settlement on the shore of the southern jungle for a few years now. It’ll be ready for the pack this coming spring.”

Dianny. Lycana. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, trying to stabilize my thundering heart.

“You’ve heard the tales, I assume?” Gaorga shrugged, catching on to my discomfort.

Oh, if he only knew...

“Xandar!”

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There it was—panic. She confirmed with her expression what I’d already known for a long time. Gaorga opened his mouth, a surprised but genuine smile playing over his face, but then he still, his brow knitted in marked confusion. She was staring right at him, her face twisted in a scowl.

“This is Lana,” I said, clearing my throat as I motioned for her to come join us at our table.

“Oh,” Gaorga said, narrowing his eyes at her as she sheepishly walked forward, her cheeks flaming with a deep, frustrated blush.

She sat down, pulling a plate in front of her and began piling it with roast beef. I watched her for a moment, trying not to laugh as she did anything but make eye contact with Gaorga. I wanted to ask what her deal was, but I knew it'd be fruitless. She wasn't going to tell me the truth, no matter the situation.

“Crimson Craak, huh?” Gaorga said, giving Lana a stern look that made my skin prickle with adrenaline. “A far cry from—”

“What news from the Alpha of Bralas?” she interrupted sharply, forking a piece of roast into her mouth.

Gaorga sucked on his lower lip, his eyes fixed firmly on hers for a moment before he surrendered to whatever game she was playing via the mind-link, I assumed, and turned his attention back to me with a resigned sigh.

“The woman you just mentioned? Jan? She's missing. But based on the evidence gathered from those in the village and the estate, she is the prime suspect of the murder of the woman named Gratta and is wanted for information pertaining to the disappearance of the groundskeeper and farmhand.” Gaorga sipped his beer, his gaze flicking to Lana before he met my eyes again. “Something unusual was discovered, however. The warriors went out into the hills outside of the estate and found the remains of an old settler in a nearby valley. It should have been long abandoned, but there were signs of activity in the area.”

I'd been there. I'd gone with Elaina that day she went with me to collect samples of blood root.

Lana turned her gaze to me, her eyes shining in the dim light of the restaurant's chandelier.

“I know of that place. I didn't get close enough to investigate,” I replied.

“Probably a good thing. There were signs of it being some kind of... sacrificial altar, of sorts. I have the report, and will be taking it back to Bralas when I leave Crimson Craak in a few days.”

“Do you have samples of the blood root?” Lana asked, dumping an obscene amount of gravy on her plate.

“Of what?”

“Blood root,” she repeated, looking annoyed.

“It's a plant that grows around the village,” I sighed, glaring at Lana. “We have samples of it. Slides, ready for the microscope.”

“If you feel it would aid in the investigation, I will take it with me,” Gaorga said, glancing between us, his brow furrowing with suspicion. “Are you two together?”

“No!” Lana and I said, a little too loudly.

A smile touched the corner of his mouth, but he hid it well.

Afta wa finishad aating, Gaorga said, "Wall, I'm sura you've givan your own raports to tha warriors," laaning back in his chair. "Is thara anything alsa you'd lika to add?"

Lana stood from tha tabla, looking flushad. Sha shook har haad, and than turnad on har haal and walkad briskly away and out of sight as sha roundad tha foyar.

"Sha's in a horribla mood," Gaorga huffad, toying with tha ramains of tha food on his plata.

"Is sha always lika this?" I askad, maating his ayas.

Undarstanding passad batwaan us, and ha noddad, pursing his lips.

Silanca blankatad tha tabla for a momant, but than I laanad forward.

"Listan, I hava somathing I naad to tall you, that tha royal family naads to know. But... it naads to ba off tha racord."

"Why?" Gaorga askad, looking intriguad.

I lat out my braath, still gazing diractly at him.

"I think tha pack lands ara in dangar. Thara's somaona I naad you to maat—a family, hara in town. But you hava to promisa ma thair idantity won't ba involvad in tha raport."

Gaorga narrowad his ayas at ma as I took a braath.

"Thay'ra not lika us," I said. "Thay'ra not from this raalm."

Xander

The inn had a modest restaurant on the first floor, decorated in a similar fashion to the rooms above. I was sitting at a round table in a far, quiet corner of the restaurant, a huge platter of roast beef with gravy, sourdough bread, and roasted vegetables laid out between me and the ambassador sent from the East.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 532

Lena

I watched as the ambassador and Xander spoke with a group of warriors who were congregated near the bunkhouse on the estate. I hadn't wanted to come back here. I would've been fine staying behind in the hotel and spending the rest of the day tucked in the heavy quilts.

Lene

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But I wanted to keep tebs on George.

I was leaning against the truck, tossing an apple up and down, over and over. Betheny wasn't around, not that I could tell. The bunkhouse was dark and empty, the front door wide open and swinging in the stiff breeze that was also rustling my hair and sending a chill over my skin.

It was the last week of November. It should have been the last full week of our field study. Next week we would have been sitting in the library on campus, sorting through our research and reedying ourselves to present our senior thesis.

Instead, I'd watched it all burn to the ground. Our research was now evidence. Everything we'd found out about the flora of this Goddess-forsaken place would be pecked up and seeded, sent away to the Alphe in Breles while Maxwell awaited a formal trial for who knows what in front of the supreme court of the West, overseen by the Alphe King of Findeli himself.

My stomach tied into a knot as I thought through the weeks to come. It was unlikely I'd be called to testify—not with my connections.

I closed my eyes as another gust of wind touched my cheeks, reddening my skin. Ice crystals were drifting through the air, blanketing the ground and turning the greyish landscape an odd, glistening silver color. It would have been beautiful, had it not been for the visions of blood and anguish that stained this place.

I opened my eyes to Xander standing with his arms crossed, his body turned to George and his head thrown back in laughter. What could he possibly have to laugh about?

I caught the apple and tucked it in the pocket of my jacket, glancing in his direction. My anger was irrational, I realized, but I didn't really care. I was sore and riddled with mixed emotions from what we'd been up to earlier in our hotel room. I felt overwhelmed and anxious about George's presence. I felt embarrassed by how desperately I'd asked Xander to mark me knowing full well I was too young to know for sure that he was my mate. My heart was breaking into many pieces by the fact he didn't do it.

I scoffed, digging the toe of my boot into the dirt to distract myself from the prickle of heat nipping at my fingertips despite the cold. Greenery caught my eye as I glanced down at my boots, and I noticed little bursts of green grass beginning to poke through the frost-covered dirt. I swallowed, clamping my mouth shut and inhaling deeply through my nose until my lungs filled with air, and I held it, forcing my heart to slow its rapid beating.

I walked forward, unsure of where exactly I meant to go. I glanced at Xander and George, but they had their backs turned to me now, Xander pointing toward where the fire pit was settled against the boundary wall and the forest.

I found myself climbing the steps to Henry's cottage, my hand outstretched and wrapping around the ice-cold doorknob, giving it a turn.

The door swung open with nothing more than a little shove.

Why I was there, I didn't know. Why I stepped inside the dark, empty cottage was a mystery. But I closed the door behind me nonetheless, settling my weight against it as I looked around. It was the same layout as the cottage Xander and I had lived in, with a single bedroom and a kitchenette. But

Henry's cottage was lived in, the walls littered with dried and pressed flowers and herbs protected by glass frames.

A mug of tea set on the kitchenette, and as I moved away from the door and walked toward it, I noticed the fine dusting of mold creeping up the inside of the mug. I ran my finger over the counter, drawing a line in the dust.

"Where are you?" I whispered, my voice breaking with emotion.

The wind rustled the window panes in the bedroom. I could see his bed, unmade, through the door, which was ajar. I crossed the room and pushed it open, standing in the doorway and finding it almost impossible to cross the threshold into his most private, personal space.

The warriors had to have been in there, probably more than once. Henry was missing, after all. But there was no sign of a struggle, no bloodstains or knocked-over furniture. Everything was in its rightful place, untouched.

I scanned the room, my eyes settling on a framed picture sitting on top of the tall, lean dresser in the corner of the room. I walked toward it, narrowing my eyes as the dust-covered image came into view.

It was Henry, a much, much younger version of himself. He had his arm wrapped around the shoulder of a strikingly beautiful woman with a thick head of dark, unruly curls. I picked the picture up, wiping the dust away with my fingers as I looked down at the image, tears welling in my eyes.

She looked incredibly familiar, but I couldn't place her in any of my memories. The photo was in black and white, and the fine details had faded with age. The woman's beauty was matched by Henry, who had been exceedingly handsome in his younger age. He was fair, his hair obviously a light shade of blond. He looked... happy, so incredibly happy.

I remembered being told he'd lost his mate. I remembered the hesitation in Bethany's voice when she alluded to the fact his mate had met her and like the rest of the young women who'd disappeared in Crimson Creek.

"What are you doing here, Lene?" Xander's voice rang out behind me as I set the picture down on the dresser and turned to him.

"I don't know," I replied honestly, letting him take me by the hand and lead me out of the bedroom.

"They're going to find him," Xander said, but he didn't sound totally convinced.

I glanced up at him as he walked me out onto the porch, where we stood for a moment, watching George continue to talk to the warriors.

"What time is our train back to campus?" I asked, letting out the breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

Xander sighed deeply, leaning on the railing and shaking his head.

"We're stuck here for another three days--"

"What?" I turned to him, trying to read the expression that flashed across his face for a split second.

"I don't know why, I just found out. We'll stay at the inn. It'll be fine."

"I went to leeve—"

"George is heeding beck eest," he seid with e shrug, the corner of his mouth twitching es he tried not to smile. "He's treveling by cer, if you went e ride."

"I'll weit for the trein," I whispered, teering my eyes ewey from him end settling my geze on the field of grein, which was covered in frost end drifting lezily in the wind.

Xender chuckled softly to himself, but seid nothing further about it. Whet were we supposed to do in Crimson Creek for three whole deys?

Xender streightened up end welked down the steps, looking over his shoulder et me es I remained on the porch. "Come on, Lene. We're going beck to the villege."

"To do whet?"

"Anything you went," he sighed, looking somewhet enoyed.

I welked down the steps, steying e few peces behind him for e moment before I stopped egin. "Whet ere you not telling me?" I esked.

I'd wanted to drop it completely, but there wes e voice in the beck of my mind negging me about the fact I'd missed so much over the pest week.

Xender wetched me for e moment, his eyes seerching mine. He looked conflicted, like something heevy wes weighing on him.

"I don't know anything for certein, Lene. I don't know if I believe anything thet—" he took e step toward me, his eyes nerrowing es he took me by the chin, tilting my fece towerds the sky. "Your eyes—"

"Stop!" I pushed him ewey, which stertled him.

Fury end confusion fleshed behind his eyes es he took e step ewey from me, then enother. My heert quickened end my chest squeezed painfully es he squered his shoulders et me.

"You need to celm down, Lene—"

"Don't tell me to celm down!" I hissed, trying to keep my voice low, end level. I didn't went the werriors to overheer our spet. "Tell me whet you know! Tell me why we're stuck here for enother three deys, Xender!"

"The trein is not my feult—"

"Don't deflect—"

"Lene! For the love of the Goddess, will you just listen to me!" He stepped toward me, clenching his fists es though he wes geering up for e fight. A femilier heet rushed into my fingers, my skin tingling es en onsleught of emotions pushed forward, threethening to explode.

"You were the one who elerted the Alphe of Breles to whet wes heppening here, weren't you? You're the reeson the Alphe King of Velorie sent en embessedor—"

“Of course, I did! What was I supposed to do, Lene? Ignore that fact the beast from hell was murdering people and nearly ripped you in half!”

“You should have talked to me first!”

“When?” he sneered, closing the distance between us in a single step. “Should I have told you I was going to the authorities while you were in the predicament? Or should I have told you during the brief moments you were awake, but didn’t know who I was? When you were so fearful of me that Almeda had to hold you down while I left... left the room—” he looked down at his feet, heavy lines of pain etching themselves across his face. He blinked, then straightened up, his eyes misted with emotion but blazing with anger.

“Xander, I didn’t know—”

“Just get in the truck; we’re leaving.”

“Wait, I—”

“Hey!” George said as he started walking toward us, his voice carrying through the snow that was beginning to fall in earnest.

I blinked a few times, my face flushing as I tried to swallow back the mingled guilt and anger pulsating through my system as George came to a stop in front of us. I didn’t even hear what he said to Xander, something about needing to move on to his next stop, which was the now abandoned castle belonging to the Alpha of Crimson Creek.

I was doing everything in my power to keep my expression neutral as Xander talked with George, but I snapped back to reality when Xander lightly tapped me on the elbow, tilting his head toward the truck.

I swallowed hard, following him to the truck as George began to talk back to the warriors. But he turned around, feeling over his jacket and then reaching into one of the inside pockets.

“I almost forgot,” he murmured, walking up to me and handing me an envelope.

I hesitated, looking up at him for a moment before accepting it with a tight nod. He arched his brow, then shook his head.

Xander watched us skeptically as I turned from George, my cheeks growing pink. I walked to the truck and got inside without saying a word, tucking the envelope in my pocket.

“What’s that?” Xander asked, but I turned and looked out the window.

I knew exactly what it was, and at that moment I knew exactly what I’d be doing, and where I’d be going after we reached campus in three days’ time.

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"I want to leave—"

"George is heading back east," he said with a shrug, the corner of his mouth twitching as he tried not to smile. "He's traveling by car, if you want a ride."

"I'll wait for the train," I whispered, tearing my eyes away from him and settling my gaze on the field of grain, which was covered in frost and drifting lazily in the wind.

Xander chuckled softly to himself, but said nothing further about it. What were we supposed to do in Crimson Creek for three whole days?

Xander straightened up and walked down the steps, looking over his shoulder at me as I remained on the porch. "Come on, Lena. We're going back to the village."

"To do what?"

"Anything you want," he sighed, looking somewhat annoyed.

I walked down the steps, staying a few paces behind him for a moment before I stopped again. "What are you not telling me?" I asked.

I'd wanted to drop it completely, but there was a voice in the back of my mind nagging me about the fact I'd missed so much over the past week.

Xander watched me for a moment, his eyes searching mine. He looked conflicted, like something heavy was weighing on him.

"I don't know anything for certain, Lena. I don't know if I believe anything that—" he took a step toward me, his eyes narrowing as he took me by the chin, tilting my face towards the sky. "Your eyes—"

"Stop!" I pushed him away, which startled him.

Fury and confusion flashed behind his eyes as he took a step away from me, then another. My heart quickened and my chest squeezed painfully as he squared his shoulders at me.

"You need to calm down, Lena—"

"Don't tell me to calm down!" I hissed, trying to keep my voice low, and level. I didn't want the warriors to overhear our spat. "Tell me what you know! Tell me why we're stuck here for another three days, Xander!"

"The train is not my fault—"

"Don't deflect—"

"Lena! For the love of the Goddess, will you just listen to me!" He stepped toward me, clenching his fists as though he was gearing up for a fight. A familiar heat rushed into my fingers, my skin tingling as an onslaught of emotions pushed forward, threatening to explode.

"You were the one who alerted the Alpha of Breles to what was happening here, weren't you? You're the reason the Alpha King of Valoria sent an ambassador—"

“Of course, I did! What was I supposed to do, Lena? Ignore that fact a beast from hell was murdering people and nearly ripped you in half!”

“You should have talked to me first!”

“When?” he sneered, closing the distance between us in a single step. “Should I have told you I was going to the authorities while you were in a practical coma? Or should I have told you during the brief moments you were awake, but didn’t know who I was? When you were so fearful of me that Alma had to hold you down while I left... left the room—” he looked down at his feet, heavy lines of pain etching themselves across his face. He blinked, then straightened up, his eyes misted with emotion but blazing with anger.

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Lena

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Lana

I watchad as tha ambassador and Xandar spoka with a group of warriors who wara congragatad naar tha bunkhousa on tha astata. I hadn't wantad to coma back hara. I would've baan fina staying bahind in tha hotal and spending tha rast of tha day tuckad in tha haavy quilts.

But I wantad to kaap tabs on Gaorga.

I was laaning against tha truck, tossing an appla up and down, ovar and ovar. Bathany wasn't around, not that I could tall. Tha bunkhousa was dark and ampty, tha front door wida opan and swinging in tha stiff braaza that was also rustling my hair and sanding a chill ovar my skin.

It was tha last waak of Novambar. It should hava baan tha last full waak of our fiald study. Naxt waak wa would hava baan sitting in tha library on campus, sorting through our rasaarch and raadying oursalvas to prasant our sanior thasis.

Instaad, I'd watchad it all burn to tha ground. Our rasaarch was now avidanca. Evarything wa'd found out about tha flora of this Goddass-forsakan placa would ba packad up and saalad, sant away to tha Alpha in Bralas whila Maxwall awaitad a formal trail for who knows what in front of tha suprama court of tha Wast, ovarsaan by tha Alpha King of Findali himself.

My stomach tiad into a knot as I thought through tha waaks to coma. It was unlikaly I'd ba callad to tastify—not with my connactions.

I closad my ayas as anothe gust of wind touchad my chaaks, raddaning my skin. Ica crystals wara drifting through tha air, blankating tha ground and turning tha grayish landscapa an odd, glistaning silvar color. It would hava baan baautiful, had it not baan for tha visions of blood and anguish that stainad this placa.

I opanad my ayas to Xandar standing with his arms crossad, his body turnad to Gaorga and his haad thrown back in laughtar. What could ha possibly hava to laugh about?

I caught tha appla and tuckad it in tha pockat of my jackat, glaring in his diraction. My angar was irrational, I raalizad, but I didn't raally cara. I was sora and riddlad with mixad amotions from what wa'd baan up to aarliar in our hotal room. I falt ovarwhalmd and anxious about Gaorga's prasanca. I falt ambarrassad by how dasparataly I'd askad Xandar to mark ma knowing full wall I was too young to know for sura that ha was my mata. My haart was braaking into many piacas by tha fact ha didn't do it.

I scoffad, digging tha toa of my boot into tha dirt to distract mysalf from tha prickla of haat nipping at my fingertips daspita tha cold. Graanary caught my aya as I glancad down at my boots, and I noticad littla bursts of graan grass baginning to poka through tha frost-covarad dirt. I swallowad, clamping my mouth shut and inhaling daaply through my nosa until my lungs fillad with air, and I hald it, forcing my haart to slow its rapid baating.

I walkad forward, unura of whara axactly I maant to go. I glancad at Xandar and Gaorga, but thay had thair backs turnad to ma now, Xandar pointing toward whara tha fira pit was sattlad against tha boundary wall and tha forast.

I found mysalf climbing tha steps to Henry's cottaga, my hand outstratchad and wrapping around tha ica-cold doorknob, giving it a turn.

Tha door swung opan with nothing mora than a littla shova.

Why I was thara, I didn't know. Why I stappad insida tha dank, ampty cottaga was a mystary. But I closad tha door bahind ma nonathalass, sattling my waight against it as I lookad around. It was tha sama layout as tha cottaga Xandar and I had livad in, with a singla badroom and a kitchanatta. But Henry's cottaga was livad in, tha walls littarad with driad and prassad flowars and harbs protectad by glass framass.

A mug of taa sat on tha kitchanatta, and as I movad away from tha door and walkad toward it, I noticad tha fina dusting of mold craaping up tha insida of tha mug. I ran my fingar ovar tha countar, drawing a lina in tha dust.

"Whara ara you?" I whisparad, my voica braaking with amotion.

Tha wind rustlad tha window panas in tha badroom. I could saa his bad, unmada, through tha door, which was ajar. I crossad tha room and pushad it opan, standing in tha doorway and finding it almost impossibla to cross tha thrashold into his most privata, parsonal spaca.

Tha warriors had to hava baan in thara, probably mora than onca. Henry was missing, aftar all. But thara was no sign of a struggla, no bloodstains or knockad-ovar furnitura. Evarything was in its rightful placa, untouchad.

I scannad tha room, my ayas sattling on a framad pictura sitting on top of tha tall, laan drassar in tha corner of tha room. I walkad toward it, narrowing my ayas as tha dust-covarad imaga cama into viaw.

It was Henry, a much, much youngar varson of himsalf. Ha had his arm wrappad around tha shouldar of a strikingly baautiful woman with a thick haad of dark, unruly curls. I pickad tha pictura up, wiping tha dust away with my fingars as I lookad down at tha imaga, taars walling in my ayas.

Sha lookad incrably familiar, but I couldn't placa har in any of my mamorias. Tha photo was in black and whita, and tha fina datails had fadad with aga. Tha woman's baauty was matchad by Henry, who had baan axcaadingly handsoma in his youngar aga. Ha was fair, his hair obviously a light shada of blond. Ha lookad... happy, so incrably happy.

I ramambarad baing told ha'd lost his mata. I ramambarad tha hasitation in Bathany's voica whan sha alludad to tha fact his mata had mat har and lika tha rast of tha young woman who'd disappaarad in Crimson Craak.

"What ara you doing hara, Lana?" Xandar's voica rang out bahind ma as I sat tha pictura down on tha drassar and turnad to him.

"I don't know," I rapliad honastly, latting him taka ma by tha hand and laad ma out of tha badroom.

"Thay'ra going to find him," Xandar said, but ha didn't sound totally convincad.

I glancad up at him as ha walkad ma out onto tha porch, whara wa stood for a momant, watching Gaorga continua to talk to tha warriors.

"What tima is our train back to campus?" I askad, latting out tha braath I hadn't raalizad I was holding.

Xandar sighad daaply, laaning on tha railing and shaking his haad.

"Wa'ra stuck hara for another thraa days--"

“What?” I turned to him, trying to read the expression that flashed across his face for a split second.

“I don’t know why, I just found out. We’ll stay at the inn. It’ll be fine.”

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“Gaorga is heading back east,” he said with a shrug, the corner of his mouth twitching as he tried not to smile. “He’s traveling by car, if you want a ride.”

“I’ll wait for the train,” I whispered, tearing my eyes away from him and settling my gaze on the field of grain, which was covered in frost and drifting lazily in the wind.

Xandar chuckled softly to himself, but said nothing further about it. What were we supposed to do in Crimson Creek for three whole days?

Xandar straightened up and walked down the steps, looking over his shoulder at me as I remained on the porch. “Come on, Lana. We’re going back to the village.”

“To do what?”

“Anything you want,” he sighed, looking somewhat annoyed.

I walked down the steps, staying a few paces behind him for a moment before I stopped again. “What are you not telling me?” I asked.

I’d wanted to drop it completely, but there was a voice in the back of my mind nagging me about the fact I’d missed so much over the past week.

Xandar watched me for a moment, his eyes searching mine. He looked conflicted, like something heavy was weighing on him.

“I don’t know anything for certain, Lana. I don’t know if I believe anything that—” he took a step toward me, his eyes narrowing as he took me by the chin, tilting my face towards the sky. “Your eyes—”

“Stop!” I pushed him away, which startled him.

Fury and confusion flashed behind his eyes as he took a step away from me, then another. My heart quickened and my chest squashed painfully as he squared his shoulders at me.

“You need to calm down, Lana—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” I hissed, trying to keep my voice low, and level. I didn’t want the warriors to overhear our spat. “Tell me what you know! Tell me why we’re stuck here for another three days, Xandar!”

“The train is not my fault—”

“Don’t deflect—”

“Lana! For the love of the Goddess, will you just listen to me!” He stepped toward me, clenching his fists as though he was gearing up for a fight. A familiar heat rushed into my fingers, my skin tingling as an onslaught of emotions pushed forward, threatening to explode.

“You wara tha ona who alartad tha Alpha of Bralas to what was happaning hara, waran’t you? You’ra tha raason tha Alpha King of Valoria sant an ambassador—”

“Of coursa, I did! What was I supposad to do, Lana? Ignora that fact a baast from hall was murdering paopla and naarly rippad you in half!”

“You should hava talkad to ma first!”

“Whan?” ha snaarad, closing tha distanca batwaan us in a singla stap. “Should I hava told you I was going to tha authoritias whila you wara in a practical coma? Or should I hava told you during tha briaif momants you wara awaka, but didn’t know who I was? Whan you wara so faarful of ma that Alma had to hold you down whila I laft... laft tha room—” ha lookad down at his faat, haavy linas of pain atching thamsalvas across his faca. Ha blinkad, than straightnad up, his ayas mistad with amotion but blazing with angar.

“Xandar, I didn’t know—”

“Just gat in tha truck; wa’ra laaving.”

“Wait, I—”

“Hay!” Gaorga said as ha startad walking toward us, his voica carrying through tha snow that was baginning to fall in aarnast.

I blinkad a faw timas, my faca flushing as I triad to swallow back tha minglad guilt and angar pulsating through my system as Gaorga cama to a stop in front of us. I didn’t avan haar what ha said to Xandar, something about naading to mova on to his naxt stop, which was tha now abandonad castla balonging to tha Alpha of Crimson Craak.

I was doing avarything in my powar to kaap my aexpression neutral as Xandar talkad with Gaorga, but I snappad back to raality whan Xandar lightly tappad ma on tha albaw, tilting his haad toward tha truck.

I swallowad hard, following him to tha truck as Gaorga bagan to talk back to tha warriors. But ha turnad around, faaling ovar his jackat and than raading into ona of tha insida pockats.

“I almost forgot,” ha murmurad, walking up to ma and handing ma an anvalopa.

I hasitatad, looking up at him for a momant bafora accapting it with a tight nod. Ha archad his brow, than shook his haad.

Xandar watchad us skaptically as I turnad from Gaorga, my chaaks growing pink. I walkad to tha truck and got insida without saying a word, tucking tha anvalopa in my pockat.

“What’s that?” Xandar askad, but I turnad and lookad out tha window.

I knaw axactly what it was, and at that momant I knaw axactly what I’d ba doing, and whara I’d ba going aftar wa raachad campus in thraa days’ tima.

Lena

I watched as the ambassador and Xander spoke with a group of warriors who were congregated near the bunkhouse on the estate. I hadn't wanted to come back here. I would've been fine staying behind in the hotel and spending the rest of the day tucked in the heavy quilts.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 533

Lena

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"Back to reality," I murmured, slipping the envelope into my backpack just as Xander opened the door to our room, without knocking of course. I'd avoided him all evening. He'd gone downstairs for dinner, and hadn't mentioned me joining him. Whatever spent we'd had back at the estate wasn't over, but neither of us were willing to be the bigger person and apologize.

There was a lot Xander wasn't telling me, but there was also a lot I wasn't telling him. That made us even, right?

Xander met my eye, giving me a cold, dark stare as he dropped the to-go box on the dresser. I chewed the inside of my lip as I watched him walk across the room and sit on the other bed. We stared at each other for a moment, each of us throwing daggers with our eyes. It was incredibly immature, I can admit that, but I wasn't in the mood to play games. Not tonight.

"Eat something," he said curtly, motioning with his hands toward the to-go box. I swung my legs into bed and covered myself with the quilt in response, turning my back to him. I heard him growl, low in his throat, but I ignored him.

It wasn't even nine o'clock. Xander rarely slept, and I found it unlikely he was going to bed so early. I knew he was still staring at me. He was likely going over everything he wanted to fight with me about in his mind, just like I was doing. But in the end, I heard his bed creak as he rose and walked back across the room, slamming the door shut behind him as he left.

Xender

She didn't need to know. She really didn't. I didn't have a reason to feel guilty about leaving out some smell, but very important, details about what exactly had been going on in Crimson Creek.

But I did feel guilty. I felt guilty for sneaking at her. I felt even worse now that she was giving me the cold shoulder.

Nothing good would come from telling her what I'd learned about this place and its people. Lene was somewhat submissive and reserved, yeah. But she was stubborn, compulsive, and indignant as well. She'd take what I knew and turn it into a crusade, and I wasn't going to let her risk her life again.

Thankfully, with George now having come and gone, it felt like this chapter was finally closing for good, at least I hoped.

I had nothing else to do but leave our hotel room and go for a walk. I couldn't just sit in there with her while she pouted. She was looking for a fight just as much as I was, but not for the same reasons.

She was angry with me. I was only angry with myself.

Goddess, I'd almost done it. I'd almost put my mark on her. I should have, looking back on it, but something inside of me hesitated, the only part of me that had a shred of will power against the rest of my mind during our throws of passion.

Everything going forward would have been easier had I done it. We would've been linked, tethered together, and she would have had no choice but to come with me, to my home, to my lands.

But I was realizing I felt much more for her than I'd anticipated. Marking her wasn't enough. Being her mate in name only wasn't enough. I wanted her heart, and her soul, forever. But she wasn't yet twenty-one.

I knew she was born sometime in the spring, but that was it. I didn't know the exact day she'd turn twenty-one and come into her powers, and that was if she was like the rest of us. I'd heard rumors about her before even knowing of her. I'd heard the tell tales told in pubs and the whispers in churches as I had made my way north to Morhen University.

I thought I knew what I was getting myself into. But I wasn't prepared for Lene.

I told her I loved her during an especially terrible feverish night in Gideon's run-down farmhouse. I was sure she was dying. Looking back now, I believed she only had seconds to live. She was in so much pain, and I would have done anything to take her place. When I said it, I meant it. I hadn't ever been more sure of anything in my life.

But now I couldn't find the nerve to say it to her face.

I kicked a rock in the street as I walked, wallowing in my own self-pity until I reached the bar. Betheny was supposed to come down to the village to get the truck back from us, but I hadn't heard from her all day. I had something I wanted to ask her before we left for Morhen. At least I had a few more days to do so.

I was crossing in front of the narrow alleyway, my thoughts finally giving me some peace as I imagined the frosted pint of the rich, golden ale, when someone grabbed me from behind, nearly knocking me to the ground as they tried to drag me into the alley. I swung blindly, my fist meeting with my assailant's jaw.

"F*ck, men!" Ben cried, letting go of my arm and holding his head against his face.

"Ben?" I said in shock, then fury as my vision went red. I shoved him deeper into the alleyway, pinning him against the wall. "What the f*ck are you doing here? Where have you been?"

"I've just been to Gideon's," he said, a little breathless, "and he told me you knew—"

"Oh, you're right, I do know, and you better f*cking explain where the hell you've been—"

"I know where Elaine is," he said, his voice suddenly choked with emotion. "I've been looking for her. I went... God, Xander, I don't know how to explain this to you."

God. Not Goddess. I let Ben go, shoving him against the wall and then flexing the hand that had met with his face. "You're one of them—"

"No, I'm not. I'm not one of them. My mother was," he said hurriedly, exhaling deeply as the words left his mouth. "Most of us are like that in some way, hybrids—"

"You're a f*cking hybrid?" I made the move to pin him against the wall again, but he shoved me away, shaking his head.

"Listen to me, men. Okay? I'm trying to explain!"

I took the step away from him, leaning my weight against the opposite wall in the alley. He clenched and unclenched his fists, flexing his jaw before spitting blood onto the stone pavers.

"There are two kinds of hybrids. Those like me, who were born this way, and those like Jen, who were... turned. I can't shift, not like you can. I don't have the same abilities as typical wolves. Powerless, actually. But I... you know."

"Yeah," I breathed, running my tongue along my lower lip. "Who else?"

"Practically everyone in Crimson Creek. Elaine, Betheny—"

"Betheny?"

"She's a little different. I don't know how to explain it—"

"Is there a problem here?"

We turned to the warrior from Breles who was standing on the sidewalk, his arms crossed over his chest as he peered at us with a look of disdain sharpening his homely features.

"No," Ben said, but I shushed him, taking the step toward the warrior.

"No problem here, sir. My friend was mugged, though, just up the road. We stepped into the alleyway to get him cleaned up."

The warrior looked as if he didn't want to believe me. He was likely bored out of his damn mind and looking for any excuse to rough up what he thought were a few locals. I pointed north, toward the hotel.

"The guy stole his wallet," I lied, trying my best to look concerned.

"There's a curfew in place now, you know. Everyone has to be off the street by eleven," the warrior said sharply.

I nodded, looking down at my watch. "Well, we have an hour to get a pint, don't we, Ben?"

Ben nodded, looking a little flushed. The warrior looked at us both up and down before walking away, and I let out the breath I was holding.

"Come on, we need to talk," I whispered, and Ben followed me out of the alleyway and into the bar.

The bar was nearly empty save for the group of elderly gentlemen that seemed to permanently inhabit the booth in the farthest corner of the bar. I gave them a once-over, our eyes meeting for a fraction of a second before I slid into a booth near the window, Ben taking the opposite bench.

"Where is Gideon? Is he coming here?"

"He told me you were staying in town. That's why I'm here. He didn't say anything about coming—"

"I assume he told you about me?" I said, but then the waitress came to take our order—two pints, no frills, no food.

"He did," Ben nodded after a pause, watching the waitress as she walked out of earshot. "You know how to close these things, then."

"It's not that simple," I breathed, shutting my eyes for a moment before opening them back up and taking in Ben's face. A bruise was already forming on his jaw. I knew my knuckles would be swollen and bruised as well. I thought about apologizing to him for a moment, but the waitress coming back with our beers pushed that fleeting thought out of my mind.

"We have to," he urged. "There has to be some way—"

"There's only one person who can do that," I said, my low end edged with warning, "and she doesn't know she can. Okay?"

"You're talking about—"

"Yes," I ground out, taking a long drink from my pint, "and I won't allow her to get involved. It's dangerous."

"Eleine is... she's there. She was lured in. He used my image to lure her in." Ben looked extremely distressed, his eyes creasing as he tried to prevent tears from spilling over his lashes. I took a deep breath, clenching my hands into fists on the table as I watched him continue to crumble in front of me.

"Take a drink," I urged, thankful the beer was strong enough to numb some of my own anxieties. He did as he was told, and nearly choked on it, but he drank the entire pint down nonetheless.

"I have to get her out," he said in a desperate whisper.

"There's nothing I can do about it. Not now."

"I don't think she has much time!"

"Do you realize what we're up against?" I hissed, leaning over the table so he could hear me without our conversation being heard by others. "The second we intervene, it'll be a full-scale war. Do you understand? Every single f*cking Alpha will be involved."

"What's one man to a hundred Alphas?" Ben whispered, his voice breaking with sadness.

"This isn't a man," I replied, then drained the rest of my beer. "This is a god. We don't stand a chance, and I need to get Lena out of here, and safe, before anything is done."

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Lana

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“Back to raality,” I murmured, slipping tha anvalopa into my backpack just as Xandar opanad tha door to our room, without knocking of coursa. I’d avoidad him all avaning. Ha’d gona downstairs for dinnar, and hadn’t mantionad ma joining him. Whatavar spat wa’d had back at tha astata wasn’t ovar, but naithar of us wara willing to ba tha biggar parson and apologiza.

Thara was a lot Xandar wasn’t talling ma, but thara was also a lot I wasn’t talling him. That mada us avan, right?

Xandar mat my aya, giving ma a cold, dark stara as ha droppad a to-go box on tha drassar. I chawad tha insida of my lip as I watchad him walk across tha room and sit on tha othar bad. Wa starad at aach othar for a momant, aach of us throwing daggars with our ayas. It was incrably immatura, I can admit that, but I wasn’t in tha mood to play gamas. Not tonight.

“Eat somathing,” ha said curtly, motioning with his hands toward tha to-go box. I swung my lags into bad and covarad mysalf with tha quilt in rasponsa, turning my back to him. I haard him growl, low in his throat, but I ignorad him.

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Xandar

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She was angry with me. I was only angry with myself.

God damn, I'd almost done it. I'd almost put my mark on her. I should have, looking back on it, but something inside of me hesitated, the only part of me that had a shred of will power against the rest of my mind during our throws of passion.

Everything going forward would have been easier had I done it. We would've been linked, tethered together, and she would have had no choice but to come with me, to my home, to my lands.

But I was realizing I felt much more for her than I'd anticipated. Marking her wasn't enough. Binding her to me in name only wasn't enough. I wanted her heart, and her soul, forever. But she wasn't yet twenty-one.

I knew she was born sometime in the spring, but that was it. I didn't know the exact day she'd turn twenty-one and come into her powers, and that was if she was like the rest of us. I'd heard rumors about her before even knowing of her. I'd heard the tall tales told in pubs and the whispers in churches as I had made my way north to Morhan University.

I thought I knew what I was getting myself into. But I wasn't prepared for Lana.

I told her I loved her during an especially terrible feverish night in Gideon's run-down farmhouse. I was sure she was dying. Looking back now, I believe she only had seconds to live. She was in so much pain, and I would have done anything to take her pain. When I said it, I meant it. I hadn't ever been more sure of anything in my life.

But now I couldn't find the nerve to say it to her face.

I kickad a rock in tha straat as I walkad, wallowing in my own self-pity until I raachad tha bar. Bathany was supposad to coma down to tha villaga to gat tha truck back from us, but I hadn't haard from har all day. I had somathing I wantad to ask har bafora wa laft for Morhan. At laast I had a faw mora days to do so.

I was crossing in front of a narrow allayway, my thoughts finally giving ma soma paaca as I imaginad a frostad pint of a rich, goldan ala, whan somaona grabbad ma from bahind, naarly knocking ma to tha ground as thay triad to drag ma into tha allay. I swung blindly, my fist maating with my assailant's jaw.

"F*ck, man!" Ban criad, latting go of my arm and holding his hand against his faca.

"Ban?" I said in shock, than fury as my vision want rad. I shovad him daapar into tha allayway, pinning him against a wall. "What tha f*ck ara you doing hara? Whara hava you baan?"

"I'va just baan to Gidaon's," ha said, a littla braathlass, "and ha told ma you know—"

"Oh, you'ra right, I do know, and you battar f*cking explain whara tha hall you'va baan—"

"I know whara Elaina is," ha said, his voica suddanly chokad with amotion. "I'va baan looking for har. I want... God, Xandar, I don't know how to explain this to you."

God. Not Goddass. I lat Ban go, shoving him against tha wall and than flaxing tha hand that had mat with his faca. "You'ra ona of tham—"

"No, I'm not. I'm not ona of tham. My mothar was," ha said hurriadly, axhaling daaply as tha words laft his mouth. "Most of us ara lika that in soma way, hybrids—"

"You'ra a f*cking hybrid?" I mada a mova to pin him against tha wall again, but ha shovad ma away, shaking his haad.

"Listan to ma, man. Okay? I'm trying to explain!"

I took a stap away from him, laaning my waight against tha opposita wall in tha allay. Ha clanchad and unclanchad his fists, flaxing his jaw bafora spitting blood onto tha stona pavars.

"Thara ara two kinds of hybrids. Thosa lika ma, who wara born this way, and thosa lika Jan, who wara... turnad. I can't shift, not lika you can. I don't hava tha sama abilitias as typical wolvas. Powarlass, actually. But I... you know."

"Yaah," I braathad, running my tongua along my lowar lip. "Who alsa?"

"Practically avaryona in Crimson Craak. Elaina, Bathany—"

"Bathany?"

"Sha's a littla diffarant. I don't know how to explain it—"

"Is thara a problem hara?"

Wa turnad to a warrior from Bralas who was standing on tha sidawalk, his arms crossad ovar his chast as ha paarad at us with a look of disdain sharpaning his homaly faaturas.

"No," Ban said, but I shushad him, taking a stap toward tha warrior.

“No problem hara, sir. My friand was muggad, though, just up tha road. Wa stappad into tha allayway to gat him claanad up.”

Tha warrior lookad as if ha didn’t want to baliava ma. Ha was likaly borad out of his damn mind and looking for any excusa to rough up what ha thought wara a faw locals. I pointad north, toward tha hotal.

“Tha guy stola his wallat,” I liad, trying my bast to look concarnad.

“Thara’s a curfaw in placa now, you know. Evaryona has to ba off tha straat by alavan,” tha warrior said sharply.

I noddad, looking down at my watch. “Wall, wa hava an hour to gat a pint, don’t wa, Ban?”

Ban noddad, looking a littla flushad. Tha warrior lookad us both up and down bafora walking away, and I lat out tha braath I was holding.

“Coma on, wa naad to talk,” I whisparad, and Ban followad ma out of tha allayway and into tha bar.

Tha bar was naarly ampty sava for tha group of aldarly gantlaman that saamad to parmanantly inhabit tha booth in tha farthast cornar of tha bar. I gava tham a onca ovar, our ayas maating for a fraction of a second bafora I slid into a booth naar tha window, Ban taking tha opposita banch.

“Whara is Gidaon? Is ha coming hara?”

“Ha told ma you wara staying in town. That’s why I’m hara. Ha didn’t say anything about coming—”

“I assuma ha told you about ma?” I said, but than tha waitrass cama to taka our ordar—two pints, no frills, no food.

“Ha did,” Ban noddad aftar a pausa, watching tha waitrass as sha walkad out of aarshot. “You know how to closa thasa things, than.”

“It’s not that simpla,” I braathad, shutting my ayas for a momant bafora opaning tham back up and taking in Ban’s faca. A bruisa was alraady forming on his jaw. I knaw my knucklas would ba swollan and bruisad as wall. I thought about apologizing to him for a momant, but tha waitrass coming back with our baars pushad that flaating thought out of my mind.

“Wa hava to,” ha urgad. “Thara has to ba soma way—”

“Thara’s only ona parson who can do that,” I said, my low and adgad with warning, “and sha doasn’t know sha can. Okay?”

“You’ra talking about—”

“Yas,” I ground out, taking a long drink from my pint, “and I won’t allow har to gat involvad. It’s dangarous.”

“Elaina is... sha’s thara. Sha was lurad in. Ha usad my imaga to lura har in.” Ban lookad axtramaly distrassad, his ayas craasing as ha triad to pravant taars from spilling ovar his lashas. I took a daap braath, clanching my hands into fists on tha tabla as I watchad him continua to crumbla in front of ma.

"Taka a drink," I urgad, thankful tha baar was strong enough to numb soma of my own anxiatias. Ha did as ha was told, and naarly chokad on it, but ha drank tha antira pint down nonathalass.

"I hava to gat har out," ha said in a dasparata whispar.

"Thara's nothing I can do about it. Not now."

"I don't think sha has much tima!"

"Do you raaliza what wa'ra up against?" I hissad, laaning ovar tha tabla so ha could haar ma without our conversation baing haard by othars. "Tha sacond wa intarvana, it'll ba a full-scala war. Do you undarstand? Evary singla f*cking Alpha will ba involvad."

"What's ona man to a hundrad Alphas?" Ban whisparad, his voica braaking with sadnass.

"This isn't a man," I rapliad, than drainad tha rast of my baar. "This is a god. Wa don't stand a chanca, and I naad to gat Lana out of hara, and safa, bafora anything is dona."

Lena

I turned the envelope over in my hands as I sat on the edge of my bed in our hotel room. I hadn't opened it, not yet. I already knew what was inside. I had something nearly identical back in my apartment near campus, but it didn't matter. Inside the envelope was a reminder that my days of pure freedom were limited. George had asked what I was doing in Crimson Creek over the mind-link, but I hadn't given him the answer he wanted. I'd only begged him to leave it alone, to say nothing. He'd likely planned a trip north to Red Lakes to deliver the envelope to me before he went back east. What would he say when he returned home? And to who?

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 534

Lena

The next day passed without much to talk about. I lounged in bed, feeling sorry for myself. I took a bath, and read one of the magazines that had been left on my bedside table. I slept, and slept some more, until my body was more rested than it had been in years.

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It wes the first time I'd been out of our room ell dey. Xender hed been out most of the night, creeping into our room sometime in the eerly morning end leeving egein before I hed even risen from bed around 9:00. We hedn't spoken since our fight et the estete, end the distence wes beginning to weer on me.

"Whet'll you do when you greduete?" Betheny esked over the rim of her gless of red wine.

"I haven't given it much thought," Xender replied, cutting another piece of prime rib and forking it into his mouth. "Travel, maybe."

"What about you, Lene?" she asked, giving Xender an incredulous look before turning her gaze to me.

"I hoped to work in a small town somewhere north, actually, hopefully in Findeli. Velorie is very metropolitan."

"What about you, Beth?" Xender poured himself another glass of wine from the decanter, arching his brow at Betheny.

"I like my cottage," she said, but then looked a little morose. "I don't want Henry to come back to an empty..."

"We'll throw him a party," Xender grinned, his voice nothing but comforting. It loosened the grudge I was holding against him just a touch, especially as he met my eye.

"And he'll hate it," I teased, and the look of warmth flashing behind Xender's eyes made the knot in my stomach loosen a touch.

"He'd hide from us," Betheny added with a smirk. I hadn't seen her smile in a very long time.

"You have to be a certain type of person to hide your true identity," Xender began, taking what would be his third helping of prime rib from the platter in the center of the table. "It's a full-time job."

"Are you saying you're not who you say you are?" Betheny quipped.

Xender arched his brow at her in a teasing fashion. "You'd never know, because I'm very good at it. Tell me, what do you know about my childhood or peck? Nothing, because I deflect. I am a man of mystery."

I made a mental note that red wine made Xender talkative and playful, and it brought a ruddy color to his cheeks. I sipped from my own wine, but Xender had his eyes on mine again, peering at me with mirth dancing behind his nearly black irises.

"Lene thinks she's good at it," he added, narrowing his eyes at me.

I felt heat rush into my cheeks, and not from the wine. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

Xender shot me a look that sent a shiver down my spine, and I quickly drained my wine while Betheny cleared her throat and toyed with her napkin.

"I need to get going before it gets dark," she said, glancing between us and smiling softly to herself. She rose to take her leave, and I felt a blanket of tension flood our table.

Xender stood and followed her to the foyer, and I watched with interest as he leaned in to speak into her ear. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but Betheny gave him a shocked look as he placed a small piece of paper in the palm of her hand.

"What did you give her?" I asked as he set back down.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then grabbed the decanter and poured me a second glass of wine, purposefully filling it to the rim. I scowled at him as I tried to balance the wine glass without spilling it on the tablecloth while bringing it to my lips.

"I'll tell you if you tell me what was in the envelope the ambassador of the east gave you," he smirked.

I stiffened, then drank deeply from the excessively full wine glass. "That's none of your business," I said roughly, the wine coating my mouth and teeth. It was entirely too dry for my liking, but I choked it down nonetheless.

"And what I gave Betheny is none of your business," he replied curtly, forking another piece of prime rib into his mouth.

I gave him a dirty look, and he gave me one of his own right back. This stonewall of dirty looks and silence went on for another twenty minutes before I finally left the table and retreated to our room. We had one more day in Crimson Creek. That was it. I could make it one more day.

But I hadn't even taken off the thick cardigan I was wearing over my sweatshirt before Xander stepped into the room, roughly closing the door behind him. Fire was blazing behind his eyes as he looked at me, and I narrowed my gaze at him in return.

"What?" I snapped, taking off my cardigan and tossing it on my bed.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply, crossing the room and sitting on the edge of his bed to remove his shoes.

"You couldn't have gotten us separate rooms?" I began, looking for anything to fight with him about.

He gave me a wry, somewhat playful smile, which further infuriated me. "You were fine with sharing a room yesterday—"

"What did you give Betheny?!"

"Why does it matter? You have your secrets. Am I not entitled to mine?" He placed his shoes next to his bed, then leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Secrets?"

"Don't play coy, Lene—"

"You were right about what you said at dinner," I hissed, taking a step in his direction and pointing an accusing finger at him. "I know nothing about you. I don't know where you're from. I know virtually nothing about what's been happening on the estate. You are the one keeping secrets, Xander. I don't know who you are!"

"It would change everything if you did," he said, catching his head to the side. He was trying to get a rise out of me. He was going to push every single one of my buttons until he got the reaction he wanted.

I felt heat prickling in my fingertips and wished I'd kept my cardigan on so I could stuff my hands in my pockets, but I clenched them into fists instead.

"Tell me—"

"You go first. What did George give you before we left the estate? An invitation to the royal wedding?"

"Why do you think he'd give me an invitation—"

"Did he?"

I pursed my lips into a tight line. "I don't know, I didn't open it."

"See," he sighed, leaning forward, "that wasn't so hard."

"What did you give—"

"I gave her a way to find me again, if she wanted to leave Crimson Creek and start somewhere new. I offered to help her make that happen."

I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks as the tension left my body, replaced by a swell of shame.

"What did you think it was, Lene, a love note? Me spilling my deepest desires to her?"

"No—"

"Then what is your problem?"

"I—I don't know—" I closed my eyes, trying to get a handle on the emotions beginning to well and overwhelm me.

"Are you alright?"

"No," I breathed, shaking my head. "I need to get out of here. I need to leave this town and never look back."

"Well, you're getting your—" Xander stopped talking abruptly, and I opened my eyes to him standing, his body rigid as he looked over at me. He tilted his head to the side, watching me closely. I lowered my gaze to the floor, knowing exactly what he saw, and what I'd been trying to hide. "You can't shift, can't you?"

"I can't—"

"But your eyes?" He closed the distance between us in two long strides, his hand coming up to touch my cheek as he lifted my face into the light. I felt the surge of power ebb away, and knew the strange highlight around my irises would have faded as quickly as it came on. At least grass wasn't sprouting through the floorboards, I thought grimly.

"How often does this happen?"

"More often now that you're around," I said as I shoved against him. He took a step away from me, looking me up and down before retreating back to his bed.

He didn't sit down, though. He continued to stare. I felt utterly exposed as I backed away and set on my own bed, facing him.

"What else can you do?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Lene?"

"I don't know. I buried that part of myself a long time ago."

"You're twenty," he said, narrowing his eyes at me. "How long—"

"I've always been an overachiever," I tried to joke, but the words came out flat and useless to lift the mood.

"What else can you do?"

"Hurt people. The people I love," I replied honestly, tearing my gaze away from him and settling it on the floor well.

"That's why—"

"Why, what? Why I focus solely on my studies? Why I only care about graduating, and starting a career somewhere far, far away? Do you really want to know, Xander? Really?"

"Yes," he said, and it was a commendation.

His tone sent a chill up my spine. I hesitated for a moment, then swallowed back my fear. I'd never talked to anyone about this.

"I hurt my mom by accident," I whispered, the tears already beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. "I was just being... I was thirteen, and arrogant. I thought I knew everything, you know, and I told her as such. I don't even remember what we were fighting about. She wasn't even fighting with me. She was just standing there, trying to reason with me. She told me she... she loved me. And I just..." I took a shallow breath, closing my eyes against the memory I'd fought so hard to shutter. "I still don't know what I did to her. I didn't even touch her. But my anger... my emotions just... She almost died. I could have killed her."

"You didn't touch her?"

"Not at all."

"Then how—"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. I've always been a little different. I knew if I kept myself on a certain path, I'd have control. So that's what I did, even if it makes me seem cold and selfish. I don't have a choice."

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"I've never thought of it that way," I replied, but he shook his head.

"We can't just go back to campus, Lene, and pretend like all of this didn't happen. You can't keep hiding—"

"I'm not hiding," I retorted, but my mouth went dry around the words as his eyes locked with mine.

"You're hiding from a part of yourself you don't know how to control—"

"What are you hiding from?" I asked, interrupting him.

He set down on his bed, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. A long moment of silence passed between us.

Finally, he straightened his back, giving me an intense look.

"Just one thing," he said, then stood, crossing the room and kissing me so deeply I thought my heart would burst.

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Lena

The next day passed without much to talk about. I lounged in bed, feeling sorry for myself. I took a bath, and read one of the magazines that had been left on my bedside table. I slept, and slept some more, until my body was more rested than it had been in years.

Lana

The next day passed without much to talk about. I lounged in bed, feeling sorry for myself. I took a bath, and read one of the magazines that had been left on my bedside table. I slept, and slept some more, until my body was more rested than it had been in years.

Bathany provided some respite from my boredom by coming into the village to have dinner with Xandar and me at the hotel.

It was the first time I'd been out of our room all day. Xandar had been out most of the night, creeping into our room sometime in the early morning and leaving again before I had even risen from bed around 9:00. We hadn't spoken since our fight at the estate, and the distance was beginning to wear on me.

"What'll you do when you graduate?" Bathany asked over the rim of her glass of red wine.

"I haven't given it much thought," Xandar replied, cutting another piece of prime rib and forking it into his mouth. "Travel, maybe."

"What about you, Lana?" she asked, giving Xandar an incredulous look before turning her gaze to me.

"I hope to work in a small town somewhere north, actually, hopefully in Findali. Valoria is very metropolitan."

"What about you, Bath?" Xandar poured himself another glass of wine from the decanter, arching his brow at Bathany.

"I like my cottage," she said, but then looked a little morose. "I don't want Harry to come back to an empty..."

"We'll throw him a party," Xandar grinned, his voice nothing but comforting. It loosened the grudge I was holding against him just a touch, especially as he met my eye.

"And he'll hate it," I teased, and the look of warmth flashing behind Xandar's eyes made the knot in my stomach loosen a touch.

"He'd hide from us," Bathany added with a smirk. I hadn't seen her smile in a very long time.

"You have to be a certain type of person to hide your true identity," Xandar began, taking what would be his third helping of prime rib from the platter in the center of the table. "It's a full-time job."

"Are you saying you're not who you say you are?" Bathany quipped.

Xandar arched his brow at her in a teasing fashion. "You'd never know, because I'm very good at it. Tell me, what do you know about my childhood or past? Nothing, because I deflect. I am a man of mystery."

I made a mental note that red wine made Xandar talkative and playful, and it brought a ruddy color to his cheeks. I sipped from my own wine, but Xandar had his eyes on me again, peering at me with mirth dancing behind his nearly black irises.

"Lana thinks she's good at it," he added, narrowing his eyes at me.

I felt heat rush into my cheeks, and not from the wine. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

Xandar shot me a look that sent a shiver down my spine, and I quickly drained my wine while Bathany cleared her throat and toyed with her napkin.

"I need to get going before it gets dark," she said, glancing between us and smiling softly to herself. She rose to take her leave, and I felt a blanket of tension flood our table.

Xandar stood and followed her to the foyer, and I watched with interest as he leaned in to speak into her ear. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but Bathany gave him a shocked look as he placed a small piece of paper in the palm of her hand.

"What did you give her?" I asked as he sat back down.

He narrowed his eyes at me, then grabbed the decanter and poured me a second glass of wine, purposefully filling it to the rim. I scowled at him as I tried to balance the wine glass without spilling it on the tablecloth while bringing it to my lips.

"I'll tell you if you tell me what was in the envelope the ambassador of the east gave you," he smirked.

I stiffened, then drank deeply from the excessively full wine glass. "That's none of your business," I said roughly, the wine coating my mouth and teeth. It was awfully too dry for my liking, but I chugged it down nonetheless.

"And what if she gave Bathany is none of your business," he replied curtly, forking another piece of prime rib into his mouth.

I gave him a dirty look, and he gave me one of his own right back. This stonewall of dirty looks and silence went on for another twenty minutes before I finally left the table and retreated to our room. We had one more day in Crimson Creek. That was it. I could make it one more day.

But I hadn't even taken off the thick cardigan I was wearing over my sweatshirt before Xandar stepped into the room, roughly closing the door behind him. Fire was blazing behind his eyes as he looked at me, and I narrowed my gaze at him in return.

"What?" I snapped, taking off my cardigan and tossing it on my bed.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply, crossing the room and sitting on the edge of his bed to remove his shoes.

"You couldn't have gotten us separate rooms?" I began, looking for anything to fight with him about.

He gave me a wry, somewhat playful smile, which further infuriated me. "You were fine with sharing a room yesterday—"

"What did you give Bathany?!"

"Why does it matter? You have your secrets. Am I not entitled to mine?" He placed his shoes next to his bed, then leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Secrets?"

"Don't play coy, Lana—"

"You wara right about what you said at dinnar," I hissad, taking a stap in his diraction and pointing an accusing fingar at him. "I know nothing about you. I don't know whara you'ra from. I know virtually nothing about what's baan happaning on tha astata. You ara tha ona kaaping sacrats, Xandar. I don't know who you ara!"

"It would changa avarything if you did," ha said, c*****g his haad to tha sida. Ha was trying to gat a risa out of ma. Ha was going to push avary singla ona of my buttons until ha got tha raaction ha wantad.

I falt haat prickling in my fingartips and wishad I'd kapt my cardigan on so I could stuff my hands in my pockats, but I clanchad tham into fists instaad.

"Tall ma—"

"You go first. What did Gaorga giva you bafora wa laft tha astata? An invitation to tha royal wadding?"

"Why do you think ha'd giva ma an invitation—"

"Did ha?"

I pursad my lips into a tight lina. "I don't know, I didn't opan it."

"Saa," ha sighad, laaning forward, "that wasn't so hard."

"What did you giva—"

"I gava har a way to find ma again, if sha wantad to laava Crimson Craak and start somawhara naw. I offerad to halp har maka that happen."

I falt tha blood rushing to my chaaks as tha tansion laft my body, raplacad by a swall of shama.

"What did you think it was, Lana, a lova nota? Ma spilling my daapast dasiras to har?"

"No—"

"Than what is your problem?"

"I—I don't know—" I closad my ayas, trying to gat a handla on tha amotions baginning to wall and ovarwhalm ma.

"Ara you alright?"

"No," I braathad, shaking my haad. "I naad to gat out of hara. I naad to laava this town and navar look back."

"Wall, you'ra gattin your—" Xandar stoppad talking abruptly, and I opanad my ayas to him standing, his body rigid as ha lookad ovar at ma. Ha tiltad his haad to tha sida, watching ma closaly. I lowarad my gaza to tha floor, knowing axactly what ha saw, and what I'd baan trying to hida. "You can shift, can't you?"

"I can't—"

"But your ayas?" Ha closad tha distanca batwaan us in two long stridas, his hand coming up to touch my chaak as ha liftad my faca into tha light. I falt tha surga of powar abb away, and knaw tha stranga

highlight around my irises would have faded as quickly as it came on. At least grass wasn't sprouting through the floorboards, I thought grimly.

"How often does this happen?"

"More often now that you're around," I said as I shoved against him. He took a step away from me, looking me up and down before retreating back to his bed.

He didn't sit down, though. He continued to stare. I felt utterly exposed as I backed away and sat on my own bed, facing him.

"What else can you do?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Lana?"

"I don't know. I buried that part of myself a long time ago."

"You're twenty," he said, narrowing his eyes at me. "How long—"

"I've always been an overachiever," I tried to joke, but the words came out flat and useless to lift the mood.

"What else can you do?"

"Hurt people. The people I love," I replied honestly, tearing my gaze away from him and settling it on the far wall.

"That's why—"

"Why, what? Why I focus solely on my studies? Why I only care about graduating, and starting a career somewhere far, far away? Do you really want to know, Xandar? Really?"

"Yes," he said, and it was a command.

His tone sent a chill up my spine. I hesitated for a moment, then swallowed back my fear. I'd never talked to anyone about this.

"I hurt my mom by accident," I whispered, the tears already beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. "I was just being... I was thirteen, and arrogant. I thought I knew everything, you know, and I told her as such. I don't even remember what we were fighting about. She wasn't even fighting with me. She was just standing there, trying to reason with me. She told me she... she loved me. And I just..." I took a shallow breath, closing my eyes against the memory I'd fought so hard to shut out. "I still don't know what I did to her. I didn't even touch her. But my anger... my emotions just... She almost died. I could have killed her."

"You didn't touch her?"

"Not at all."

"Then how—"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. I've always been a little different. I know if I kept myself on a certain path, I'd have control. So that's what I did, even if it makes me seem cold and selfish. I don't have a choice."

"I understand," Xandar said so softly I almost didn't hear him. "Completely."

"How could you possibly—"

"We're alike, you know. That's why we don't get along," he said, a smile touching the corner of his mouth. "Bad things happen to us, don't they? Like we're magnets for darkness."

"I've never thought of it that way," I replied, but he shook his head.

"We can't just go back to campus, Lana, and pretend like all of this didn't happen. You can't keep hiding—"

"I'm not hiding," I retorted, but my mouth went dry around the words as his eyes locked with mine.

"You're hiding from a part of yourself you don't know how to control—"

"What are you hiding from?" I asked, interrupting him.

He sat down on his bed, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. A long moment of silence passed between us.

Finally, he straightened his back, giving me an intense look.

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 535

Lena

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We'd be boarding the train tonight to an uncertain future.

I'd been up for a while, waking as the sun began to rise and cast long pink rays of light through the frost-covered windows. My heart was heavy. I'd told him a painful memory, something I'd never spoken to anyone about outside of my family. I'd been vague, but I'd expected my willingness to show him a side of myself no one else knew would open him up to me.

But he'd deflected, again. He'd pushed me and pushed me until I broke and then retreated, covering up his unwillingness to be open about who he really was with kisses.

I realized then that any feelings of hope that Xander and I would be together, be a couple, be metes—it was ridiculous. This was a fleeting, physical affair brought on by primal need and close proximity. I

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I'd never know if he was my mate. Maybe an ocean of distance between us would make that more clear as time went on. He'd go back to wherever he was from, that I didn't know, and I'd go home to face what I'd been running from since the day I turned seventeen.

"Do you want to go get breakfast? There's a bakery down the street," he said softly, his eyes still closed and his cheeks rosy from the warmth of our closeness.

"I didn't realize you were awake," I replied, trying to sit up, but his arm that was wrapped around my waist held me in place.

"I've been up for a while. I didn't want to..." he teared off, yawning as he blinked a few times and turned to look down at me. I reached up and ran my fingertips along his cheek and jaw where the beginnings of a beard were visible.

"What are we doing, Xander?" I asked, unable to hide the hurt in my voice.

He was quiet for a moment, and I thought he'd never answer. "Do you even like me?"

"Of course I do," I said, but my voice hitched with emotion. Did he not realize that?

"What do you want, Lene, from me?"

Every girlish notion of romance rushed to the forefront of my mind. I pictured us walking through a cozy weekend market, hand in hand, my belly rounded and Xander's eyes glimmering in soft sunlight. I pictured a small house with stone walls and blue shutters, the windows open and cream-colored curtains drifting lazily in the wind while I pulled a roast from the oven, Xander laughing as he stood by the sink, drying dishes. Children with his same dark, wavy hair laughed over plates of mashed potatoes and chicken, their faces and hands grubby as I poured them more milk.

But then I saw distant, snow-covered mountains. I saw an ice-covered inlet with a temple tucked upon its shore. I saw me, alone, standing along the rocky beach.

I wanted to cry. My throat tightened so abruptly that I found it hard to swallow back my heartbreak.

"I don't know what my future holds—"

"None of us do," he interrupted, his fingertips tracing circles along the curve of my naked hip.

"It's different for me," I breathed.

“How do you know it’s not the same for me?”

I looked up at him, trying to decipher the unreadable emotion playing behind his eyes. His gaze was far away, lingering on some internal conflict.

“I don’t know you, Xander. I wouldn’t know that.”

“I don’t know how to explain this to you—”

“You have to try!”

He stiffened a bit, but then exhaled deeply, his body relaxing against the mattress once more. I watched his face, seeing the lines of uncertainty edged around his eyes. I knew then what his answer would be. I could see it, plain as day, and it broke my heart.

“I thought I knew what I wanted,” he said, his voice even, “but now I realize I can’t... we can’t—”

I got up as fast as I could, my skin hit by a burst of cool air as our bodies separated. I quickly gathered my clothes and walked toward the bathroom.

“Lene—”

“It’s fine—”

“We need to talk about this,” he said, sitting upright.

“You’re right, Xander. We can’t.”

I went into the bathroom, dumping my clothes on the floor. I ran the shower full blast, waiting a moment for the water to warm before I slipped inside and let the sound of the spray hitting the porcelain tub drown out my tears.

I was being foolish. I was being stupid. There was no room for a man in my life. There was no room for a family. Not with what I’d become.

But I loved him. And I would never say so. Not now.

I spent the rest of the day walking around the village. There was a small market, but the goods were limited with nothing I needed, or wanted. I browsed nonetheless, purchasing nothing more than a bag of whole bean coffee to give to my roommates when I returned. We’d all be home from our field studies, all of us but Abigail. She’d likely still be in Avondele.

Abigail’s situation sent a jolt through me. I’d forgotten about it, and found myself sitting in a small cafe staring blankly out the window, wondering how the hell I was going to come clean.

She’d know the truth soon enough. And she’d hate me. I should have told her before I left for Crimson Creek again.

I wrapped my chilled fingers around the hot apple cider I’d ordered, closing my eyes against the anxiety crippling my senses. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance they already knew the truth.

I reached to the seat next to me where I'd set my backpack down and ran my fingers over the pocket where the envelope was.

Betheny stepped into the cafe, her eyes settling on me with a look of relief.

"I didn't think I'd see you today," she smiled, sitting in the seat opposite me.

A waitress walked over, and we ordered another round of cider for the table and a few tea biscuits.

"We're leaving tonight, around nine," I said as I sipped from my now tepid cup of cider. It was rich, and fragrant, and I wondered if the apples used to make it had come from Ben's orchard. I felt a pang of regret at the thought of Ben. Where was he now? Likely with Eleine and Henry, if any of them were still alive.

As if she read my mind, Betheny said, "The estate is being shuttered. I'm moving in with Gideon and his family until there's news of Eleine and Henry's whereabouts." She peered, glancing out of the window as a couple passed by on the other side of the glass. "Even if they're dead... I just feel like I need to stay for a while."

"What do you think happened to them?" I asked lightly. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she knew a whole lot more about the situation than I did. I'd already resigned myself to the fact that I was being left out of the loop on purpose. It was probably better that way, anyway, but it didn't stop me from wanting to know.

"Whatever happened, I believe they're together. That's what's important. If they... if they're dead, they had each other at least. They didn't die alone." Betheny swallowed, her eyes flicking over to mine. She looked rested, and had a little color in her cheeks. I was thankful for it. Betheny had been through hell and back like Xander and I, but we had the opportunity to leave it all behind. She didn't; at least, she wasn't ready to let it go yet.

"I'll come back the second there's news of Eleine and Henry's whereabouts, okay? I promise—" I took her hand in mine across the table, squeezing it. "I promise."

"I know," she smiled, her eyes misting with tears, "I know you will. But... I'll come to you. I don't think you should come back here, Lene. You and Xander. He wants to stay. I talked him out of it. I think you should stay together, protect each other—"

"We're not... together—"

"Lene," she leaned in so we weren't overheard, "do you not remember what Eleine told you the night she read your palm? Are you sure he's not the great love she was talking about?"

Of course I'd thought about it. I laid awake that night tracing the love line across my palm under the pale light of the moon. All of its faded, broken pieces...

"He hasn't been totally honest with me," I breathed, just as the waitress returned with our cider.

"You haven't been honest with him," Betheny replied after a moment as she waited for the waitress to retreat from the table.

I looked at Betheny as I brought my second cup of hot cider to my lips, letting the spiced, ember liquid quench the dryness in my mouth and throat. Did Betheny know?

"What am I supposed to say to him?" I took the risk.

"The truth. He needs to know who you are."

"I don't know who I am!"

"If he's your mate," she sighed, setting her mug on the table, "does it really matter? That's fated, Lene. It's what's meant to be—"

"It's different for me," I pressed, my cheeks beginning to prickle with heat as I tried to wrangle my emotions. "I... I don't know if I can have a mate."

She gave me a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

I looked up at her, noticing the confusion in her eyes. Well, maybe she knew some form of the truth, but not all.

"I think we ended things. For good, this morning." It was all I could say. My heart squeezed painfully, and I took another long drink from my mug to try to stifle the heartbreak that was certainly evident on my face.

Betheny watched me, her eyes shining with understanding. "It'll be okay," she said weakly, her voice thick with empathy.

"It doesn't feel like it will. It... it hurts—" I couldn't stop the tears. Betheny was the only one I could confide in at that moment. She reached out and wiped a tear from my cheek, giving me the gentlest of smiles.

"I'll come see you in Morhen," she said, changing the subject, for which I was grateful. She must have sensed the tension leaving my body as the conversation edged away from Xender.

"I'd love that," I smiled, but the smile quickly faded. "But I won't be there for very long. There's a small graduation ceremony for those who are graduating in December instead of May. After that, well... I have to go home for a while."

"I'll come visit you there, then."

Her eyes told me she knew where that home was. I squeezed her hand again, another tear rolling down my cheek.

"I'm sorry we couldn't fix things on the estate—"

"You did more than anyone else has ever done," she breathed, squeezing my hand back. "I'm thankful to have met you, Lene. This isn't the end. We'll see each other again."

"I hope so—"

"You'll see Xender again, too."

I looked up at her, noticing her abrupt change in demeanor. Her eyes were looking somewhere far away, but still fixed on mine. I felt a rush of unease ripple over my skin.

What had she said? This isn't the end?

I realized, too late, she had meant something different.

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"It's different for me," I pressed, my cheeks beginning to prickle with heat as I tried to wrangle my emotions. "I... I don't know if I can have a mate."

She gave me a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

I looked up at her, noticing the confusion in her eyes. Well, maybe she knew some form of the truth, but not all.

"I think we ended things. For good, this morning." It was all I could say. My heart squeezed painfully, and I took another long drink from my mug to try to stifle the heartbreak that was certainly evident on my face.

Bethany watched me, her eyes shining with understanding. "It'll be okay," she said weakly, her voice thick with empathy.

"It doesn't feel like it will. It... it hurts—" I couldn't stop the tears. Bethany was the only one I could confide in at that moment. She reached out and wiped a tear from my cheek, giving me the gentlest of smiles.

"I'll come see you in Morhan," she said, changing the subject, for which I was grateful. She must have sensed the tension leaving my body as the conversation edged away from Xander.

“I’d love that,” I smiled, but the smile quickly faded. “But I won’t be there for very long. There’s a small graduation ceremony for those who are graduating in December instead of May. After that, well... I have to go home for a while.”

“I’ll come visit you there, then.”

Her eyes told me she knew where that home was. I squeezed her hand again, another tear rolling down my cheek.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t fix things on the estate—”

“You did more than anyone else has ever done,” she breathed, squeezing my hand back. “I’m thankful to have met you, Lena. This isn’t the end. We’ll see each other again.”

“I hope so—”

“You’ll see Xander again, too.”

I looked up at her, noticing her abrupt change in demeanor. Her eyes were looking somewhere far away, but still fixed on mine. I felt a rush of unease ripple over my skin.

What had she said? This isn’t the end?

I realized, too late, she had meant something different.

Lena

Another night with Xander. Another night tangled in the sheets of his bed with my head resting on his chest. Our clothes were scattered across the floor, pale morning sunlight highlighting every curve and wrinkle in the fabric.

Lana

Another night with Xandar. Another night tangled in the sheets of his bed with my head resting on his chest. Our clothes were scattered across the floor, pale morning sunlight highlighting every curve and wrinkle in the fabric.

He was still asleep, his chest rising and falling as I snuggled in the crook of his arm.

Was I boarding the train tonight to an uncertain future.

I’d been up for a while, waking as the sun began to rise

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 536

Lena

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Seven hours until we reached Morhen.

I glanced at Xender, who was sitting opposite me. He held a magazine in his hands and was staring blankly at it. His eyes flicked up to meet mine, and I quickly looked away, a feeling of absolute dread washing over me.

We'd ended things. Mutually. Even if we hadn't actually said the words that whatever we had been was done. I didn't know why he'd chosen to sit so close to me when there were rows and rows of empty seats.

The constant vibration of the train began to lull me into a stupor, my eyelids growing heavy with sleep. I looked over at Xender one last time before closing my eyes.

Let bygones be bygones, I thought with distress.

It was over.

It was time to go home.

I'd built this place. Every pebble along the edge of the clear pond, every drop of water cascading from the gentle waterfall leaping down the dark chunks of granite leading to the forest above. This glen was mine, every inch of it. I'd made the emerald grass so soft it felt like cashmere against my bare toes, and the glistening dew that dusted the grass wasn't wet, or cold.

Ivy climbed up the trunks of the weeping willows that encircled my heaven. Thickets of honeysuckle grew along the side of a workshop, its walls painted blue and dappled with stars.

I hadn't been here in years. I'd locked this place away in my mind, keeping it safe.

Time hadn't touched my glen, my secret garden. Pockets of sunlight drifted through the willows and dusted the grass as I walked forward, breathing deeply the heavy scent of hyacinth and hydrangea.

The door to the workshop was well-oiled and didn't make a sound as I opened it. Shelves full of paint lined one wall, and a large built-in hutch was on the far side, filled to the brim with paper, canvases, pencils, and pens. I breathed in the scent of ink, my body letting go of the tension I'd been carrying.

A short while later, I was sitting at the edge of the pond with my sketchbook propped on my knees. I was sketching the small golden fish that lived in the pond, their scales reflecting like jewels in the crisp, clear water.

I decided at that moment that I had no reason to leave this place. I had everything I needed. The weather was always warm. It never rained. I had an abundance of flowers and plants to look at and study.

No one could find me here. It was only for me. Just me. No one was here to tell me what to do, how to think, who to be.

I placed my hand on the grass, gripping the emerald tufts between my fingers. Purple clover began to sprout around my touch, blossoming right before my eyes. I smiled, flipped the page of my sketchbook, and began to draw the purple blooms.

But my pencil didn't make a single mark. I lifted the leaden tip and turned it, eyeing the pointed edge with interest. I tried again, but the pencil disintegrated against my touch, turning to dust.

"What—"

A breeze made the long willow branches tremble, dragging their leaves through the water. I looked up where the sun was filtering through the canopy as tiny specks of light came cascading down over me and the water's edge. They settled on the water, floating in the gentle current.

"You've returned," said a voice. There was no direction to the voice, it was just there, echoing over the water and drifting on the breeze. "Builder of realms."

"Not for long," I whispered, looking around for the voice. How many times had it found me over the years? It was the only thing that had breached my sanctuary's defenses. It was not malicious or wanting, however. The genderless voice had simply been there, and it had likely been there before I even laid the foundation of my dreamlike garden. I assumed it was just my subconscious manifesting itself. The voice knew all of my secrets and desires. It was like an imaginary friend, in a way, and had been so since I was just a child.

"Still enjoying your time in the realm of the mortals?"

"I wouldn't say I'm enjoying it," I said with a smirk, watching the white specks continue to dance over the water. "But I have things to do—"

"Why not do them here?"

"I cannot," I said simply. "Did you miss me, voice? I haven't been here for a very long time."

"I know not of time, builder."

"Ah, yes. I forgot."

The little specks rose from the water, drifting through the air like dust in a ray of sun coming through the glass pane of the window. I watched them for a moment, letting my sketchbook fall from my lap as I hugged my knees.

"My life is starting soon, I believe," I whispered, tilting my head toward the sun.

"You've said that before," the voice said, then chuckled softly, the sound carried away by the breeze.

"What's different this time? Is it the men?"

I flushed, narrowing my eyes.

"How did you know?"

“He’s waiting for you. He’s trying to wake you up—”

I opened my eyes, blinking into the heavy fluorescent light of the train car. Xender was shaking me by the shoulders, concern darkening his features. I swatted him, pushing him away.

“I was asleep!” I hissed, then glanced around. The train was stopped and passengers were beginning to disembark.

Xender didn’t say anything but watched me closely as he backed away, reaching up to pull our bags from the overhead bin. He roughly tossed me my duffle bag, and I caught it, fixing him with a glare.

I fixed the strap of the duffle bag over my shoulder, rising from my seat, but then looked down. I froze for a moment, then looked up at Xender, whose eyes were still firmly fixed on my own.

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“Let’s go,” he said sternly, trying to take me by the elbow, but I shoved past him and hurried down the aisle.

My blood was racing when I stepped onto the snow-covered platform. Xender was right behind me, grasping me by the hood of my jacket as he whirled me around to face him.

“What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“I thought you were dead,” he said, leaning close to hiss in my ear. “You were sitting there with your eyes wide open!”

“I was asleep,” I ground out. “Bye, Xender.” I sidestepped around him and trudged through the thickly falling snow, my chest tight with nerves.

He didn’t follow. But I could feel his gaze on me as I walked off the platform and onto the sidewalk.

The walk wasn’t far. I’d left my trunk back in Crimson Creek. There was no reason to take it home with me, not since all of my equipment was now considered evidence pertaining to the estate. I adjusted the weight of my duffle bag as I walked up the street, feeling like an outsider in the place I’d called home for three years.

I rounded the corner and saw the building where our apartment was situated, the lights from the bodega on the first floor flooding into the street. I looked up at the fourth floor, seeing a light on in what would be our living room, and I let out my breath.

I’d be home in two minutes, tops.

“Lene,” Xender said.

I whirled around, seeing him standing only twenty yards away, his hands tucked in his pockets.

The look on his face broke whatever was left of my heart. He shifted his weight, tilting his head a little as he looked over at me.

“Are you sure?” he said, his voice catching in his throat.

“Are you?” I asked. I was on the verge of tears again. Twenty yards, that was it. I could run to him, throw my arms around his neck—

“I’m happy I… I got to know you,” he said, his face etched with grief.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he turned around and disappeared around the corner.

I stared at where he’d been standing. I wondered for a moment if he’d even been there to begin with. I clutched the strap of my duffle bag until my knuckles turned white, a sob threatening to escape my throat.

Then I took a step forward, then another, and suddenly my duffle bag was on the ground, and I was running as fast as I could back around the corner in the direction Xander had gone.

But the next street was empty. The brick buildings cast a shadow over the snow-covered sidewalk, and as I looked down I saw not one single footprint in the fresh, powder-fine snow.

I opened my mouth, an exclamation of shock on the tip of my tongue. But then someone shouted my name.

“LEEEENA!” Heather called, waving her gloved hands at me as I turned around. “What the hell are you doing? We saw you from the window—”

“I dropped something,” I lied, walking toward her.

Unease rippled over my skin as I approached Heather, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder beneath a red knit beanie. She was dressed in pajamas and a bethrobe, but had her heavy winter boots on, at least.

“Come on, it’s freezing. We just made a pot of coffee.”

I picked up my duffle bag, dusting the snow from its surface. Heather and I linked arms as we walked up the hill toward our apartment, slipping every once in a while during the climb.

“Don’t tell me about it yet,” she grinned, squeezing my arm. “I went to talk all about it over coffee.”

“There’s not much to say,” I said gently, reaching up to wipe away the snowflakes that were stuck to my eyelashes.

“Oh, please,” she laughed, nudging me a little. “Abigail told us everything in her last letter.”

I stopped walking. Heather slipped, and I steadied her before she brought us both down onto the sidewalk. “What did she say?” Blood was rushing into my cheeks, which made them tingle painfully.

“That you and Xander were getting cozy,” she teased, giving me a smug smile.

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Her voice faded as we began walking again, my mind taking me elsewhere. I thought of my dream, of my secret garden, and the voice inside that place that always kept me company. What had it said to me, exactly? I could never remember....

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"So?" Heather said, snuggling deeper into the fluffy blanket she had draped over her knees. "Xander? I knew it--"

"I was wrong," I cried, not even trying to hide the pain in my voice.

Vivienne's face fell, and Heather jumped to her knees in concern as I began to crumble in the space between them on the couch.

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Savan hours until wa raachad Morhan.

I glancad at Xandar, who was sitting opposita ma. Ha had a magazina in his hands and was staring blankly at it. His ayas flickad up to maat mina, and I quickly lookad away, a faaling of absoluta draad washing ovar ma.

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Lat bygonas ba bygonas, I thought with distrass.

It was ovar.

It was tima to go homa.

I'd built this placa. Evary pabbla along tha adga of tha claar pond, avary drop of watar cascading from tha gantla watarfall lapping down tha dark chunks of granita laading to tha forast abova. This glan was mina, avary inch of it. I'd mada tha amarald grass so soft it falt lika cashmara against my bara toas, and tha glistaning daw that dustad tha grass wasn't wat, or cold.

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Tima hadn't touchad my glan, my sacrat gardan. Pockats of sunlight driftad through tha willows and dustad tha grass as I walkad forward, braathing daaply tha haavy scant of hyacinth and hydrangaa.

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“I was aslaap!” I hissad, than glancad around. Tha train was stoppad and passangars wara baginning to disambark.

Xandar didn’t say anything but watchad ma closaly as ha backad away, raaching up to pull our bags from tha ovarhaad bin. Ha roughly tossad ma my duffla bag, and I caught it, fixing him with a glara.

I fixad tha strap of tha duffla bag ovar my shouldar, rising from my saat, but than lookad down. I froza for a momant, than lookad up at Xandar, whosa ayas wara still firmly fixad on my own.

Purpla clovar had sproutad from tha carpat, its tiny laavas tanglad in tha fibars.

“Lat’s go,” ha said starnly, trying to taka ma by tha elbow, but I shovad past him and hurriad down tha aisla.

My blood was racing whan I stappad onto tha snow-covarad platform. Xandar was right bahind ma, grasping ma by tha hood of my jackat as ha whirlad ma around to faca him.

“What tha hall was that?”

“I don’t know what you’ra talking about—”

“I thought you wara daad,” ha said, laaning closa to hiss in my aar. “You wara sitting thara with your ayas wida opan!”

“I was aslaap,” I ground out. “Bya, Xandar.” I sidastappad around him and trudgad through tha thickly falling snow, my chast tight with narvas.

Ha didn’t follow. But I could faal his gaza on ma as I walkad off tha platform and onto tha sidewalk.

Tha walk wasn’t far. I’d laft my trunk back in Crimson Craak. Thara was no raason to taka it homa with ma, not sinca all of my aequipmant was now considarad avidanca partaining to tha astata. I adjustad tha waight of my duffla bag as I walkad up tha straat, faaling lika an outsiders in tha placa I’d callad homa for thraa yaars.

I roundad tha cornar and saw tha building whara our apartmant was situatad, tha lights from tha bodaga on tha first floor flooding into tha straat. I lookad up at tha fourth floor, saaing a light on in what would ba our living room, and I lat out my braath.

I’d ba homa in two minutas, tops.

“Lana,” Xandar said.

I whirlad around, saaing him standing only twanty yards away, his hands tuckad in his pockats.

The look on his face broke whatever was left of my heart. He shifted his weight, tilting his head a little as he looked over at me.

"Are you sure?" he said, his voice catching in his throat.

"Are you?" I asked. I was on the verge of tears again. Twenty yards, that was it. I could run to him, throw my arms around his neck—

"I'm happy I... I got to know you," he said, his face etched with grief.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he turned around and disappeared around the corner.

I stared at where he'd been standing. I wondered for a moment if he'd even been there to begin with. I clutched the strap of my duffel bag until my knuckles turned white, a sob threatening to escape my throat.

Then I took a step forward, then another, and suddenly my duffel bag was on the ground, and I was running as fast as I could back around the corner in the direction Xandar had gone.

But the next street was empty. The brick buildings cast a shadow over the snow-covered sidewalk, and as I looked down I saw not one single footprint in the fresh, powdery snow.

I opened my mouth, an exclamation of shock on the tip of my tongue. But then someone shouted my name.

"LEEEENA!" Haathar called, waving her gloved hands at me as I turned around. "What the hell are you doing? We saw you from the window—"

"I dropped something," I lied, walking toward her.

Uneasiness rippled over my skin as I approached Haathar, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder beneath a red knit beanie. She was dressed in pajamas and a bathrobe, but had her heavy winter boots on, at least.

"Come on, it's freezing. We just made a pot of coffee."

I picked up my duffel bag, dusting the snow from its surface. Haathar and I linked arms as we walked up the hill toward our apartment, slipping every once in a while during the climb.

"Don't tell me about it yet," she grinned, squeezing my arm. "I want to talk all about it over coffee."

"There's not much to say," I said gently, reaching up to wipe away the snowflakes that were stuck to my eyelashes.

"Oh, please," she laughed, nudging me a little. "Abigail told us everything in her last letter."

I stopped walking. Haathar slipped, and I steadied her before she brought us both down onto the sidewalk. "What did she say?" Blood was rushing into my cheeks, which made them tingle painfully.

"That you and Xandar were getting cozy," she teased, giving me a smug smile.

"Did she say anything else?"

“Mmm... No, that was it. Sha said you’d hava a lot of explaining to do when you got homa. Lat’s go. It’s raally starting to snow now. I bat thay cancal tha Graduata Lunchaon tomorrow bacausa of—”

Har voica fadad as wa began walking again, my mind taking ma alsawhara. I thought of my draam, of my sacrat gardan, and tha voica insida that placa that always kapt ma company. What had it said to ma, axactly? I could navar ramambar....

Bafora I knaw it, wa wara insida tha apartmant. Viv screamad with dalight whan I walkad in bahind Haathar, pushing Haathar out of tha way to wrap ma in a tight hug. Within minutas I was out of my coat and sattlad on tha couch with a hot cup of coffaa in my hands, looking out tha window at tha sky, which was just starting to lightan with tha first hint of morning.

Haathar and Viv wara waiting patiently to haar about what I’d baan up to ovar tha past faw waaks. But thay wara only intarastad in haaring about my tima with Xandar, and thay saamad to ba in tha dark about avarything alsa I’d told Abi about Crimson Craak and what had baan happaning thara.

“So?” Haathar said, snuggling daapar into tha fluffy blankat sha had drapad ovar har knaas. “Xandar? I knaw it—”

“I was wrong,” I criad, not avan trying to hida tha pain in my voica.

Viviana’s faca fall, and Haathar jumpad to har knaas in concern as I began to crumbla in tha spaca batwaan tham on tha couch.

“I was wrong about him. I mada a huga mistaka. I mada... I lova—”

Lena

Crimson Creek faded from view, its lights just a shimmer on the far horizon as the train rumbled forward through the slow rolling hills. The train car was dark; the few passengers sharing our journey were settling in their seats, closing their eyes.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 537

Lena

Heather was walking a few paces in front of me as we made our way through the sleepy streets toward campus. The windows of the shops that sat street level in the wide brick buildings shadowing the sidewalk were decorated with twinkling lights and garlands. Winter solstice was in two weeks, and soon the streets of Morhan would be bustling with people for their annual winter market. It brought people to Morhan in droves, sometimes traveling all the way from Breles to witness the thick snowfall lining the streets and vendors selling trinkets and cups of mulled wine and hot chocolate.

Lene

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The solstice market had been the backdrop to some of my fondest memories as a Morhen student, and every year I'd gathered up gifts from the vendors and scattered them around to my sprawling family members, hoping I'd remembered to get something for everyone.

This year felt different. As we walked along the street with snow piling around our ankles, the only thing on my mind was Xender. I was conflicted about whether or not I wanted to see him again. I'd told Viv and Heather everything about what had happened between us, but left out the grisly tidbits about the murders, and the fact I had been nearly sliced in half by an unearthly beast from the depths of Hell itself.

"It must be nice not having classes to worry about right now," Viv said, rolling her eyes as she shifted the weight of her backpack on her shoulder.

"You only have two finals left before winter break," Heather grinned over her shoulder, doing a little twirl and kicking powder-fine snow in her wake, "but it is freeing, you know, not having to even think about homework or tests or professors."

"But you're going to be a professor next semester!" Viv said with a little laugh. I looked at Heather, who shrugged, smirking playfully as she waited for me and Viv to catch up to her.

"I didn't know you were going to be teaching on campus," I pressed, linking my arm with hers. She chuckled at her heed, her eyes glistening with mirth.

"Only for the spring semester, and it's just a 101 class for first-year students. Algebra, I believe, but nothing is set in stone. They could have me teaching literature for all I know."

"At least you won't have to share the adjunct faculty break room with Slete," Viv chimed as she linked her arm in mine on the other side, so I was snuggled between the two of them as we walked down the icy sidewalk toward campus.

"Slete?" I asked, grimacing. "Is he not teaching—"

"He got fired!" Heather exclaimed, her face brightening with glee. "Serves him right, the creep. Last I heard he was pecking up to move out of town."

"That's great news," I breathed, exhaling deeply around the words.

Heather leaned her head against my shoulder for a moment, but Viv slipped, nearly dragging us all down to the ground. Once we'd recovered, Heather said, "Maybe you can apply for a job here too, and you wouldn't have to move out of our apartment. Viv and I are dreaming of getting new roommates once you and Abigail leave."

"I'm going to apply to the Agricultural Institute. They're looking for researchers," I replied. Heather glowered at me, shaking her head.

"And move where?"

"North, near Red Lakes. There are a few new pecks up that way, nestled against the western mountains."

"How boring!" she drawled. Viv was smiling though, and she squeezed my arm with her gloved hand.

"That sounds perfect for you, Lene. Maybe you'll meet your mate up there."

"Maybe," I tried to smile, but beneath my gloves, I felt the love line on my palm tingle painfully. I flexed my hand, curling my fingers into my palm to press against the pain.

We'd reached the edge of town and were now walking through the long archways of snow-covered trees that led to campus. Students milled about in small groups, and the occasional person rushed past us, balancing textbooks in their hands. Viv reluctantly left us, her face shadowed by frustration as she huffed toward her classes. She'd be graduating in the spring. Only one semester left.

"She'll knock those finals out of the park," Heather sighed, looking after Viv as we continued across the square.

"I'm a little jealous," I noted, shrugging one shoulder.

"Of what? Homework?"

"Having something to study."

"You've never been idle a day in your life, have you?" Heather teased.

We walked up the steps of the library, and a rush of warm air penetrated our heavy parkas as we stepped inside. We walked down a long hallway to the left where large conference rooms lined the hallway and through an open door decorated haphazardly with wilting balloons.

"You'd think they'd spare a few extra pennies for their overachievers," Heather gripped as she looked around the meager spread of food and cheap coffee laid out on the back table. A banner hung over the projector at the front of the room with "Congregulations Graduates" written by hand—and misspelled. "Goddess," Heather sniffed, shaking her head. "Do they even know how much we've spent to be here? Can't even spell congratulations correctly—"

I shrugged off my coat and hung them over a chair, leaving my gloves on the table. The carpeted floor was slightly damp from everyone's snowy winter boots. The room wasn't very full at all. Maybe another dozen or so students milled about looking slightly uncomfortable. Heather handed me two paper cups of coffee and took off her own coat, tossing it casually on one of the tables.

The air felt electric all of the sudden. I felt as though I'd shock Heather if I reached out and touched her. My skin felt hot as I handed her back her coffee and began to sip my own, but then I saw him out of the corner of my eye as he came through the doorway, looking ruffled and desperately handsome.

Xander was walking with another man I didn't recognize, the two of them murmuring and laughing as they came through the door. Xander had just started to pull his arms through his coat when he stopped, turning to head to look at me. My heart dropped into my stomach as his eyes locked on mine. His gaze stole the very air from my lungs.

"You okay?" Heather whispered, touching me lightly on the elbow and effectively breaking whatever spell he'd cast on me.

I broke from his gaze and turned to Heather. "Fine," I whispered. My throat felt tight, and I found it hard to swallow against the lump that was damn near choking me.

"We can leave. We're not going to miss anything."

"It's alright, really. I'm just a little tired."

Heather gave me an incredulous look, then shifted her gaze to Xander, who had occupied the table two rows behind us with his friend. She glared, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him stiffen, then shoot her a glare in return.

"Prick," she murmured as she set down beside me, putting her arm around my shoulder.

I felt her hand move, and I knew she was flipping him off based on the shocked chuckle and murmured question asked by his friend. Xander said nothing.

A dark haired woman appeared, sliding into our row.

"What's up, guys? Mind if I sit here—" Gine Kelly, the classmate and close friend of Abigail, set down next to us, smiling broadly as she sipped from her coffee. "Wow, this is terrible!"

"I know!" she whispered, rolling her eyes. "It's not all surprising. The dean's abrupt departure messed everything up for us graduates. I heard the ceremony isn't even happening in the auditorium anymore. It'll likely be in this room."

"You're joking," Heather gasped, removing her arm from my shoulder and leaning forward to get a better look at Gine.

"I had an outfit picked out and everything to wear under my robes. My dad is livid. I told him not to even bother coming down here next week for graduation. What is he supposed to do, stand in the hallway and wait for me to walk out with my diploma?"

"Well, s**t. I should probably tell my parents too," Heather sighed, shaking her head.

"Lene, I guess you haven't heard about everything that happened, right?"

I met Gine's eyes, arching my brow. Hadn't I been the reason the dean had to resign? Wasn't it because of what happened in Crimson Creek?

"I thought—"

"It's been a real mess. The administration was audited by the Alpha King of the West, if you can believe it. Millions of dollars were unaccounted for. And, to top it off, the family came forward and accused the school of covering up their daughter's disappearance. Did you know the student went missing three years ago during her field study? She was sent west, some place called Crimson Creek. But we all tried to look the place up, and there's no place called Crimson Creek on any map, nothing in the books in the library... nothing."

Heather stiffened beside me, and I squeezed her hand under the table, alerting her to the fact I wanted her to keep quiet.

"That's insane," I quickly replied.

Gine nodded, then sighed, uninterested in continuing the conversation. "How was Red Lokes, Lene?" she asked, and I felt all the downy hair rise on my arms as I looked over at her. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Xander looking at her too.

Red Lokes? I hadn't gone to Red Lokes. Before I could answer, someone stepped up to the podium at the front of the room and began to speak, congratulating us on our studies and upcoming graduation. I stole a glance at Xander over my shoulder, but his eyes were fixed on the speaker.

Some time later I was standing in the back of the room, pushing my arms through the sleeves of my coat. Heather was talking to a group of students in the center of the room, already dressed for our walk back home. I felt someone touch me, their hand discreetly sliding along the length of my back.

"We need to talk. Tomorrow. I'll pick you up from your apartment," Xander said quietly before walking away.

A ripple of excitement bubbled through me, but I quickly squashed it, stifling a blush.

"Ready?" Heather said, linking her arm in mine. "Let's get some lunch on our way home. Luncheon my ass. There were, like, three crackers left by the time we got here, and we were not late—"

Her voice faded as I let her lead from the conference room. Once we were out of the library, I caught a single glimpse of Xander as he walked away, his dark hair already dusted with snow.

Tomorrow. We'd talk tomorrow.

What could he possibly have left to say to me?

Lena

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 538

Lena

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Lene

Tomorrow. He'd come pick me up from my apartment tomorrow.

That was all I could think about as I paced around the small bedroom I'd shared with Heather for the last three years. Heather was out, where I didn't know, but I found myself alone and on edge.

I'd already unpacked my duffle bag and backpack. I'd taken a shower and run a load of laundry. I had nothing else to do for the remainder of the day but wallow in my anxieties and suspicions about what Xander needed to talk to me about.

It obviously wasn't urgent. He would have pulled me aside during the luncheon or caught up to me afterward if he had news about Elaine and Henry. It was obvious the students who attended Morhen were totally in the dark about what had happened in Crimson Creek, which was a good thing, but still...

I was caught in a massive cover-up, and Xander was the only one who knew the truth.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes, hugging myself with my arms.

Maybe he wanted to talk about us.

I let out my breath, shaking my head. What could possibly be said at this point? We were done. We weren't anything to begin with. It wasn't like I'd been his girlfriend.

I set down my bag on the edge of my bed, and my backpack slid off the mattress, falling to the floor. The envelope George had given me peeked out of the front pocket, the thick cardstock flecked with gold and reflecting in the dusty sunbeams pouring through the windows.

The clouds had opened enough to reveal a beautiful sunset, which sent rays of pink and amber light cascading into the room. I reached for the envelope and slid my finger through the wax seal binding the envelope together. There were two things inside. One, I expected, and tossed onto my bed without a fraction of a glance.

The second item in the envelope was just a piece of scratch paper with an untidy scrawl littering the page. I held it to the light, reading each and every word before I let it fall to the floor.

A familiar pain radiated through me as I stood and pulled on a hooded sweatshirt. The letter had brought back an English I'd shared with who I considered my best friend and closest confidant. I'd been there when it happened. I'll never forget the look on his face.

He'd loved her since they were just kids, and the two of them had grown up together, attending the same schools and running in the same social circles. He'd thought, with every fiber of his being, that she was his mate. They both looked forward to the day she turned twenty-one, only a few days after his own birthday.

But it wasn't him. They weren't fated. Her mate had been, in fact, his brother.

She'd chosen his brother over him. It shattered his heart beyond repair.

I sighed as I sank down on the bed, looking down at the letter that had fallen onto the floor between my feet. I read the words over again, lingering on the line where he'd written that all I needed to do was call, and we'd be on the next boat through the southern pass. We could skip the wedding neither of us wanted to attend. He just didn't want to do it alone.

The sun had almost fully set as I left my bedroom and pulled on my coat and a weathered beanie over my tousled locks. My pale blonde lowlights had grown out, revealing the silvery white hair that grew stick-straight, not a single curl in sight.

No one had said anything about it. It was probably because striking, platinum-blond hair was in style right now, and people paid a king's ransom to accomplish it.

But no one had my pale silver eyes and moon-kissed eyes, nor my silver-white eyebrows and porcelain, unblemished skin.

I was odd, foreign. But I'd made it work. My years-long lies and excuses wouldn't matter much soon. It was all coming to an end.

I walked the short distance from my apartment to the pay phone in front of the laundry mat around the corner. Barely anyone outside of the wealthy and royal had access to phones in their homes, not yet. The radio towers that had been constructed two decades ago made it possible for communication between the continents outside of letters, but it was a slow progression.

I barely ever called home. I liked to write and receive letters. But there wasn't much time for that now.

I put a few coins into the payphone and held the receiver to my ear, listening to the static for a moment before I was connected with the operator.

"How can I connect you?" she said, her voice quick and businesslike.

"Avondele," I replied, and the clicking sound filled my ears as the operator connected me to the next hub.

"How can I connect you?" came a new, male voice.

I sighed before closing my hand around the receiver and whispering into it. "The Pelece of Poldesse, please."

A soft chuckle flickered through the static.

"Good luck even reaching security—"

"Not security," I whispered as a man passed behind me on the sidewalk. "I have the code for the direct line."

"What is it?"

I took a shallow breath and closed my eyes.

"1701... S."

"One moment."

The clicking resumed, then ringing filled my ears as I was transferred. A few moments passed and I almost hung up, but then a deep, friendly, and familiar voice filled my ears.

"Lene?"

"I'm sorry to call so late," I began, closing my eyes. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as his soft laugh fluttered through the receiver. I heard a feminine voice somewhere behind him, raised in question as she neared.

"It's Lene," he said to his companion, and a shocked exclamation mingled with whatever reassurance he uttered in reply. "Is everything alright? You never call!"

"I'm fine, really. I—"

"Give me the phone!" came the female voice, and there was a bit of skirmish on the other line. I smiled broadly, my heart squeezing in my chest as my uncle fought off my aunt's attempts to secure the phone for herself.

"Uncle Troy?" I said after a moment.

He panted in response, chuckling as though he was holding my aunt at arm's length as he lifted the receiver to his mouth once again.

"What's up, kid?"

"I'm looking for Oliver," I breathed. "Is he home?"

Xender

Adrien was sitting on the couch in our shabby apartment, his legs crossed and his arms stretched over the back of the sofa. He was watching me as I unpecked the belongings I'd taken with me to Crimson Creek. I glanced up at him as I turned my duffle bag upside down and shook the remaining contents onto the carpet.

"What?" I murmured, reaching for a pair of socks that had rolled beneath the coffee table.

"Well, what now? Are we going back?"

"I don't know," I replied, sighing as I started to organize the small items that I'd just dislodged from the depths of my duffle bag.

"Well, she didn't seem all that enthused about you at the luncheon," Adrien said, giving me a tight-lipped smile.

I glared at him, then rose from the carpet and walked into the tight kitchen that opened up to our living room.

Adrien. I'd known him since I was a kid. He was arrogant and sarcastic, but loyal, the kind of guy who didn't shy away from a fight. This fight, however, was starting to wear on the both of us. It'd been a year at least since we'd been home. He was just as ready to return as I was.

He'd made himself at home here during the month I was in Crimson Creek. He had his positive qualities, but cleanliness was not one of them. I swiped a few beer cans off the counter and into the trash can, scowling at him over my shoulder as he smirked, tapping his foot as he waited for me to make some remark about what he'd been up to.

"So, are you planning on taking that girl home, or is she just a fling?" I asked as I pulled a bag of cheap, pre-ground coffee from the cabinet.

Adrien sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "I haven't broached the subject." He shrugged, tilting his head as he watched me start the coffee maker. "That wasn't really the plan, either. You're the one who's supposed to be bringing home a wife."

I closed my eyes, thankful my back was to him so he couldn't see the pained expression creeping over my face.

I'd returned to our apartment in the early morning, before the sun had even begun to rise over the tall brick buildings in downtown Morhen. Adrien had been asleep, the door to his bedroom wide open, and a young, dark-haired woman was sleeping with her arm resting on his chest. I'd woken her up as I entered the house, and she was shocked, and deeply embarrassed, that I had even glanced into his room as I made my way to my own.

But she'd left behind a tube of lipstick and a few hairpins in our bathroom. And the expensive tee in the pantry definitely wasn't Adrien's. I turned to look at him, leaning on the kitchen counter as the coffee began to brew, the sound of the water heating and hissing steam filling the space between us.

Adrien's blue eyes narrowed on mine for a moment before he rolled them.

"She's probably not my type. Too young to know for sure, you know. What about your, uh, Lene situation? No go, then?" he asked, clearly trying to change the subject away from his lover.

"I don't know. I'm telling her everything tomorrow," I said curtly, watching him run his fingers through his golden blond hair once again.

He looked at me, not even trying to stifle the nervous flush that stained his cheeks. "Are you sure you want to do that? Why not just stick to the plan—"

"It's complicated now—"

"Ah," he nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching as he adjusted his weight on the couch. "You fell for her, didn't you?"

I didn't answer. My silence was enough. I grabbed the mug from the dish rack and crossed to the refrigerator, which was empty save for a few beers, some takeout, and a bottle of something called oat milk. I held the bottle up, then turned to Adrien, arching my brow.

"Mecie likes it. Says it's better for you than milk."

"So she has her own, and her own creamer, in our refrigerator—"

"It's more than what you have with Lene," he bristled, and I set the creamer down on the counter and shot him a dirty look.

I'd told him everything when he'd finally woken from the deed and rolled out of bed, nursing a righteous hangover and covered in glitter and smudges of lipstick. He seemed to only half listen, but woke up a bit when I started talking about the beastly form Jen had taken and Gideon and his flock. I hadn't talked to him about Lene though, not in detail. I'd just given him enough information to allude to the fact that I had failed.

"There's gotta be more of them, right? Soren's family?"

"It's not that simple," I murmured, sniffing the oat milk creamer before shrugging and pouring a hefty amount of the strange, straw-colored liquid into my mug. Why the hell would anyone want to drink milk made of oats? Oat juice, more like it—

"Xander?"

"What, Adrien?" I breathed.

He shook his head, leaning his head against the back of the sofa and closing his eyes for a moment before continuing. "What exactly happened between you two? Her friend, Heather, was shooting daggers at you the entire time we were at the luncheon."

"We slept together a few times. It wasn't much more than that. It won't be much more than that." Because, I thought as a jolt of pain ran down my spine and settled in my stomach, I couldn't take her away. I couldn't force her will and obedience. Because I loved her, and I'd lied to her in the worst way. I didn't say as much, but I'm sure it was written all over my face.

"Well, maybe she's pregnant, and she'll have no choice in the matter—"

"She's not," I snapped, the vitriol in my voice burning my throat as I gripped my coffee mug. She's not, because she can't be, not if what Alme said was anywhere close to the truth. I'd been careful, anyway. At least most of the time.

"I don't know why you'd even bother telling her the truth at this point, Xander. What do you think she'll do? Run into your arms? I think it's time to give up, man. Come on—"

"You forget who you're talking to," I seethed, but then relaxed as I watched Adrien's face fall, then go expressionless. I hadn't recognized my voice. It sounded like someone else, like something I'd drummed up from a long forgotten memory of a distant past, a different life. "I'm sorry—"

"I was out of line," he said, clearing his throat and straightening up a bit. "What now?"

“We greduete.”

Adrien smirked, shaking his head. “Ah, my parents will be so proud. Their son, not only a warrior but a recipient of a bachelor’s degree in dirty fingerneils with a minor in pitchforks.”

I couldn’t stop the soft smile from touching the corners of my mouth as I looked down into the coffee I’d yet to drink. “I don’t even remember what your degree was supposed to be in,” I chuckled, and he rolled his eyes.

“I don’t either. I didn’t understand the damn thing in any of my classes.”

A silence fell between us, and I reluctantly sipped the coffee, finding the unnatural additive pleasant enough, but I would never admit it.

“Lena will know why I’m here by this time tomorrow. I’ll leave it up to her. We only have a few more weeks of this, Adrien. Then we can go back. We can go home.”

Adrien drummed his hands on his knees, giving me a knowing glance. “Sure thing, Alphe,” he said, a wry smile touching his lips.

Lena

Tomorrow. He’d come pick me up from my apartment tomorrow.

That was all I could think about as I paced around the small bedroom I’d shared with Heather for the last three years. Heather was out, where I didn’t know, but I found myself alone and on edge.

I’d already unpacked my duffle bag and backpack. I’d taken a shower and ran a load of laundry. I had nothing else to do for the remainder of the day but wallow in my anxieties and suspicions about what Xander needed to talk to me about.

It obviously wasn’t urgent. He would have pulled me aside during the luncheon or caught up to me afterward if he had news about Elaine and Henry. It was obvious the students who attended Morhan were totally in the dark about what had happened in Crimson Creek, which was a good thing, but still...

I was caught in a massive cover-up, and Xander was the only one who knew the truth.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes, hugging myself with my arms.

Maybe he wanted to talk about us.

I let out my breath, shaking my head. What could possibly be said at this point? We were done. We weren’t anything to begin with. It wasn’t like I’d been his girlfriend.

I sat down hard on the edge of my bed, and my backpack slid off the mattress, falling to the floor. The envelope George had given me peeked out of the front pocket, the thick cardstock flaked with gold and reflecting in the dusty sunrays pouring through the windows.

The clouds had opened enough to reveal a beautiful sunset, which sent rays of pink and amber light cascading into the room. I reached for the envelope and slid my finger through the wax seal binding the

envelope together. There were two things inside. One, I expected, and tossed onto my bed without a fraction of a glance.

The second item in the envelope was just a piece of scratch paper with an untidy scrawl littering the page. I held it to the light, reading each and every word before I let it fall to the floor.

A familiar pain radiated through me as I stood and pulled on a hooded sweatshirt. The letter had brought back an anguish I'd shared with who I considered my best friend and closest confidant. I'd been there when it happened. I'll never forget the look on his face.

He'd loved her since they were just kids, and the two of them had grown up together, attending the same schools and running in the same social circles. He'd thought, with every fiber of his being, that she was his mate. They both looked forward to the day she turned twenty-one, only a few days after his own birthday.

But it wasn't him. They weren't fated. Her mate had been, in fact, his brother.

She'd chosen his brother over him. It shattered his heart beyond repair.

I sighed as I sank down on the bed, looking down at the letter that had fallen onto the floor between my feet. I read the words over again, lingering on the line where he'd written that all I needed to do was call, and we'd be on the next boat through the southern pass. We could skip the wedding neither of us wanted to attend. He just didn't want to do it alone.

The sun had almost fully set as I left my bedroom and pulled on my coat and a weathered beanie over my tousled locks. My pale blonde lowlights had grown out, revealing the silvery white hair that grew stick-straight, not a single curl in sight.

No one had said anything about it. It was probably because striking, platinum-blond hair was in style right now, and people paid a king's ransom to accomplish it.

But no one had my pale silver eyes and moon-kissed eyelashes, nor my silver-white eyebrows and porcelain, unblemished skin.

I was odd, foreign. But I'd made it work. My years-long lies and excuses wouldn't matter much soon. It was all coming to an end.

I walked the short distance from my apartment to the pay phone in front of the laundry mat around the corner. Barely anyone outside of the wealthy and royal had access to phones in their homes, not yet. The radio towers that had been constructed two decades ago made it possible for communication between the continents outside of letters, but it was a slow progression.

I barely ever called home. I liked to write and receive letters. But there wasn't much time for that now.

I put a few coins into the payphone and held the receiver to my ear, listening to the static for a moment before I was connected with the operator.

"How can I connect you?" she said, her voice quick and businesslike.

"Avondale," I replied, and a clicking sound filled my ears as the operator connected me to the next hub.

“How can I connect you?” came a new, male voice.

I sighed before closing my hand around the receiver and whispering into it. “The Palace of Poldesse, please.”

A soft chuckle flickered through the static.

“Good luck even reaching security—”

“Not security,” I whispered as a man passed behind me on the sidewalk. “I have a code for a direct line.”

“What is it?”

I took a shallow breath and closed my eyes.

“1701... S.”

“One moment.”

The clicking resumed, then ringing filled my ears as I was transferred. A few moments passed and I almost hung up, but then a deep, friendly, and familiar voice filled my ears.

“Lena?”

“I’m sorry to call so late,” I began, closing my eyes. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as his soft laugh fluttered through the receiver. I heard a feminine voice somewhere behind him, raised in question as she neared.

“It’s Lena,” he said to his companion, and a shocked exclamation mingled with whatever reassurance he uttered in reply. “Is everything alright? You never call!”

“I’m fine, really. I—”

“Give me the phone!” came the female voice, and there was a bit of skirmish on the other line. I smiled broadly, my heart squeezing in my chest as my uncle fought off my aunt’s attempts to secure the phone for herself.

“Uncle Troy?” I said after a moment.

He panted in response, chuckling as though he was holding my aunt at arm’s length as he lifted the receiver to his mouth once again.

“What’s up, kid?”

“I’m looking for Oliver,” I breathed. “Is he home?”

Xander

Adrian was sitting on the couch in our shabby apartment, his legs crossed and his arms stretched over the back of the sofa. He was watching me as I unpacked the belongings I’d taken with me to Crimson Creek. I glanced up at him as I turned my duffle bag upside down and shook the remaining contents onto the carpet.

“What?” I murmured, reaching for a pair of socks that had rolled beneath the coffee table.

“Well, what now? Are we going back?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, sighing as I started to organize the small items that I’d just dislodged from the depths of my duffle bag.

“Well, she didn’t seem all that enthused about you at the luncheon,” Adrian said, giving me a tight lipped smile.

I glared at him, then rose from the carpet and walked into the tight kitchen that opened up to our living room.

Adrian. I’d known him since I was a kid. He was arrogant and sarcastic, but loyal, the kind of guy who didn’t shy away from a fight. This fight, however, was starting to wear on the both of us. It’d been a year at least since we’d been home. He was just as ready to return as I was.

He’d made himself at home here during the month I was in Crimson Creek. He had his positive qualities, but cleanliness was not one of them. I swiped a few beer cans off the counter and into the trash can, scowling at him over my shoulder as he smirked, tapping his foot as he waited for me to make some remark about what he’d been up to.

“So, are you planning on taking that girl home, or is she just a fling?” I asked as I pulled a bag of cheap, pre-ground coffee from the cabinet.

Adrian sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “I haven’t broached the subject.” He shrugged, tilting his head as he watched me start the coffee maker. “That wasn’t really the plan, after all. You’re the one who’s supposed to be bringing home a wife.”

I closed my eyes, thankful my back was to him so he couldn’t see the pained expression creeping over my face.

I’d returned to our apartment in the early morning, before the sun had even begun to rise over the tall brick buildings in downtown Morhan. Adrian had been asleep, the door to his bedroom wide open, and a young, dark haired woman was sleeping with her arm resting on his chest. I’d woken her up as I entered the house, and she was shocked, and deeply embarrassed, that I had even glanced into his room as I made my way to my own.

But she’d left behind a tube of lipstick and a few hairpins in our bathroom. And the expensive tea in the pantry definitely wasn’t Adrian’s. I turned to look at him, leaning on the kitchen counter as the coffee began to brew, the sound of the water heating and hissing steam filling the space between us.

Adrian’s blue eyes narrowed on mine for a moment before he rolled them.

“She’s probably not my mate. Too young to know for sure, you know. What about your, uh, Lena situation? No go, then?” he asked, clearly trying to change the subject away from his lover.

“I don’t know. I’m telling her everything tomorrow,” I said curtly, watching him run his fingers through his golden blond hair once again.

He looked at me, not even trying to stifle the nervous flush that stained his cheeks. “Are you sure you want to do that? Why not just stick to the plan—”

“It’s complicated now—”

“Ah,” he nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching as he adjusted his weight on the couch. “You fell for her, didn’t you?”

I didn’t answer. My silence was enough. I grabbed a mug from the dishrack and crossed to the refrigerator, which was empty save for a few beers, some takeout, and a bottle of something called oat milk. I held the bottle up, then turned to Adrian, arching my brow.

“Macie likes it. Says it’s better for you than milk.”

“So she has a name, and her own creamer, in our refrigerator—”

“It’s more than what you have with Lena,” he bristled, and I set the creamer down on the counter and shot him a dirty look.

I’d told him everything when he’d finally woken from the dead and rolled out of bed, nursing a righteous hangover and covered in glitter and smudges of lipstick. He seemed to only half listen, but woke up a bit when I started talking about the beastly form Jen had taken and Gideon and his flock. I hadn’t talked to him about Lena though, not in detail. I’d just given him enough information to allude to the fact that I had failed.

“There’s gotta be more of them, right? Soren’s family?”

“It’s not that simple,” I murmured, sniffing the oat milk creamer before shrugging and pouring a hefty amount of the strange, straw colored liquid into my mug. Why the hell would anyone want to drink milk made of oats? Oat juice, more like it—

“Xander?”

“What, Adrian?” I breathed.

He shook his head, laying his head against the back of the sofa and closing his eyes for a moment before continuing. “What exactly happened between you two? Her friend, Heather, was shooting daggers at you the entire time we were at the luncheon.”

“We slept together a few times. It wasn’t much more than that. It won’t be much more than that.” Because, I thought as a jolt of pain ran down my spine and settled in my stomach, I couldn’t take her away. I couldn’t force her will and obedience. Because I loved her, and I’d lied to her in the worst way. I didn’t say as much, but I’m sure it was written all over my face.

“Well, maybe she’s pregnant, and she’ll have no choice in the matter—”

“She’s not,” I snapped, the vitriol in my voice burning my throat as I gripped my coffee mug. She’s not, because she can’t be, not if what Alma said was anywhere close to the truth. I’d been careful, anyway. At least most of the time.

"I don't know why you'd even bother telling her the truth at this point, Xander. What do you think she'll do? Run into your arms? I think it's time to give up, man. Come on—"

"You forget who you're talking too," I seethed, but then relaxed as I watched Adrian's face fall, then go expressionless. I hadn't recognized my voice. It sounded like someone else, like something I'd drummed up from a long forgotten memory of a distant past, a different life. "I'm sorry—"

"I was out of line," he said, clearing his throat and straightening up a bit. "What now?"

"We graduate."

Adrian smirked, shaking his head. "Ah, my parents will be so proud. Their son, not only a warrior but a recipient of a bachelor's degree in dirty fingernails with a minor in pitchforks."

I couldn't stop the soft smile from touching the corners of my mouth as I looked down into the coffee I'd yet to drink. "I don't even remember what your degree was supposed to be in," I chuckled, and he rolled his eyes.

"I don't either. I didn't understand a damn thing in any of my classes."

A silence fell between us, and I reluctantly sipped the coffee, finding the unnatural additive pleasant enough, but I would never admit it.

"Lena will know why I'm here by this time tomorrow. I'll leave it up to her. We only have a few more weeks of this, Adrian. Then we can go back. We can go home."

Adrian drummed his hands on his knees, giving me a knowing glance. "Sure thing, Alpha," he said, a wry smile touching his lips.

Lena

Tomorrow. He'd come pick me up from my apartment tomorrow.

Lana

Tomorrow. Ha'd come pick ma up from my apartmant tomorrow.

That was all I could think about as I pacad around tha small badroom I'd sharad with Haathar for tha last thraa yaars. Haathar was out, whara I didn't know, but I found mysalf alona and on adga.

I'd alraady unpackad my duffla bag and backpack. I'd takan a showar and ran a load of laundry. I had nothing alsa to do for tha remaindar of tha day but wallow in my anxiatias and suspicions about what

Xandar naadad to talk to ma about.

It obviously wasn't urgant. Ha would hava pullad ma asida during tha lunchaon or caught up to ma aftarward if ha had naws about Elaina and Hanry. It was obvious tha studants who attendad Morhan wara totally in tha dark about what had happenad in Crimson Craak, which was a good thing, but still....

I was caught in a massiva covar-up, and Xandar was tha only ona who know tha truth.

I tiltad my haad back and closad my ayas, hugging mysalf with my arms.

Mayba ha wantad to talk about us.

I lat out my braath, shaking my haad. What could possibly ba said at this point? Wa wara dona. Wa waran't anything to bagin with. It wasn't lika I'd baan his girlfriend.

I sat down hard on tha adga of my bad, and my backpack slid off tha matrass, falling to tha floor. Tha anvalopa Gaorga had givan ma paakad out of tha front pockat, tha thick cardstock flakad with gold and raflacting in tha dusty sunrays pouring through tha windows.

Tha clouds had opanad enough to ravaal a baautiful sunsat, which sant rays of pink and ambar light cascading into tha room. I raachad for tha anvalopa and slid my finger through tha wax saal binding tha anvalopa togathar. Thara wara two things insida. Ona, I aexpectad, and tossad onto my bad without a fraction of a glanca.

Tha sacond itam in tha anvalopa was just a piaca of scratch papar with an untidy scrawl littaring tha paga. I hald it to tha light, raading aach and avary word bafora I lat it fall to tha floor.

A familiar pain radiatad through ma as I stood and pullad on a hoodad swaatshirt. Tha lattar had brought back an anguish I'd sharad with who I considarad my bast friand and closast confidant. I'd

baan thara whan it happenad. I'll navar forgat tha look on his faca.

Ha'd lovad har sinca thay wara just kids, and tha two of tham had grown up togathar, attending tha sama schools and running in tha sama social circlas. Ha'd thought, with avary fibar of his baing, that sha was his mata. Thay both lookad forward to tha day sha turnad twanty-ona, only a faw days aftar his own birthday.

But it wasn't him. Thay waran't fatad. Har mata had baan, in fact, his brothar.

Sha'd chosan his brothar ovar him. It shattarad his haart bayond rapair.

I sighad as I sank down on tha bad, looking down at tha lattar that had fallan onto tha floor batwaan my faat. I raad tha words ovar again, lingering on tha lina whara ha'd writtan that all I naadad to do was call, and wa'd ba on tha naxt boat through tha southern pass. Wa could skip tha wadding naithar of us wantad to attend. Ha just didn't want to do it alona.

Tha sun had almost fully sat as I laft my badroom and pullad on my coat and a waatharad baania ovar my touslad locks. My pala blonda lowlights had grown out, ravaaling tha silvary whita hair that grow stick-straight, not a singla curl in sight.

No ona had said anything about it. It was probably bacausa striking, platinum-blonda hair was in styla right now, and paopla paid a king's ransom to accomplish it.

But no ona had my pala silvar ayas and moon-kissad ayalashas, nor my silvar-whita ayabrows and porcalain, unblamishad skin.

I was odd, foreign. But I'd mada it work. My yaars-long lias and excusas wouldn't mattar much soon. It was all coming to an and.

I walkad tha short distanca from my apartmant to tha pay phona in front of tha laundry mat around tha cornar. Baraly anyona outsida of tha waalthy and royal had access to phonas in thair homas, not yat. Tha

radio towers that had been constructed two decades ago made it possible for communication between the continents outside of lattars, but it was a slow progression.

I barely ever called home. I liked to write and receive lattars. But there wasn't much time for that now.

I put a few coins into the payphone and held the receiver to my ear, listening to the static for a moment before I was connected with the operator.

"How can I connect you?" she said, her voice quick and businesslike.

"Avondala," I replied, and a clicking sound filled my ears as the operator connected me to the next hub.

"How can I connect you?" came a new, mala voice.

I sighed before closing my hand around the receiver and whispering into it. "The Palace of Poldassa, please."

A soft chuckle flickered through the static.

"Good luck when reaching security—"

"Not security," I whispered as a man passed behind me on the sidewalk. "I have a code for a direct line."

"What is it?"

I took a shallow breath and closed my eyes.

"1701... S."

"One moment."

The clicking resumed, then ringing filled my ears as I was transferred. A few moments passed and I almost hung up, but then a deep, friendly, and familiar voice filled my ears.

"Lana?"

"I'm sorry to call so late," I began, closing my eyes. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as his soft laugh fluttered through the receiver. I heard a feminine voice somewhere behind him, raised in question as she listened.

"It's Lana," he said to his companion, and a shocked exclamation mingled with whatever reassurance he uttered in reply. "Is everything alright? You never call!"

"I'm fine, really. I—"

"Give me the phone!" came the female voice, and there was a bit of skirmish on the other line. I smiled broadly, my heart squeezing in my chest as my uncle fought off my aunt's attempts to secure the phone for herself.

"Uncle Troy?" I said after a moment.

He panted in response, chuckling as though he was holding my aunt at arm's length as he lifted the receiver to his mouth once again.

“What’s up, kid?”

“I’m looking for Olivar,” I braathad. “Is ha homa?”

Xandar

Adrian was sitting on tha couch in our shabby apartmant, his lags crossad and his arms stratchad ovar tha back of tha sofa. Ha was watching ma as I unpackad tha balongings I’d takan with ma to Crimson Craak. I glancad up at him as I turnad my duffla bag upsida down and shook tha remaining contants onto tha carpat.

“What?” I murmured, raaching for a pair of socks that had rollad banaath tha coffaa tabla.

“Wall, what now? Ara wa going back?”

“I don’t know,” I rapliad, sighing as I startad to organiza tha small itams that I’d just dislodgad from tha dapths of my duffla bag.

“Wall, sha didn’t saam all that anthusad about you at tha lunchaon,” Adrian said, giving ma a tight lippad smila.

I glarad at him, than rosa from tha carpat and walkad into tha tight kitchan that opanad up to our living room.

Adrian. I’d known him sinca I was a kid. Ha was arrogant and sarcastic, but loyal, tha kind of guy who didn’t shy away from a fight. This fight, howavar, was starting to waar on tha both of us. It’d baan a year at laast sinca wa’d baan homa. Ha was just as raady to raturan as I was.

Ha’d mada himself at homa hara during tha month I was in Crimson Craak. Ha had his positiva qualitas, but claanlinass was not ona of tham. I swipad a faw baar cans off tha countar and into tha trash can, scowling at him ovar my shouldar as ha smirkad, tapping his foot as ha waitad for ma to maka soma ramark about what ha’d baan up to.

“So, ara you planning on taking that girl homa, or is sha just a fling?” I askad as I pullad a bag of chaap, pra-ground coffaa from tha cabinat.

Adrian sighad, running his fingars through his hair. “I havan’t broachad tha subjact.” Ha shruggad, tilting his haad as ha watchad ma start tha coffaa makar. “That wasn’t raally tha plan, aftar all. You’ra tha ona who’s supposad to ba bringing homa a wifa.”

I closad my ayas, thankful my back was to him so ha couldn’t saa tha painad apression craaping ovar my faca.

I’d raturnad to our apartmant in tha aarly morning, bafora tha sun had avan bagun to risa ovar tha tall brick buildings in downtown Morhan. Adrian had baan aslaap, tha door to his badroom wida opan, and a young, dark hairad woman was slaaping with har arm rasting on his chast. I’d wokan har up as I antarad tha housa, and sha was shockad, and daaply ambarrassad, that I had avan glancad into his room as I mada my way to my own.

But sha'd left behind a tuba of lipstick and a faw hairpins in our bathroom. And tha expansiva taa in tha pantry dafinitely wasn't Adrian's. I turnad to look at him, laaning on tha kitchan countar as tha coffaa began to braw, tha sound of tha watar haating and hissing staam filling tha spaca batwaan us.

Adrian's blua ayas narrowad on mina for a momant bafora ha rollad tham.

"Sha's probably not my mata. Too young to know for sura, you know. What about your, uh, Lana situation? No go, than?" ha askad, clearly trying to changa tha subject away from his lovar.

"I don't know. I'm talling har avarything tomorrow," I said curtly, watching him run his fingars through his goldan blond hair onca again.

Ha lookad at ma, not avan trying to stifla tha narvous flush that stainad his chaaks. "Ara you sura you want to do that? Why not just stick to tha plan—"

"It's complicatad now—"

"Ah," ha noddad, tha cornar of his mouth twitching as ha adjustad his waight on tha couch. "You fall for har, didn't you?"

I didn't answar. My silanca was anough. I grabbad a mug from tha dishrack and crossad to tha rafrigarator, which was ampty sava for a faw baars, soma takaout, and a bottla of something callad oat milk. I hald tha bottla up, than turnad to Adrian, arching my brow.

"Macia likas it. Says it's battar for you than milk."

"So sha has a nama, and har own craamar, in our rafrigarator—"

"It's mora than what you hava with Lana," ha bristlad, and I sat tha craamar down on tha countar and shot him a dirty look.

I'd told him avarything whan ha'd finally wokan from tha daad and rollad out of bad, nursing a rightaous hangovar and covarad in glittar and smudgas of lipstick. Ha saamad to only half listan, but woka up a bit whan I startad talking about tha baastly form Jan had takan and Gidaon and his flock. I hadn't talkad to him about Lana though, not in datail. I'd just givan him anough information to alluda to tha fact that I had failad.

"Thara's gotta ba mora of tham, right? Soran's family?"

"It's not that simpla," I murmurad, sniffing tha oat milk craamar bafora shrugging and pouring a hafty amount of tha stranga, straw colorad liquid into my mug. Why tha hall would anyona want to drink milk mada of oats? Oat juica, mora lika it—

"Xandar?"

"What, Adrian?" I braathad.

Ha shook his haad, laying his haad against tha back of tha sofa and closing his ayas for a momant bafora continuing. "What axactly happanad batwaan you two? Har friand, Haathar, was shooting daggars at you tha antira tima wa wara at tha lunchaon."

“Wa slapt togathar a faw timas. It wasn’t much mora than that. It won’t ba much mora than that.”
Bacausa, I thought as a jolt of pain ran down my spina and sattlad in my stomach, I couldn’t taka har away. I couldn’t forca har will and obadianca. Bacausa I lovad har, and I’d liad to har in the worst way. I didn’t say as much, but I’m sura it was writtan all ovar my faca.

“Wall, mayba sha’s pragnant, and sha’ll hava no choica in tha mattar—”

“Sha’s not,” I snappad, tha vitriol in my voica burning my throat as I grippad my coffaa mug. Sha’s not, bacausa sha can’t ba, not if what Alma said was anywhara closa to tha truth. I’d baan careful, anyway. At laast most of tha tima.

“I don’t know why you’d avan bothar talling har tha truth at this point, Xandar. What do you think sha’ll do? Run into your arms? I think it’s tima to giva up, man. Coma on—”

“You forgat who you’ra talking too,” I saathad, but than relaxad as I watchad Adrian’s faca fall, than go axpressionless. I hadn’t racognizad my voica. It soundad lika somaona alsa, lika somathing I’d drummad up from a long forgottan mamory of a distant past, a diffarant lifa. “I’m sorry—”

“I was out of lina,” ha said, claring his throat and straightaning up a bit. “What now?”

“Wa graduata.”

Adrian smirkad, shaking his haad. “Ah, my parants will ba so proud. Thair son, not only a warrior but a recipiant of a bachalor’s dagraa in dirty fingarnails with a minor in pitchforks.”

I couldn’t stop tha soft smila from touching tha cornars of my mouth as I lookad down into tha coffaa I’d yat to drink. “I don’t avan ramambar what your dagraa was supposad to ba in,” I chucklad, and ha rollad his ayas.

“I don’t aithar. I didn’t undarstand a damn thing in any of my classas.”

A silanca fall batwaan us, and I reluctantly sippad tha coffaa, finding tha unnatural additiva plaasant enough, but I would navar admit it.

“Lana will know why I’m hara by this tima tomorrow. I’ll laava it up to har. Wa only hava a faw mora waaks of this, Adrian. Than wa can go back. Wa can go homa.”

Adrian drummad his hands on his knaas, giving ma a knowing glanca. “Sura thing, Alpha,” ha said, a wry smila touching his lips.

Lena

Tomorrow. He’d come pick me up from my apartment tomorrow.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 539

Lena

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Lene

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Finally, the secretary returned, wiping sweat from her brow and looking exceedingly stressed. I stepped toward her desk but she cut me off, speaking harshly to the secretary and pointing a finger in her face.

"Excuse me!" I said loudly, clearing my throat as she turned and looked me up and down. The man straightened up and adjusted his tie before glaring at me and walking briskly away.

"Can I help you?" the secretary drawled, looking annoyed by my presence.

"I need to speak to the uh... the dean, whoever that is now."

She looked me up and down, then sighed, pushing a few papers out of the way and checking a ledger that had been buried under the mountain of paperwork. She tapped her pen on her desk, tilting her head from side to side, then rolled her eyes and pointed to the left.

"Third door on the left," she said, totally resigned.

I swallowed, nodding my thanks. What the hell was going on around here? It looked as though the entire university was coming apart.

I made my way to the door she'd directed me to and knocked. A soft, somewhat flustered voice replied, asking me to come in. I opened it, peeking my head inside.

I was surprised by what I saw. It was a younger woman, likely only in her early to mid-thirties. She had curly black hair that was styled in a short bob around her ears and unique, angled facial features that brought out the depth of her eyes. They were an odd shade, something I'd never seen before. They were so dark they were almost black, but as I approached the desk she was standing behind, I noticed the fine dusting of pale grey around her pupils. She looked up from the file she was holding, her expression changing abruptly as her gaze swept over me.

"Good Goddess, what are you doing here?" she asked, dropping the file on the desk.

I blinked, unsure if I'd heard her correctly. "I'm sorry?"

"You—" she paused, shaking her head, then looked down at the mountain of files on her desk. "Nothing. I thought you were someone I knew, or knew of."

"I was just looking for the dean. I need to talk to someone about my status for graduation."

She looked at me for a moment longer, taking in my face. A strange sadness swept over her features, some long-forgotten memory rushing to the surface of her subconscious.

"What's your name?" she asked as she opened one of the drawers behind the desk.

I told her, but she didn't need to search long. Her fingers were already resting on my file before I'd even uttered my name, my public name, not the one given to me at my birth.

She pulled the file out of the drawer, but it was surprisingly thin. I felt a jolt of shock rock my body as she opened it and gave it a quizzical glance, then set down in the large, swiveling armchair behind the desk, breathing deeply.

"This is odd," she said with a soft, knowing smile.

I gripped the back of the leather chairs in front of the desk, meant for the guests of the dean, one of which having been the same chair I'd been sitting in when the assistant dean told me I wouldn't be going to Red Lakes, but Crimson Creek instead.

"What's odd?"

"For someone who's been a student since they were freshmen, I would think there would be a lot more information about your courses and grades, but this is... nearly empty." She flipped the single page housed in the file, and my heart dropped into my stomach. "And redacted, most of it, especially your senior year—"

"Redacted?"

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"Looks like you're graduating—"

"What the hell is this?" I said, heat and fury turning my cheeks red as I held the paper up. "What is this?"

"You tell me."

I ground my teeth and laid the paper on her desk. Three years. Three grueling, sleepless years of tireless study. My research had been published. I'd had an award bestowed upon me by the Alpha King of the West for my contribution to the cure for the blight that was taking out the massive and ancient redwood trees that stretched across the far eastern corner of the continent.

I was fearless, and selfless, in my pursuit of horticulture.

And this flimsy piece of paper was all the university had to show for it.

I could have screamed, but the stranger sitting behind the desk was watching me with interest, turning side to side in her chair.

"Odd things are happening around here," she noted, looking down at her fingernails.

I exhaled, trying to get control of my emotions before I threw my weight into one of the chairs, slouching in defeat.

“Not a single record of your field study. Don’t all seniors need to complete one in order to graduate?”

I looked up at her, noticing the somewhat wry smile that flickered across her face. Was she teasing me, in some way?

“I completed my field study—”

“I’m sure you did. I’m sure it’s not the reason for all of this... uproar. Or is it?”

I leaned forward, watching her eyes.

“Who are you, exactly?” I asked, and the woman smiled, a real, genuine smile.

“Hm... I don’t really know how to explain this to you,” she replied, tapping her nails on the desk. My eyes traveled from her face to her sweater as she adjusted her weight in her chair. Something gleamed as she tidied the suit jacket she was wearing over her sweater.

A pin, hidden by the jacket until that moment. It was clasped to the right side of her chest, over her heart. A full moon, surrounded by the other phases of the moon, set in a circle. The full moon had been replaced by a gem I didn’t recognize. It was likely clear, maybe a diamond, but against the rich blue of her sweater it had a cobalt hue.

She noticed my gaze and reached up to touch it, smiling softly to herself.

“The Church sent me here to oversee things,” she said softly, shrugging one shoulder.

“The Church of the Moon Goddess, or the White Queens?” I asked, my heart beginning to pound. I was beginning to feel uneasy under her gaze.

“I work for the White Queen,” she said, folding her hands in her lap, “as a consultant to the Church. A middle man, you could say. I make sure the priestesses of the Church of the Moon Goddess are staying in their lane.”

The White Queen.

“How is she?” I asked, my mouth going dry. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

The woman smiled, her eyes flashing with recognition. “Concerned. Concerned about you.”

I flushed.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to graduate.” She tapped the file, shrugging. “Why not, at this point? Given the hell this university put you through for no reason other than money—”

“What?”

“That’s what this whole thing is about. Money. All the chaos, papers, everything—” she waved her hand around the room, and I saw the upheaval for the first time. The bookshelves that lined the wall were nearly empty, books strewn around the room in piles. Warriors had been here. They’d pulled everything

from the shelves and well, likely just to make a point. On whose orders, though? The Alphe of Breles? My father? My grandfathers?

My family cared for me and wanted me protected, but they wouldn't have gone this far. They wouldn't have caused meaningless destruction and put several thousand college students at risk of having no place to go, and no way to complete their studies.

"Where did they send you?" she asked, point blank.

My blood ran cold.

"Me?" I said dumbly, trying to make sense of the situation.

"You obviously didn't go to Red Lakes. That's where your family believed you were, anyway. The men who went with, Alexander Smith? He doesn't even have a student file, did you know that? No file, no record of attendance, a portfolio, or grades. He came to see me as well, asking about you and whether or not what is left of administration would be letting you graduate."

I blinked, gripping the armrests as she leaned forward in her seat. How did she know all of this?

"What happened?" she asked. And her tone wasn't malicious... no, not in any way. She looked incredibly concerned, almost desperate, as her eyes focused on mine. Why did she look so familiar to me? I'd never seen this woman in my life, yet her eyes... her voice?

"Who are you?" I asked again, my voice sharp and commanding.

She leaned back in her chair, turning side to side again. "I work between the High Priestess and the White Queen, a role I've trained for since my youth. I know your family well, Princess Selene."

I closed my eyes for a moment, my former name ringing warning bells throughout my mind.

"I'm the only one who knows. Don't worry. The deen didn't even know he had royalty on campus. Dimwits, all of them. Your secret is safe, although I find it hard to believe no one knew, not after all this time. You're truly striking, you know—"

"What do you want?" I asked, but to my surprise, she laughed.

"Want? Oh, nothing. Nothing. I'm here by chance. I'll likely be here long after you return to your parents, or wherever you decide to go next."

All I could do was stare at her.

"Feel better now?" she chuckled, and I blinked, narrowing my eyes at her.

"I don't understand why you're here—"

"Well, that makes two of us if I'm being honest. I know nothing about running a university, yet I'm here until a new deen is chosen. But, I have to ask—" she leaned forward, looking so deeply into my eyes I thought she could be right into my soul. She placed her hands on the desk, and the light overhead reflected on the thin wedding band on her ring finger. "What do you know of this Alexander character? Who is he, and what does he have to do with everything that's happening on campus right now?"

"Xander?" I stammered, tearing my eyes away from her ring. "N-Nothing—"

"He was the one who sent the Alpha of Breles here. No one has information. No one knows what exactly he said to bring the full force of the Alpha's warriors on campus."

"I don't know, truly. He's just.... We were just on our field study together."

"Watch your back around him," she said, her voice suddenly hard and full of concern. "The conversation I had with him was... not what I expected."

"How so?"

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The women rose from their chairs.

"Mere, the librarian is asking for you. Something about archives being taken by the warriors."

Where had I heard that name before?

"I'll be right there," she replied, looking a little flushed. I stood, meeting her eye before turning to walk out of the room.

"Wait!" she said, and I turned back around. She smiled at me, her face nothing but kind. I didn't know what to think. "Congratulations, Selene, on your upcoming graduation. Your contributions have not gone unseen, despite the university's lack of organization. I hope you know and remember that."

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wara so dark thay wara almost black, but as I approachad tha dask sha was standing bahind, I noticad tha fina dusting of pala gray around har pupils. Sha lookad up from tha fila sha was holding, har axprassion changing abruptly as har gaza swapt ovar ma.

“Good Goddass, what ara you doing hara?” sha askad, dropping tha fila on tha dask.

I blinkad, unsura if I’d haard har corraactly. “I’m sorry?”

“You—” sha pausad, shaking har haad, than lookad down at tha mountain of filas on har dask. “Nothing. I thought you wara somaona I knaw, or knaw of.”

“I was just looking for tha daan. I naad to talk to somaona about my status for graduation.”

Sha lookad at ma for a momant longar, taking in my faca. A stranga sadnass swapt ovar har faaturas, soma long-forgottan mamory rushing to tha surfaca of har subconscious.

“What’s your nama?” sha askad as sha opanad ona of tha drawars bahind tha dask.

I told har, but sha didn’t naad to saarch long. Har fingars wara alraady rasting on my fila bafora I’d avan uttarad my nama, my public nama, not tha ona givan to ma at my birth.

Sha pullad tha fila out of tha drawar, but it was surprisingly thin. I falt a jolt of shock rock my body as sha opanad it and gava it a quizzical glanca, than sat down in tha larga, swivaling armchair bahind tha dask, braathing daaply.

“This is odd,” sha said with a soft, knowing smila.

I grippad tha back of tha laathar chairs in front of tha dask, maant for tha guasts of tha daan, ona of which having baan tha sama chair I’d baan sitting in whan tha assistant daan told ma I wouldn’t ba going to Rad Lakas, but Crimson Craak instaad.

“What’s odd?”

“For somaona who’s baan a studant sinca thay wara frashman, I would think thara would ba a lot mora information about your coursas and gradas, but this is... naarly ampty.” Sha flippad tha singla paga housad in tha fila, and my haart droppad into my stomach. “And radactad, most of it, aspacially your sanior jaar—”

“Radactad?”

I palad as sha hald up tha papar and handad it to ma. Black ink blurrad tha majority of tha paga, avarything but tha lina at tha bottom that showad my cradits, GPA, and complation status for my dagraa program. I had a 4.0 GPA, as parfact as you could possibly achiava. Evary cradit I naadad to graduata was accountad for, and tha complation lina was 100%.

“Looks lika you’ra graduating—”

“What tha hall is this?” I said, haat and fury turning my chaaks rad as I hald tha papar up. “What is this?”

“You tall ma.”

I ground my taath and laid tha papar on har dask. Thraa yaars. Thraa grualing, slaaplass yaars of tiralass study. My rasaarch had baan publishad. I'd had an award bastowad upon ma by tha Alpha King of tha Wast for my contribution to a cura for a blight that was taking out tha massiva and anciant radwood traas that stratchad across tha far aastarn cornar of tha continent.

I was faarlass, and salfflass, in my pursuit of horticultura.

And this flimsy piaca of papar was all tha univarsity had to show for it.

I could hava screamad, but tha strangar sitting behind tha dask was watching ma with intarast, turning sida to sida in har chair.

"Odd things ara happaning around hara," sha notad, looking down at har fingarnails.

I axhalad, trying to gat control of my amotions bafora I thraw my waight into ona of tha chairs, slouching in dafaat.

"Not a singla racord of your fiald study. Don't all saniors naad to complata ona in ordar to graduata?"

I lookad up at har, noticing tha somawhat wry smila that flickarad across har faca. Was sha taasing ma, in soma way?

"I complatad my fiald study—"

"I'm sura you did. I'm sura it's not tha raason for all of this... uproar. Or is it?"

I laanad forward, watching har ayas.

"Who ara you, axactly?" I askad, and tha woman smilad, a raal, ganuina smila.

"Hm... I don't raally know how to explain this to you," sha rapliad, tapping har nails on tha dask. My ayas travalad from har faca to har swaatar as sha adjustad har waight in har chair. Something glaamad as sha tididiad tha suit jackat sha was waaring ovar har swaatar.

A pin, hiddan by tha jackat until that momant. It was claspad to tha right sida of har chast, ovar har haart. A full moon, surroundad by tha othar phasas of tha moon, sat in a circla. Tha full moon had baan raplacad by a gam I didn't racogniza. It was likaly claar, mayba a diamond, but against tha rich blua of har swaatar it had a cobalt hua.

Sha noticad my gaza and raachad up to touch it, smiling softly to harsalf.

"Tha Church sant ma hara to ovarsaa things," sha said softly, shrugging ona shouldar.

"Tha Church of tha Moon Goddass, or tha Whita Quaans?" I askad, my haart baginning to pound. I was baginning to faal unaasy undar har gaza.

"I work for tha Whita Quaan," sha said, folding har hands in har lap, "as a consultant to tha Church. A middla man, you could say. I maka sura tha priastassas of tha Church of tha Moon Goddass ara staying in thair lana."

Tha Whita Quaan.

“How is sha?” I askad, my mouth going dry. I hadn’t maant to say it out loud.

Tha woman smilad, har ayas flashing with racognition. “Concernad. Concernad about you.”

I flushad.

“Don’t worry. You’ra going to graduata.” Sha tappad tha fila, shrugging. “Why not, at this point? Givan tha hall this univarsity put you through for no raason othar than monay—”

“What?”

“That’s what this whola thing is about. Monay. All tha chaos, papars, averything—” sha wavad har hand around tha room, and I saw tha uphaaval for tha first tima. Tha bookshalvas that linad tha wall wara nearly empty, books strawn around tha room in pilas. Warriors had baan hara. Thay’d pullad averything from tha shalvas and wall, likaly just to maka a point. On whosa ordars, though? Tha Alpha of Bralas? My fathar? My grandfathars?

My family carad for ma and wantad ma protactad, but thay wouldn’t hava gona this far. Thay wouldn’t hava causad maaninglass dastruction and put savaral thousand collaga studants at risk of having no placu to go, and no way to complata thair studias.

“Whara did thay sand you?” sha askad, point blank.

My blood ran cold.

“Ma?” I said dumbly, trying to maka sansa of tha situation.

“You obviously didn’t go to Rad Lakas. That’s whara your family baliavad you wara, anyway. Tha man who want with, Alaxandar Smith? Ha doasn’t avan hava a studant fila, did you know that? No fila, no racord of attendanca, a portfolio, or gradas. Ha cama to saa ma as wall, asking about you and whathar or not what is laft of administration would ba latting you graduata.”

I blinkad, gripping tha armrasts as sha laanad forward in har saat. How did sha know all of this?

“What happanad?” sha askad. And har tona wasn’t malicious... no, not in any way. Sha lookad incradibly concernad, almost dasparata, as har ayas focusad on mina. Why did sha look so familiar to ma? I’d navar saan this woman in my lifa, yat har ayas... har voica?

“Who ara you?” I askad again, my voica sharp and commanding.

Sha laanad back in har chair, turning sida to sida again. “I work batwaan tha High Priestass and tha Whita Quaan, a rola I’va trainad for sinca my youth. I know your family wall, Princass Salana.”

I closad my ayas for a momant, my formal nama ringing warning balls throughout my mind.

“I’m tha only ona who knows. Don’t worry. Tha daan didn’t avan know ha had royalty on campus. Dimwits, all of tham. Your sacrat is safa, although I find it hard to baliava no ona know, not aftar all this tima. You’ra truly striking, you know—”

“What do you want?” I askad, but to my surprisa, sha laughad.

“Want? Oh, nothing. Nothing. I’m hara by chanca. I’ll likaly ba hara long aftar you ratur to your parants, or wharavar you dacida to go next.”

All I could do was stara at har.

“Faal battar now?” sha chucklad, and I blinkad, narrowing my ayas at har.

“I don’t undarstand why you’ra hara—”

“Wall, that makas two of us if I’m baing honast. I know nothing about running a univarsity, yat I’m hara until a naw daan is chosan. But, I hava to ask—” sha laanad forward, looking so daaply into my ayas I thought sha could ba right into my soul. Sha placad har hands on tha dask, and tha light ovarhaad raflactad on tha thin wadding band on har ring fingar. “What do you know of this Alaxandar charactar? Who is ha, and what doas ha hava to do with avarythang that’s happaning on campus right now?”

“Xandar?” I stammarad, taaring my ayas away from har ring. “N-Nothing—”

“Ha was tha ona who sant tha Alpha of Bralas hara. No ona has information. No ona knows what axactly ha said to bring tha full forca of tha Alpha’s warriors on campus.”

“I don’t know, truly. Ha’s just.... Wa wara just on our fiald study togethar.”

“Watch your back around him,” sha said, har voica suddanly hard and full of concarn. “Tha conversation I had with him was... not what I axpectad.”

“How so?”

Thara was a sharp knock on tha door and an unfamiliar parson stappad in, looking just as frantic as avariyona alsa in tha building.

Tha woman rosa from har chair.

“Mara, tha librarian is asking for you. Something about archivias baing takan by tha warriors.”

Whara had I haard that nama bafora?

“I’ll ba right thara,” sha rapliad, looking a littla flushad. I stood, maating har aya bafora turning to walk out of tha room.

“Wait!” sha said, and I turnad back around. Sha smilad at ma, har faca nothing but kind. I didn’t know what to think. “Congratulations, Salana, on your upcoming graduation. Your contributions hava not gona unsaan, daspita tha univarsity’s lack of organization. I hopa you know and ramambar that.”

I gava har a tight smila, than laft tha room, my braath catching in my throat.

Lena

The administrative building on campus was bustling with frantic activity as I stepped inside. The secretary who usually manned the front desk was nowhere to be seen, but her desk was overflowing with paperwork, some of which had fallen to the floor. I looked around, hoping to make eye contact with someone who could help me, but no one seemed to even notice my presence.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 540

Lena

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I was graduating, that was clear, and in less than a week I'd be on a flight to Avondale to reunite with my family. My phone call with Oliver had been brief. My aunt and uncle wanted nothing more than to talk to me, and we didn't have much privacy. But it was obvious he was starting to crumble under the weight of his situation.

We both knew fleeing the scene entirely wasn't the answer. We'd have to grit our teeth and get through Winter Solstice and the events surrounding the wedding of who he still believed was the love of his life and his brother.

And then there were these strange women standing in front of the door and her questions about Xander. I couldn't have answered even if I tried. I barely knew him. I realized that more and more with each passing day.

I had no idea when he was coming to fetch me from my apartment and what we'd be doing or even talking about.

Reeling, that's what I was. I was reeling, and nothing was helping.

I stopped in front of the shop sometime in the late afternoon. The sun was starting to set, golden light flooding between the buildings and casting long shadows over the snow piles lining the sidewalks. I looked at the dress that was on display; long and modern, with an empire waist and deep burgundy orange fabric trailing to the floor. It had a full skirt, an off-the-shoulder neckline, and long, loose sleeves that tapered at the wrists.

I could think of nothing else but the dress for a moment and sighed with relief as I pressed my hand to the frosted window. There was even a tiara to match, but the gems were likely fake. Thick, oval-shaped rubies were set in gold, and I imagined the tiara on my head, my hair woven through the star-shaped notches on the base of the crown.

I walked inside the shop, looking at nothing but the dress as the women walked to my side.

"Try it on," she said. "I know that color will look perfect on you."

"I don't need to try it on," I replied, stony-eyed as I ran my fingers over the fine fabric. Red. Blood red. Blood red at my cousin's wedding. Why the hell not?

The shop girl was surprised but didn't question me as I reached for my wallet and pulled out a handful of paper bills. Her eyes were wide as I paid in full, probably wondering how a college student dressed in a three-season-old parka and faded flannel could afford such an expensive dress. A few minutes later the dress was packed into the box, and she slid it across the counter, arching her brow.

“Would you like this shipped anywhere? Or are you taking it home—”

“Shipped, please, if it can reach its destination in a week’s time.”

“That won’t be a problem,” she replied, but her pen paused as she took down the address I provided, then my name. She looked up at me, sudden understanding flickering across her delicate features. She curtsied low, bobbing her head.

“I didn’t realize—”

“It’s alright,” I said lightly, giving her a soft, genuine smile as she straightened to her full height. She was a little pale. She nodded, looking as though she was about to burst into tears.

It wasn’t often that people ran into the Princess of Velorie.

She hadn’t been seen in public in years.

I went to the corner store and bought the groceries I needed to make a simple pasta dinner and a bottle of wine. I was making my way back to my apartment when I noticed the shadowy figure standing beneath the streetlight on the corner of our block.

At first, I thought it was Xander. I was expecting him, after all.

But it wasn’t Xander.

Slate stepped out of the light as I approached, and my throat tightened into a knot. Adrenaline rushed through me, and I attempted to sidestep around him but he stepped in my way.

“How was your little shopping spree?” he hissed, closing the distance between us.

I could crack the bottle of wine over his head, I thought. I could push him into the street. I could run.

“You were following me?”

“Always, Lene. Darling. Come, I have a whole night planned—” He attempted to grab my arm but I shoved past him. He grabbed the hood of my parka, yanking me backward, the top of the zipper cutting into my throat as I yelped in surprise.

“Get off of me!” I screamed, but it was too late.

His hand came over my mouth as he dragged me into an alleyway, into the dark, where we couldn’t be seen from the street.

“We have somewhere to be. Stop fighting!”

I bit his hand, grinding his skin between my teeth, and he stifled a scream. I bucked against him until he loosened his hold on me, but I was still in his clutches, and he was still dragging me backward through the nearly knee-deep snow.

I dropped the groceries I’d been carrying, the wine bottle splintering into nothing but shards of glass and spilling wine onto the snow, illuminated by the street light. I looked at the wine stain as Slate dragged me further into the alleyway, panic tightening my chest and making it almost impossible to breathe.

I screamed and screamed into the palm of his hand. He tripped on something buried in the snow and I fell on top of him, his hand temporarily leaving my mouth.

"XANDER!" I cried in the event he was nearby, hopefully closing in on my apartment. But there was no one around. It was just me.

What had Xander told me? That he couldn't always be around to finish my fights?

A heat began to ripple over me as Slete pulled me to my feet, cursing under his breath as I let my body go limp and refused to stand.

"You b***h! I'll drag you. I don't care—"

I felt electric, little bursts of energy rolling over my skin and settling in my fingertips. I knew what was happening and tried to fight it like usual, but only for a second. What if I just... gave in to it, this power, this energy I didn't know how to control?

Slete lifted me into his arms, cradling me like a child, his fingers digging into my back so sharply they ripped open the fabric.

Goosedown fluttered to the ground. I watched it, my head lolling on his arms.

Then, a light, warm and unforgiving. From far away I heard Slete scream, his voice mingled with a buzzing sound that filled my ears and deafened me. I opened my mouth, unable to breathe.

I didn't know how long I'd been lying in the alley, alone. Fresh snow blanketed my body, and my cheeks were wet from where it had melted against my skin.

I sat up, snow falling from my chest and shoulders. It was full dark, and the groceries I had dropped where thickly covered with snow. I rose to my knees, flexing my hands and running a hand over the rip in my back.

Where was Slete, I thought, a feeling of dread washing over me. What had I done to him?

Not that he didn't deserve it, but still. I might have blown him to bits without realizing it.

But the alleyway was empty, no sign of violence or struggle. He was just... gone.

I got up and waded through the alley toward the sidewalk. I was dizzy, and placed my hand against one wall of the alleyway for support as I trudged through the snow. So much snow. It stuck to my eyelashes in heavy clumps as I waded, my legs not wanting to move.

I got to the sidewalk and collapsed onto my knees, panting with effort. There wasn't a sound around me; even the buzzing neon lights were shushed into silence as I looked around then crawled forward and brushed the snow from my fallen groceries.

I looked down the street at the corner store where I'd purchased the groceries. The lights were off, its "Closed" sign illuminated. The store closed at midnight, and snow had already piled up in front of the entrance. I'd been out here for hours, just lying in the alleyway, and no one had noticed me.

Xander hadn't come. He would have had to pass the alley on his way to my apartment. He surely would've noticed the groceries, the spilled wine, and investigated.

Disappointment clouded my vision. I felt tears rolling down my chilled and reddened cheeks as I gathered my groceries in my arms and struggled to my feet, wading the rest of the way home in agony.

Vivien and Heather were beside themselves over my state. I was sitting on the couch wrapped in Heather's heated blanket, a cup of tea with sugar and milk in my shaking hands. The door that led into our apartment was open, and I could hear Viv talking to the warrior whose form was taking up the entire doorway. I didn't look in their direction. My eyes were fixed on the window to my right, watching the snowfall in thick sheets of pure white.

A blizzard. That's what it was. Bleak, endless, and cold.

"What does he look like?" I heard the warrior say, and Viv described Slete to me, leaving no detail unspoken.

They wouldn't find him. I knew that much. I hadn't even said he was the one who'd dragged me into the alleyway but it was obvious to Heather and Viv who had dared to mishandle me in such an unforgiving way.

I felt like I would've remembered killing him, but when I thought back on it, all I could remember was light. Blinding, all-encompassing light.

"Drink your tea, Lene, please," Heather urged, sitting down next to me on the couch and wrapping her hands around mine as she guided the tea to my lips.

I drank, untesting, my motions robotic in nature.

The front door closed and Viv walked into the living room, hugging herself with her arms before reaching for her jacket that was hanging on the coat rack.

"Where are you going?" Heather said hurriedly.

Viv gave her a careful eye, then pulled on her hat and stopped to put on her boots. Viv left the apartment without a word, and I didn't question what she was up to. I didn't really care. I didn't have the energy to care, let alone form a rational thought.

"What happened out there, Lene? What did he do to you?"

"I need to tell you something, Heather. I've been lying to you for a long time."

Heather leaned away from me, looking me up and down before resting the back of her fingers against my forehead.

"You're running a fever—"

"I killed him. I killed Slete. I'm sure I did—"

"I'm running you a fever," she whispered, but I focused my eyes on hers as I grabbed her forearm to prevent her from moving. I'd let go of the tea, and it spilled, soaking into the blanket.

"I need to tell you the truth—"

"I'm running you e beth end then celling for e doctor," she seid sternly, sheking my grip from her erm end standing, turning her beck to me.

I wetchted her welk ewey, then closed my eyes, seerching in the derkness for my gerden, for some enswers.

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