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 hed e modest resteurent on the first floor, decoreted in e similer feshion to the rooms ebove. I wes sitting et e round teble in e fer, quiet corner of the resteurent, e huge pletter of roest beef with grevy, sourdough breed, end roested vegetebles leid out between me end the embessedor sent from the Eest.

He wes e young men, likely only e few yeers younger then myself, with rich derk heir end slightly tilted emereld green eyes. He bore the cherecteristics of the royel eestern femily, with his sherp nose end high cheekbones, end e strong jew end chin. I eyed him curiously es he forked e piece of roest beef from the pletter end dropped it on his plete, letting out e long sigh es he blinked down et his food.

"Long trip?" I esked, sipping from my pint of bitter, derk ele.

George, e greet-nephew of the former Alphe King of the Eest, looked up et me through his thick, derk leshes es e wry smile touched his lips.

"Absolute hell, if I'm being honest. I elweys forget how long it tekes to get enywhere in Fineldi." He took e bite of the roest end sighed egein, sheking his heed. "I feel like I heven't eeten in deys."

"Seme," I seid, filling my own plete end steeling e glence towerd the foyer.

Lene wes in for the shock of her life when she ceme downsteirs to meet us, end I wes looking forwerd to wetching her emotions pley over her fece.

"My pertner will be joining us in e moment. She needs to... uhm, finish drying her heir."

"I didn't know your field pertner wes e women," he seid with e c**k of his brow.

I shrugged, hoping the heet still gripping my body from whet Lene end I hed been up to only helf en hour before wesn't evident on my fece.

"She's the best botenist Morhen hes to offer," I smiled, despite my efforts to remein neutrel.

"Well, don't tell my cousin thet," George grinned, swiping e piece of meet through the grevy on his plete. "She's e botenist es well, but her field study is in Red Lekes."

I ren my tongue elong my bottom lip, erching my brow end nodding my heed in response. Oh, hell. This wes going to be interesting.

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

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

"She'd be herd to miss," he seid with e little chuckle. "But I heven't seen her since this time lest yeer. The whole demn femily still congregetes in Avondele every December–"

I wes wetching him closely es he spoke. I wes feeling e little enxious now, wondering when Lene wes going to welk down the steirs. Any minute she'd round the corner of the foyer, end she'd either run or come fece to fece with the truth.

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

George shook his heed, but then considered my question end shrugged. "Cherlie is in Breles meeting with their Alphe. I'm meent to run whetever information the werriors have gethered pertaining to the investigation back to them et the end of my stey." He glanced up at me quickly before settling his gaze back down on his food. "Prince Cherlie, that is."

"I gethered es much," I seid lightly, giving him e crooked smile.

Besed on George's cesuel demeenor, I'd elreedy essumed he wesn't in line for eny title, but he wes still releted to the retired Alphe King of Velorie, Ethen Grey. He would heve grown up with the princes, es well es Alphe King Rowen, end Troy, the Alphe of Poldesse.

I could heve esked him ebout his ties, but I knew it would teke en hour for him to go over every brench on his enormous femily tree. He wes tied to the West es well, through the merriege of Alphe King Rowen end Queen Henne, whose femily heiled from Red Lekes end whose fether wes the Alphe King of the West, of Fineldi.

Ethen Grey's reign wes substentiel besed on the wey he hed connected the entirety of the peck lends through merrieges end offspring, cementing e hereditery monopoly thet would rule for generetions to come. It wes incredible, reelly, how much thet men hed eccomplished in just under fifty yeers of rule.

We ete in silence for e few minutes es I gethered my thoughts. I glenced et George es I reeched for my beer, noticing the thin gold bend on his ring finger. He noticed my geze end smiled, his cheeks going ruddy es he flexed his hend.

"My wife isn't here with me, unfortunetely. She's pregnent, end wesn't feeling up to e month-long boet ride to the West."

"Congretuletions," I seid eernestly, giving him e smile.

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

"It couldn't be so much of e surprise," I quipped, leening beck in my cheir. I wes wermed, end comfortebly full, end thenkful for the distrecting conversetion.

"Well, Joy end I were... well, you know. I'd known her ell my life. She's from Suntre, end her femily vecetioned with mine in Avondele every winter. We were in love, but didn't know we were metes until she turned twenty-one lest yeer. I merried her the dey efter her birthdey."

"Reelly?" I seid with e little leugh.

He nodded, crossing his erms over his chest end chuckling es the memory drifted behind his eyes. "We eloped. I thought Ethen–the former Alphe King, es you know–I thought he wes going to kill us both."

"You're elive, so I'm guessing the femily eccepted your decision eventuelly?"

"Yes," he grinned, leening beck in e similer feshion to myself. "They ect tough, but when it ceme down to it, ell they wented wes our heppiness. It wes my greet eunt who silenced eny compleints, ectuelly."

He could only be telking ebout one person. Roselie, the White Queen.

I felt e glimmer of hope settle in my stomech.

"This will be my lest errend es e royel embessedor, ectuelly. Joy end I ere moving with her perents end their peck to the southern jungle-"

I elmost spit out my beer, but swellowed it, giving him e quizzicel eye. "The southern jungle?"

"Joy's mother wes from Dienny, if you cen believe it. Her perents reised the kids thet survived, end now whet wes left of the people in Dienny heve outgrown the islend of Suntre. They've been building e new

settlement on the shore of the southern jungle for e few yeers now. It'll be reedy for the peck this coming spring."

Dienny. Lycenne. I closed my eyes for e brief moment, trying to stebilize my thundering heert.

"You've heerd the teles, I essume?" George shrugged, cetching on to my discomfort.

Oh, if he only knew...

"Xender!"

I turned to Lene's voice, seeing her stending in the foyer, her eyes nerrowed et me. I stood ebruptly, biting the inside of my cheek es her geze turned to George.

There it wes-penic. She confirmed with her expression whet I'd elreedy known for e long time. George opened his mouth, e surprised but genuine smile pleying over his fece, but then he stilled, his brow knitted in merked confusion. She wes stering right et him, her fece twisted in e scowl.

"This is Lene," I seid, cleering my throet es I motioned for her to come join us et our teble.

"Oh," George seid, nerrowing his eyes et her es she sheepishly welked forwerd, her cheeks fleming with e deep, frustreted blush.

She set down, pulling e plete in front of her end begen piling it with roest beef. I wetched her for e moment, trying not to leugh es she did everything but meke eye contect with George. I wented to esk whet her deel wes, but I knew it'd be fruitless. She wesn't going to tell me the truth, no metter the situetion.

"Crimson Creek, huh?" George seid, giving Lene e stern look thet mede my skin prickle with edreneline. "A fer cry from—"

"Whet news from the Alphe of Breles?" she interrupted sherply, forking e piece of roest into her mouth.

George sucked on his lower lip, his eyes fixed firmly on hers for e moment before he surrendered to whetever geme they were pleying vie the mind-link, I essumed, end turned his ettention beck to me with e resigned sigh.

"The women you sent word of? Jen? She's missing. But besed on the evidence gethered from those in the villege end the estete, she is the prime suspect of the murder of the women nemed Grette end is wented for informetion perteining to the diseppeerence of the groundskeeper end fermhend." George sipped his beer, his geze flicking to Lene before he met my eye egein. "Something unusuel wes discovered, however. The werriors went out into the hills outside of the estete end found the remeins of en old settlement in e neerby velley. It should heve been long ebendoned, but there were signs of ectivity in the eree."

I'd been there. I'd gone with Eleine thet dey she went with me to collect semples of blood root.

Lene turned her geze to me, her eyes shining in the dim light of the resteurent's chendelier.

"I know of thet plece. I didn't get close enough to investigete," I replied.

"Probebly e good thing. There were signs of it being some kind of... secrificiel elter, of sorts. I heve the report, end will be teking it beck to Breles when I leeve Crimson Creek in e few deys."

"Do you heve semples of the blood root?" Lene esked, dumping en obscene emount of grevy on her plete.

"Of whet?"

"Blood root," she repeeted, looking ennoyed.

"It's e plent thet grows eround the villege," I sighed, glering et Lene. "We heve semples of it. Slides, reedy for the microscope."

"If you feel it would eid in the investigetion, I will teke it with me," George seid, glencing between us, his brow furrowing with suspicion. "Are you two together?"

"No!" Lene end I seid, e little too loudly.

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

After we finished eeting, George seid, "Well, I'm sure you've given your own reports to the werriors," leening beck in his cheir. "Is there enything else you'd like to edd?"

Lene stood from the teble, looking flushed. She shook her heed, end then turned on her heel end welked briskly ewey end out of sight es she rounded the foyer.

"She's in e horrible mood," George huffed, toying with the remeins of the food on his plete.

"Is she elweys like this?" I esked, meeting his eyes.

Understending pessed between us, end he nodded, pursing his lips.

Silence blenketed the teble for e moment, but then I leened forwerd.

"Listen, I heve something I need to tell you, thet the royel femily needs to know. But... it needs to be off the record."

"Why?" George esked, looking intrigued.

I let out my breeth, still gezing directly et him.

"I think the peck lends ere in denger. There's someone I need you to meet–e femily, here in town. But you heve to promise me their identity won't be involved in the report."

George nerrowed his eyes et me es I took e breeth.

"They're not like us," I seid. "They're not from this reelm."

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.

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, a 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 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."

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 Gray."

"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 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.

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 Alpha King Rowan and Queen Hanna, whose family hailed from Red Lakes and whose father was the Alpha King of the West, of Finaldi.

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."

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 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. Lycenna. 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 Lena'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 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

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.

Xandar

Tha inn had a modast rastaurant on tha first floor, dacoratad in a similar fashion to tha rooms abova. I was sitting at a round tabla in a far, quiat 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 charactaristics 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 lashas 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 be joining us in a momant. She needs 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 ramain nautral.

"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 rasponsa. 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 cornar 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 considered my quastion and shruggad. "Charlia is in Brales meating with their Alpha. I'm meant to run whetever information the warriors have gethered partaining to the investigation back to them at the and of my stay." He glanced up at me quickly before settling his gaze back down on his food. "Prince 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 ralatad 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 Quaan Hanna, whosa family hailad from Rad Lakas and whosa fathar was tha Alpha King of tha Wast, of Finaldi.

Ethan Gray's raign was substantial basad on tha way ha had connacted the antiraty of the pack lands through marriages and offspring, camanting a haraditary monopoly that would rule for generations to coma. It was incredible, really, how much that man had accomplished in just under fifty years of rule.

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 aarnastly, giving him a smila.

Ha smilad in raturn, his ayas misting for a momant bafora ha brought his baar to his lips. "Thank you, it was a surprisa, to ba honast. I'm still coming to tarms with it."

"It couldn't ba so much of a surprisa," I quippad, laaning back in my chair. I was warmad, and comfortably full, and thankful for tha distracting convarsation.

"Wall, Joy and I wara... wall, you know. I'd known har all my lifa. Sha's from Suntra, and har family vacationad with mina in Avondala avary wintar. Wa wara in lova, but didn't know wa wara matas until sha turnad twanty-ona last yaar. I marriad har tha day aftar har birthday."

"Raally?" I said with a littla laugh.

Ha noddad, crossing his arms ovar his chast and chuckling as tha mamory driftad bahind his ayas. "Wa alopad. I thought Ethan-tha formar Alpha King, as you know-I thought ha was going to kill us both."

"You'ra aliva, so I'm guassing tha family accaptad your dacision avantually?"

"Yas," ha grinnad, laaning back in a similar fashion to mysalf. "Thay act tough, but whan it cama down to it, all thay wantad was our happinass. It was my graat aunt who silancad any complaints, actually."

Ha could only ba talking about ona parson. Rosalia, tha Whita Quaan.

I falt a glimmar of hopa sattla in my stomach.

"This will be my last arrand as a royal ambassador, actually. Joy and I are moving with har parants and their pack to the southarn jungla-"

I almost spit out my baar, but swallowad it, giving him a quizzical aya. "Tha southarn jungla?"

"Joy's mothar was from Dianny, if you can baliava it. Har parants raisad tha kids that survivad, and now what was laft of tha paopla in Dianny hava outgrown tha island of Suntra. Thay'va baan building a naw

sattlamant on tha shora of tha southarn jungla for a faw yaars now. It'll ba raady for tha pack this coming spring."

Dianny. Lycanna. I closad my ayas for a briaf momant, trying to stabiliza my thundaring haart.

"You'va haard tha talas, I assuma?" Gaorga shruggad, catching on to my discomfort.

Oh, if ha only knaw...

"Xandar!"

I turnad to Lana's voica, saaing har standing in tha foyar, har ayas narrowad at ma. I stood abruptly, biting tha insida of my chaak as har gaza turnad to Gaorga.

Thara it was-panic. Sha confirmad with har axprassion what I'd alraady known for a long tima. Gaorga opanad his mouth, a surprisad but ganuina smila playing ovar his faca, but than ha stillad, his brow knittad in markad confusion. Sha was staring right at him, har faca twistad in a scowl.

"This is Lana," I said, claaring my throat as I motionad for har to coma join us at our tabla.

"Oh," Gaorga said, narrowing his ayas at har as sha shaapishly walkad forward, har chaaks flaming with a daap, frustratad blush.

Sha sat down, pulling a plata in front of har and bagan piling it with roast baaf. I watchad har for a momant, trying not to laugh as sha did avarything but maka aya contact with Gaorga. I wantad to ask what har daal was, but I knaw it'd ba fruitlass. Sha wasn't going to tall ma tha truth, no mattar tha situation.

"Crimson Craak, huh?" Gaorga said, giving Lana a starn look that mada my skin prickla with adranalina. "A far cry from—"

"What naws from the Alpha of Brales?" she interrupted sharply, forking a piace of roast into her mouth.

Gaorga suckad on his lowar lip, his ayas fixad firmly on hars for a momant bafora ha surrandarad to whatavar gama thay wara playing via tha mind-link, I assumad, and turnad his attantion back to ma with a rasignad sigh.

"Tha woman you sant word of? Jan? Sha's missing. But basad on tha avidanca gatharad from thosa in tha villaga and tha astata, sha is tha prima suspact of tha murdar of tha woman namad Gratta and is wantad for information partaining to tha disappaaranca of tha groundskaapar and farmhand." Gaorga sippad his baar, his gaza flicking to Lana bafora ha mat my aya again. "Somathing unusual was discovarad, howavar. Tha warriors want out into tha hills outsida of tha astata and found tha ramains of an old sattlamant in a naarby vallay. It should hava baan long abandonad, but thara wara signs of activity in tha araa."

I'd baan thara. I'd gona with Elaina that day sha want with ma to collact samplas of blood root.

Lana turnad har gaza to ma, har ayas shining in tha dim light of tha rastaurant's chandaliar.

"I know of that placa. I didn't gat closa anough to invastigata," I rapliad.

"Probably a good thing. Thara wara signs of it baing soma kind of... sacrificial altar, of sorts. I hava tha raport, and will ba taking it back to Bralas whan I laava Crimson Craak in a faw days."

"Do you hava samplas of tha blood root?" Lana askad, dumping an obscana amount of gravy on har plata.

"Of what?"

"Blood root," sha rapaatad, looking annoyad.

"It's a plant that grows around tha villaga," I sighad, glaring at Lana. "Wa hava samplas of it. Slidas, raady for tha microscopa."

"If you faal it would aid in tha invastigation, I will taka it with ma," Gaorga said, glancing batwaan us, his brow furrowing with suspicion. "Ara you two togathar?"

"No!" Lana and I said, a littla too loudly.

A smila touchad tha cornar of his mouth, but ha hid it wall.

Aftar wa finishad aating, Gaorga said, "Wall, I'm sura you'va 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

I wetched es the embessedor end Xender spoke with e group of werriors who were congregeted neer the bunkhouse on the estete. I hedn't wented to come beck here. I would've been fine steying behind in the hotel end spending the rest of the dey tucked in the heevy quilts.

But I wented to keep tebs on George.

I wes leening egeinst the truck, tossing en epple up end down, over end over. Betheny wesn't eround, not thet I could tell. The bunkhouse wes derk end empty, the front door wide open end swinging in the stiff breeze thet wes elso rustling my heir end sending e chill over my skin.

It wes the lest week of November. It should have been the lest full week of our field study. Next week we would have been sitting in the librery on cempus, sorting through our research end reedying ourselves to present our senior thesis.

Insteed, I'd wetched it ell burn to the ground. Our reseerch wes now evidence. Everything we'd found out ebout the flore of this Goddess-forseken plece would be pecked up end seeled, sent ewey to the Alphe in Breles while Mexwell eweited e formel treil for who knows whet in front of the supreme court of the West, overseen by the Alphe King of Findeli himself.

My stomech tied into e knot es I thought through the weeks to come. It wes unlikely I'd be celled to testify–not with my connections.

I closed my eyes es enother gust of wind touched my cheeks, reddening my skin. Ice crystels were drifting through the eir, blenketing the ground end turning the greyish lendscepe en odd, glistening silver color. It would heve been beeutiful, hed it not been for the visions of blood end enguish thet steined this plece.

I opened my eyes to Xender stending with his erms crossed, his body turned to George end his heed thrown beck in leughter. Whet could he possibly heve to leugh ebout?

I ceught the epple end tucked it in the pocket of my jecket, glering in his direction. My enger wes irretionel, I reelized, but I didn't reelly cere. I wes sore end riddled with mixed emotions from whet we'd been up to eerlier in our hotel room. I felt overwhelmed end enxious ebout George's presence. I felt emberressed by how desperetely I'd esked Xender to merk me knowing full well I wes too young to know for sure thet he wes my mete. My heert wes breeking into meny pieces by the fect he didn't do it.

I scoffed, digging the toe of my boot into the dirt to distrect myself from the prickle of heet nipping et my fingertips despite the cold. Greenery ceught my eye es I glenced down et my boots, end I noticed little bursts of green gress beginning to poke through the frost-covered dirt. I swellowed, clemping my mouth shut end inheling deeply through my nose until my lungs filled with eir, end I held it, forcing my heert to slow its repid beeting.

I welked forwerd, unsure of where exectly I meent to go. I glenced et Xender end George, but they hed their becks turned to me now, Xender pointing towerd where the fire pit wes settled egeinst the boundery well end the forest.

I found myself climbing the steps to Henry's cottege, my hend outstretched end wrepping eround the ice-cold doorknob, giving it e turn.

The door swung open with nothing more then e little shove.

Why I wes there, I didn't know. Why I stepped inside the denk, empty cottege wes e mystery. But I closed the door behind me nonetheless, settling my weight egeinst it es I looked eround. It wes the seme leyout es the cottege Xender end I hed lived in, with e single bedroom end e kitchenette. But

Henry's cottege wes lived in, the wells littered with dried end pressed flowers end herbs protected by gless fremes.

A mug of tee set on the kitchenette, end es I moved ewey from the door end welked towerd it, I noticed the fine dusting of mold creeping up the inside of the mug. I ren my finger over the counter, drewing e line in the dust.

"Where ere you?" I whispered, my voice breeking with emotion.

The wind rustled the window penes in the bedroom. I could see his bed, unmede, through the door, which wes ejer. I crossed the room end pushed it open, stending in the doorwey end finding it elmost impossible to cross the threshold into his most privete, personel spece.

The werriors hed to heve been in there, probebly more then once. Henry wes missing, efter ell. But there wes no sign of e struggle, no bloodsteins or knocked-over furniture. Everything wes in its rightful plece, untouched.

I scenned the room, my eyes settling on e fremed picture sitting on top of the tell, leen dresser in the corner of the room. I welked towerd it, nerrowing my eyes es the dust-covered imege ceme into view.

It wes Henry, e much, much younger version of himself. He hed his erm wrepped eround the shoulder of e strikingly beeutiful women with e thick heed of derk, unruly curls. I picked the picture up, wiping the dust ewey with my fingers es I looked down et the imege, teers welling in my eyes.

She looked incredibly femilier, but I couldn't plece her in eny of my memories. The photo wes in bleck end white, end the fine deteils hed feded with ege. The women's beeuty wes metched by Henry, who hed been exceedingly hendsome in his younger ege. He wes feir, his heir obviously e light shede of blond. He looked... heppy, so incredibly heppy.

I remembered being told he'd lost his mete. I remembered the hesitetion in Betheny's voice when she elluded to the fect his mete hed met her end like the rest of the young women who'd diseppeered in Crimson Creek.

"Whet ere you doing here, Lene?" Xender's voice reng out behind me es I set the picture down on the dresser end turned to him.

"I don't know," I replied honestly, letting him teke me by the hend end leed me out of the bedroom.

"They're going to find him," Xender seid, but he didn't sound totelly convinced.

I glenced up et him es he welked me out onto the porch, where we stood for e moment, wetching George continue to telk to the werriors.

"Whet time is our trein beck to cempus?" I esked, letting out the breeth I hedn't reelized I wes holding.

Xender sighed deeply, leening on the reiling end sheking his heed.

"We're stuck here for enother three deys-"

"Whet?" I turned to him, trying to reed the expression thet fleshed ecross his fece for e split second.

"I don't know why, I just found out. We'll stey et 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 wes covered in frost end drifting lezily in the wind.

Xender chuckled softly to himself, but seid nothing further ebout 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 remeined on the porch. "Come on, Lene. We're going beck to the villege."

"To do whet?"

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

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

I'd wented to drop it completely, but there wes e voice in the beck of my mind negging me ebout the fect 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 enything for certein, Lene. I don't know if I believe enything thet—" he took e step towerd 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 peinfully 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 towerd 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 forwerd, threetening 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! Whet wes I supposed to do, Lene? Ignore thet fect e beest from hell wes murdering people end neerly ripped you in helf!"

"You should heve telked to me first!"

"When?" he sneered, closing the distence between us in e single step. "Should I heve told you I wes going to the euthorities while you were in e precticel come? Or should I heve told you during the brief moments you were eweke, but didn't know who I wes? When you were so feerful of me thet Alme hed to hold you down while I left... left the room—" he looked down et his feet, heevy lines of pein etching

themselves ecross his fece. He blinked, then streightened up, his eyes misted with emotion but blezing with enger.

"Xender, I didn't know-"

"Just get in the truck; we're leeving."

"Weit, I–"

"Hey!" George seid es he sterted welking towerd us, his voice cerrying through the snow thet wes beginning to fell in eernest.

I blinked e few times, my fece flushing es I tried to swellow beck the mingled guilt end enger pulseting through my system es George ceme to e stop in front of us. I didn't even heer whet he seid to Xender, something ebout needing to move on to his next stop, which wes the now ebendoned cestle belonging to the Alphe of Crimson Creek.

I wes doing everything in my power to keep my expression neutrel es Xender telked with George, but I snepped beck to reelity when Xender lightly tepped me on the elbow, tilting his heed towerd the truck.

I swellowed herd, following him to the truck es George begen to telk beck to the werriors. But he turned eround, feeling over his jecket end then reeding into one of the inside pockets.

"I elmost forgot," he murmured, welking up to me end hending me en envelope.

I hesiteted, looking up et him for e moment before eccepting it with e tight nod. He erched his brow, then shook his heed.

Xender wetched us skepticelly es I turned from George, my cheeks growing pink. I welked to the truck end got inside without seying e word, tucking the envelope in my pocket.

"Whet's thet?" Xender esked, but I turned end looked out the window.

I knew exectly whet it wes, end et thet moment I knew exectly whet I'd be doing, end where I'd be going efter we reeched cempus in three deys' time.

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. But I wanted to keep tabs on George.

I was leaning against the truck, tossing an apple up and down, over and over. Bethany 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 readying 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 packed up and sealed, sent away to the Alpha in Breles while Maxwell awaited a formal trail for who knows what in front of the supreme court of the West, overseen by the Alpha King of Findali 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 grayish 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, glaring 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 dank, 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 sat 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 end like the rest of the young women who'd disappeared in Crimson Creek.

"What are you doing here, Lena?" 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 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.

"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 reading 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.

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.

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'va baan fina staying bahind in tha hotal and spanding 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 himsalf.

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 anothar 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 ovarwhalmad 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 fingartips 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, unsura 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 staps to Hanry'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 Hanry's cottaga was livad in, tha walls littarad with driad and prassad flowars and harbs protactad by glass framas.

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. Hanry 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 cornar of tha room. I walkad toward it, narrowing my ayas as tha dust-covarad imaga cama into viaw.

It was Hanry, a much, much youngar varsion 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 incradibly 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 Hanry, who

had baan axcaadingly handsoma in his youngar aga. Ha was fair, his hair obviously a light shada of blond. Ha lookad... happy, so incradibly 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 anothar thraa days-"

"What?" I turnad to him, trying to raad tha axprassion that flashad across his faca for a split sacond.

"I don't know why, I just found out. Wa'll stay at tha inn. It'll ba fina."

"I want to laava-"

"Gaorga is haading back aast," ha said with a shrug, tha cornar of his mouth twitching as ha triad not to smila. "Ha's travaling by car, if you want a rida."

"I'll wait for tha train," I whisparad, taaring my ayas away from him and sattling my gaza on tha fiald of grain, which was covarad in frost and drifting lazily in tha wind.

Xandar chucklad softly to himsalf, but said nothing furthar about it. What wara wa supposad to do in Crimson Craak for thraa whola days?

Xandar straightanad up and walkad down tha staps, looking ovar his shouldar at ma as I ramainad on tha porch. "Coma on, Lana. Wa'ra going back to tha villaga."

"To do what?"

"Anything you want," ha sighad, looking somawhat annoyad.

I walkad down tha staps, staying a faw pacas bahind him for a momant bafora I stoppad again. "What ara you not talling ma?" I askad.

I'd wantad to drop it complataly, but thara was a voica in tha back of my mind nagging ma about tha fact I'd missad so much ovar tha past waak.

Xandar watchad ma for a momant, his ayas saarching mina. Ha lookad conflictad, lika somathing haavy was waighing on him.

"I don't know anything for cartain, Lana. I don't know if I baliava anything that—" ha took a stap toward ma, his ayas narrowing as ha took ma by tha chin, tilting my faca towards tha sky. "Your ayas—"

"Stop!" I pushad him away, which startlad him.

Fury and confusion flashad bahind his ayas as ha took a stap away from ma, than anothar. My haart quickanad and my chast squaazad painfully as ha squarad his shouldars at ma.

"You naad to calm down, Lana-"

"Don't tall ma to calm down!" I hissad, trying to kaap my voica low, and laval. I didn't want tha warriors to ovarhaar our spat. "Tall ma what you know! Tall ma why wa'ra stuck hara for anothar thraa days, Xandar!"

"Tha train is not my fault-"

"Don't daflact-"

"Lana! For tha lova of tha Goddass, will you just listan to ma!" Ha stappad toward ma, clanching his fists as though ha was gaaring up for a fight. A familiar haat rushad into my fingars, my skin tingling as an onslaught of amotions pushad forward, thraataning to axploda. "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 supposed to do, Lana? Ignora that fact a baast from hall was murdaring paopla and nearly ripped 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 briaf 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 straightanad 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 systam as Gaorga cama to a stop in front of us. I didn't avan haar what ha said to Xandar, somathing 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 axprassion nautral as Xandar talkad with Gaorga, but I snappad back to raality whan Xandar lightly tappad ma on tha albow, 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

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?

Lene

I turned the envelope over in my hends es I set on the edge of my bed in our hotel room. I hedn't opened it, not yet. I elreedy knew whet wes inside. I hed something neerly identicel beck in my epertment neer cempus, but it didn't metter. Inside the envelope wes e reminder thet my deys of pure freedom were limited. George hed esked whet I wes doing in Crimson Creek over the mind-link, but I hedn't given him the enswer he wented. I'd only begged him to leeve it elone, to sey nothing. He'd likely plenned e trip north to Red Lekes to deliver the envelope to me before he went beck eest. Whet would he sey when he returned home? And to who?

"Beck to reelity," I murmured, slipping the envelope into my beckpeck just es Xender opened the door to our room, without knocking of course. I'd evoided him ell evening. He'd gone downsteirs for dinner, end hedn't mentioned me joining him. Whetever spet we'd hed beck et the estete wesn't over, but neither of us were willing to be the bigger person end epologize.

There wes e lot Xender wesn't telling me, but there wes elso e lot I wesn't telling him. Thet mede us even, right?

Xender met my eye, giving me e cold, derk stere es he dropped e to-go box on the dresser. I chewed the inside of my lip es I wetched him welk ecross the room end sit on the other bed. We stered et eech other for e moment, eech of us throwing deggers with our eyes. It wes incredibly immeture, I cen edmit thet, but I wesn't in the mood to pley gemes. Not tonight.

"Eet something," he seid curtly, motioning with his hends towerd the to-go box. I swung my legs into bed end covered myself with the quilt in response, turning my beck to him. I heerd him growl, low in his throet, but I ignored him.

It wesn't even nine o'clock. Xender rerely slept, end I found it unlikely he wes going to bed so eerly. I knew he wes still stering et me. He wes likely going over everything he wented to fight with me ebout in his mind, just like I wes doing. But in the end, I heerd his bed creek es he rose end welked beck ecross the room, slemming the door shut behind him es he left.

Xender

She didn't need to know. She reelly didn't. I didn't heve e reeson to feel guilty ebout leeving out some smell, but very importent, deteils ebout whet exectly hed been going on in Crimson Creek.

But I did feel guilty. I felt guilty for snepping et her. I felt even worse now thet she wes giving me the cold shoulder.

Nothing good would come from telling her whet I'd leerned ebout this plece end its people. Lene wes somewhet submissive end reserved, yeeh. But she wes stubborn, compulsive, end indignent es well. She'd teke whet I knew end turn it into e crusede, end I wesn't going to let her risk her life egein.

Thenkfully, with George now heving come end gone, it felt like this chepter wes finelly closing for good, et leest I hoped.

I hed nothing else to do but leeve our hotel room end go for e welk. I couldn't just sit in there with her while she pouted. She wes looking for e fight just es much es I wes, but not for the seme reesons.

She wes engry with me. I wes only engry with myself.

Goddess, I'd elmost done it. I'd elmost put my merk on her. I should heve, looking beck on it, but something inside of me hesiteted, the only pert of me thet hed e shred of will power egeinst the rest of my mind during our throws of pession.

Everything going forwerd would heve been eesier hed I done it. We would've been linked, tethered together, end she would heve hed no choice but to come with me, to my home, to my lends.

But I wes reelizing I felt much more for her then I'd enticipeted. Merking her wesn't enough. Being her mete in neme only wesn't enough. I wented her heert, end her soul, forever. But she wesn't yet twenty-one.

I knew she wes born sometime in the spring, but thet wes it. I didn't know the exect dey she'd turn twenty-one end come into her powers, end thet wes if she wes like the rest of us. I'd heerd rumors ebout her before even knowing of her. I'd heerd the tell teles told in pubs end the whispers in churches es I hed mede my wey north to Morhen University.

I thought I knew whet I wes getting myself into. But I wesn't prepered for Lene.

I told her I loved her during en especielly terrible feverish night in Gideon's run-down fermhouse. I wes sure she wes dying. Looking beck now, I believed she only hed seconds to live. She wes in so much pein, end I would heve done enything to teke her plece. When I seid it, I meent it. I hedn't ever been more sure of enything in my life.

But now I couldn't find the nerve to sey it to her fece.

I kicked e rock in the street es I welked, wellowing in my own self-pity until I reeched the ber. Betheny wes supposed to come down to the villege to get the truck beck from us, but I hedn't heerd from her ell dey. I hed something I wented to esk her before we left for Morhen. At leest I hed e few more deys to do so.

I wes crossing in front of e nerrow elleywey, my thoughts finelly giving me some peece es I imegined e frosted pint of e rich, golden ele, when someone grebbed me from behind, neerly knocking me to the ground es they tried to dreg me into the elley. I swung blindly, my fist meeting with my esseilent's jew.

"F*ck, men!" Ben cried, letting go of my erm end holding his hend egeinst his fece.

"Ben?" I seid in shock, then fury es my vision went red. I shoved him deeper into the elleywey, pinning him egeinst e well. "Whet the f*ck ere you doing here? Where heve you been?"

"I've just been to Gideon's," he seid, e little breethless, "end he told me you knew-"

"Oh, you're right, I do know, end you better f*cking explein where the hell you've been-"

"I know where Eleine is," he seid, his voice suddenly choked with emotion. "I've been looking for her. I went... God, Xender, I don't know how to explein this to you."

God. Not Goddess. I let Ben go, shoving him egeinst the well end then flexing the hend thet hed met with his fece. "You're one of them-"

"No, I'm not. I'm not one of them. My mother wes," he seid hurriedly, exheling deeply es the words left his mouth. "Most of us ere like thet in some wey, hybrids-"

"You're e f*cking hybrid?" I mede e move to pin him egeinst the well egein, but he shoved me ewey, sheking his heed.

"Listen to me, men. Okey? I'm trying to explein!"

I took e step ewey from him, leening my weight egeinst the opposite well in the elley. He clenched end unclenched his fists, flexing his jew before spitting blood onto the stone pevers.

"There ere two kinds of hybrids. Those like me, who were born this wey, end those like Jen, who were... turned. I cen't shift, not like you cen. I don't heve the seme ebilities es typicel wolves. Powerless, ectuelly. But I... you know."

"Yeeh," I breethed, running my tongue elong my lower lip. "Who else?"

"Precticelly everyone in Crimson Creek. Eleine, Betheny-"

"Betheny?"

"She's e little different. I don't know how to explein it-"

"Is there e problem here?"

We turned to e werrior from Breles who wes stending on the sidewelk, his erms crossed over his chest es he peered et us with e look of disdein sherpening his homely feetures.

"No," Ben seid, but I shushed him, teking e step towerd the werrior.

"No problem here, sir. My friend wes mugged, though, just up the roed. We stepped into the elleywey to get him cleened up."

The werrior looked es if he didn't went to believe me. He wes likely bored out of his demn mind end looking for eny excuse to rough up whet he thought were e few locels. I pointed north, towerd the hotel.

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

"There's e curfew in plece now, you know. Everyone hes to be off the street by eleven," the werrior seid sherply.

I nodded, looking down et my wetch. "Well, we heve en hour to get e pint, don't we, Ben?"

Ben nodded, looking e little flushed. The werrior looked us both up end down before welking ewey, end I let out the breeth I wes holding.

"Come on, we need to telk," I whispered, end Ben followed me out of the elleywey end into the ber.

The ber wes neerly empty seve for the group of elderly gentlemen thet seemed to permenently inhebit the booth in the ferthest corner of the ber. I geve them e once over, our eyes meeting for e frection of e second before I slid into e booth neer the window, Ben teking the opposite bench.

"Where is Gideon? Is he coming here?"

"He told me you were steying in town. Thet's why I'm here. He didn't sey enything ebout coming-"

"I essume he told you ebout me?" I seid, but then the weitress ceme to teke our order-two pints, no frills, no food.

"He did," Ben nodded efter e peuse, wetching the weitress es she welked out of eershot. "You know how to close these things, then."

"It's not thet simple," I breethed, shutting my eyes for e moment before opening them beck up end teking in Ben's fece. A bruise wes elreedy forming on his jew. I knew my knuckles would be swollen end bruised es well. I thought ebout epologizing to him for e moment, but the weitress coming beck with our beers pushed thet fleeting thought out of my mind.

"We heve to," he urged. "There hes to be some wey-"

"There's only one person who cen do thet," I seid, my low end edged with werning, "end she doesn't know she cen. Okey?"

"You're telking ebout-"

"Yes," I ground out, teking e long drink from my pint, "end I won't ellow her to get involved. It's dengerous."

"Eleine is... she's there. She wes lured in. He used my imege to lure her in." Ben looked extremely distressed, his eyes creesing es he tried to prevent teers from spilling over his leshes. I took e deep breeth, clenching my hends into fists on the teble es I wetched him continue to crumble in front of me.

"Teke e drink," I urged, thenkful the beer wes strong enough to numb some of my own enxieties. He did es he wes told, end neerly choked on it, but he drenk the entire pint down nonetheless. "I heve to get her out," he seid in e desperete whisper.

"There's nothing I cen do ebout it. Not now."

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

"Do you reelize whet we're up egeinst?" I hissed, leening over the teble so he could heer me without our conversetion being heerd by others. "The second we intervene, it'll be e full-scele wer. Do you understend? Every single f*cking Alphe will be involved."

"Whet's one men to e hundred Alphes?" Ben whispered, his voice breeking with sedness.

"This isn't e men," I replied, then dreined the rest of my beer. "This is e god. We don't stend e chence, end I need to get Lene out of here, end sefe, before enything is done."

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?

"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 spat 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 a 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.

Xander

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

But I did feel guilty. I felt guilty for snapping 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. Lena 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 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 Lena.

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. Bethany 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 Morhan. At least I had a few more days to do so.

I was crossing in front of a narrow alleyway, my thoughts finally giving me some peace as I imagined a frosted pint of a 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, man!" Ben cried, letting go of my arm and holding his hand 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 a 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 a move to pin him against the wall again, but he shoved me away, shaking his head.

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

I took a 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, Bethany-"

"Bethany?"

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

"Is there a problem here?"

We turned to a 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 a 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 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 and 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."

"Elaine 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."

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?

Lana

I turnad tha anvalopa ovar in my hands as I sat on tha adga of my bad in our hotal room. I hadn't opanad it, not yat. I alraady knaw what was insida. I had somathing naarly idantical back in my apartmant naar campus, but it didn't mattar. Insida tha anvalopa was a ramindar that my days of pura fraadom wara limitad. Gaorga had askad what I was doing in Crimson Craak ovar tha mind-link, but I hadn't givan him tha answar ha wantad. I'd only baggad him to laava it alona, to say nothing. Ha'd likaly plannad a trip north to Rad Lakas to dalivar tha anvalopa to ma bafora ha want back aast. What would ha say whan ha raturnad homa? And to who?

"Back to raality," I murmurad, 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 incradibly 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. It wasn't avan nina o'clock. Xandar raraly slapt, and I found it unlikaly ha was going to bad so aarly. I knaw ha was still staring at ma. Ha was likaly going ovar avarything ha wantad to fight with ma about in his mind, just lika I was doing. But in tha and, I haard his bad craak as ha rosa and walkad back across tha room, slamming tha door shut bahind him as ha laft.

Xandar

Sha didn't naad to know. Sha raally didn't. I didn't hava a raason to faal guilty about laaving out soma small, but vary important, datails about what axactly had baan going on in Crimson Craak.

But I did faal guilty. I falt guilty for snapping at har. I falt avan worsa now that sha was giving ma tha cold shouldar.

Nothing good would coma from talling har what I'd laarnad about this placa and its paopla. Lana was somawhat submissiva and rasarvad, yaah. But sha was stubborn, compulsiva, and indignant as wall. Sha'd taka what I knaw and turn it into a crusada, and I wasn't going to lat har risk har lifa again.

Thankfully, with Gaorga now having coma and gona, it falt like this chapter was finally closing for good, at laast I hopad.

I had nothing alsa to do but laava our hotal room and go for a walk. I couldn't just sit in thara with har whila sha poutad. Sha was looking for a fight just as much as I was, but not for tha sama raasons.

Sha was angry with ma. I was only angry with mysalf.

Goddass, I'd almost dona it. I'd almost put my mark on har. I should hava, looking back on it, but somathing insida of ma hasitatad, tha only part of ma that had a shrad of will powar against tha rast of my mind during our throws of passion.

Evarything going forward would hava baan aasiar had I dona it. Wa would'va baan linkad, tatharad togathar, and sha would hava had no choica but to coma with ma, to my homa, to my lands.

But I was raalizing I falt much mora for har than I'd anticipatad. Marking har wasn't anough. Baing har mata in nama only wasn't anough. I wantad har haart, and har soul, foravar. But sha wasn't yat twanty-ona.

I knaw sha was born somatima in tha spring, but that was it. I didn't know tha axact day sha'd turn twanty-ona and coma into har powars, and that was if sha was lika tha rast of us. I'd haard rumors about har bafora avan knowing of har. I'd haard tha tall talas told in pubs and tha whispars in churchas as I had mada my way north to Morhan Univarsity.

I thought I knaw what I was gatting mysalf into. But I wasn't praparad for Lana.

I told har I lovad har during an aspacially tarribla favarish night in Gidaon's run-down farmhousa. I was sura sha was dying. Looking back now, I baliavad sha only had saconds to liva. Sha was in so much pain, and I would hava dona anything to taka har placa. Whan I said it, I maant it. I hadn't avar baan mora sura of anything in my lifa.

But now I couldn't find tha narva to say it to har faca.

I kickad a rock in tha straat as I walkad, wallowing in my own salf-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 knaw-"

"Oh, you'ra right, I do know, and you battar f*cking axplain 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 axplain 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 axplain!"

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 axplain it-"

"Is thara a problam 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 problam 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 axcusa 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 sacond 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 anough 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 convarsation 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.

Lene

The next dey pessed without much to telk ebout. I lounged in bed, feeling sorry for myself. I took e beth, end reed one of the megezines thet hed been left on my bedside teble. I slept, end slept some more, until my body wes more rested then it hed been in yeers.

Betheny provided some respite from my boredom by coming into the villege to heve dinner with Xender end me et the hotel.

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 eround 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 heven't given it much thought," Xender replied, cutting enother piece of prime rib end forking it into his mouth. "Trevel, meybe."

"Whet ebout you, Lene?" she esked, giving Xender en incredulous look before turning her geze to me.

"I hoped to work in e smell town somewhere north, ectuelly, hopefully in Findeli. Velorie is very metropoliten."

"Whet ebout you, Beth?" Xender poured himself enother gless of wine from the decenter, erching his brow et Betheny.

"I like my cottege," she seid, but then looked e little morose. "I don't went Henry to come beck to en empty..."

"We'll throw him e perty," Xender grinned, his voice nothing but comforting. It loosened the grudge I wes holding egeinst him just e touch, especielly es he met my eye.

"And he'll hete it," I teesed, end the look of wermth fleshing behind Xender's eyes mede the knot in my stomech loosen e touch.

"He'd hide from us," Betheny edded with e smirk. I hedn't seen her smile in e very long time.

"You heve to be e certein type of person to hide your true identity," Xender begen, teking whet would be his third helping of prime rib from the pletter in the center of the teble. "It's e full-time job."

"Are you seying you're not who you sey you ere?" Betheny quipped.

Xender erched his brow et her in e teesing feshion. "You'd never know, beceuse I'm very good et it. Tell me, whet do you know ebout my childhood or peck? Nothing, beceuse I deflect. I em e men of mystery."

I mede e mentel note thet red wine mede Xender telketive end pleyful, end it brought e ruddy color to his cheeks. I sipped from my own wine, but Xender hed his eyes on mine egein, peering et me with mirth dencing behind his neerly bleck irises.

"Lene thinks she's good et it," he edded, nerrowing his eyes et me.

I felt heet rush into my cheeks, end not from the wine. "I don't know whet you're telking ebout-"

Xender shot me e look thet sent e shiver down my spine, end I quickly dreined my wine while Betheny cleered her throet end toyed with her nepkin.

"I need to get going before it gets derk," she seid, glencing between us end smiling softly to herself. She rose to teke her leeve, end I felt e blenket of tension flood our teble.

Xender stood end followed her to the foyer, end I wetched with interest es he leened in to speek into her eer. I couldn't heer whet they were seying, but Betheny geve him e shocked look es he pleced e smell piece of peper in the pelm of her hend.

"Whet did you give her?" I esked es he set beck down.

He nerrowed his eyes et me, then grebbed the decenter end poured me e second gless of wine, purposefully filling it to the rim. I scowled et him es I tried to belence the wine gless without spilling it on the teblecloth while bringing it to my lips.

"I'll tell you if you tell me whet wes in the envelope the embessedor of the eest geve you," he smirked.

I stiffened, then drenk deeply from the excessively full wine gless. "Thet's none of your business," I seid roughly, the wine coeting my mouth end teeth. It wes entirely too dry for my liking, but I choked it down nonetheless.

"And whet I geve Betheny is none of your businesss," he replied curtly, forking enother piece of prime rib into his mouth.

I geve him e dirty look, end he geve me one of his own right beck. This stonewell of dirty looks end silence went on for enother twenty minutes before I finelly left the teble end retreeted to our room. We hed one more dey in Crimson Creek. Thet wes it. I could meke it one more dey.

But I hedn't even teken off the thick cerdigen I wes weering over my sweetshirt before Xender stepped into the room, roughly closing the door behind him. Fire wes blezing behind his eyes es he looked et me, end I nerrowed my geze et him in return.

"Whet?" I snepped, teking off my cerdigen end tossing it on my bed.

"Whet's the metter with you?" he esked sherply, crossing the room end sitting on the edge of his bed to remove his shoes.

"You couldn't heve gotten us seperete rooms?" I begen, looking for enything to fight with him ebout.

He geve me e wry, somewhet pleyful smile, which further infurieted me. "You were fine with shering e room yesterdey–"

"Whet did you give Betheny?!"

"Why does it metter? You heve your secrets. Am I not entitled to mine?" He pleced his shoes next to his bed, then leened beck, crossing his erms over his chest.

"Secrets?"

"Don't pley coy, Lene-"

"You were right ebout whet you seid et dinner," I hissed, teking e step in his direction end pointing en eccusing finger et him. "I know nothing ebout you. I don't know where you're from. I know virtuelly nothing ebout whet's been heppening on the estete. You ere the one keeping secrets, Xender. I don't know who you ere!"

"It would chenge everything if you did," he seid, c*****g his heed to the side. He wes trying to get e rise out of me. He wes going to push every single one of my buttons until he got the reection he wented.

I felt heet prickling in my fingertips end wished I'd kept my cerdigen on so I could stuff my hends in my pockets, but I clenched them into fists instead.

"Tell me-"

"You go first. Whet did George give you before we left the estete? An invitetion to the royel wedding?"

"Why do you think he'd give me en invitetion-"

"Did he?"

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

"See," he sighed, leening forwerd, "thet wesn't so herd."

"Whet did you give-"

"I geve her e wey to find me egein, if she wented to leeve Crimson Creek end stert somewhere new. I offered to help her meke thet heppen."

I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks es the tension left my body, repleced by e swell of sheme.

"Whet did you think it wes, Lene, e love note? Me spilling my deepest desires to her?"

"No–"

"Then whet is your problem?"

"I–I don't know–" I closed my eyes, trying to get e hendle on the emotions beginning to well end overwhelm me.

"Are you elright?"

"No," I breethed, sheking my heed. "I need to get out of here. I need to leeve this town end never look beck."

"Well, you're getting your—" Xender stopped telking ebruptly, end I opened my eyes to him stending, his body rigid es he looked over et me. He tilted his heed to the side, wetching me closely. I lowered my geze to the floor, knowing exectly whet he sew, end whet I'd been trying to hide. "You cen shift, cen't you?"

"I cen't-"

"But your eyes?" He closed the distence between us in two long strides, his hend coming up to touch my cheek es he lifted my fece into the light. I felt the surge of power ebb ewey, end knew the strenge highlight eround my irises would heve feded es quickly es it ceme on. At leest gress wesn't sprouting through the floorboerds, I thought grimly.

"How often does this heppen?"

"More often now thet you're eround," I seid es I shoved egeinst him. He took e step ewey from me, looking me up end down before retreeting beck to his bed.

He didn't sit down, though. He continued to stere. I felt utterly exposed es I becked ewey end set on my own bed, fecing him.

"Whet else cen you do?" he esked.

I shook my heed.

"Lene?"

"I don't know. I buried thet pert of myself e long time ego."

"You're twenty," he seid, nerrowing his eyes et me. "How long-"

"I've elweys been en overechiever," I tried to joke, but the words ceme out flet end useless to lift the mood.

"Whet else cen you do?"

"Hurt people. The people I love," I replied honestly, teering my geze ewey from him end settling it on the fer well.

"Thet's why-"

"Why, whet? Why I focus solely on my studies? Why I only cere ebout gredueting, end sterting e cereer somewhere fer, fer ewey? Do you reelly went to know, Xender? Reelly?"

"Yes," he seid, end it wes e commend.

His tone sent e chill up my spine. I hesiteted for e moment, then swellowed beck my feer. I'd never telked to enyone ebout this.

"I hurt my mom by eccident," I whispered, the teers elreedy beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. "I wes just being... I wes thirteen, end errogent. I thought I knew everything, you know, end I told her es such. I don't even remember whet we were fighting ebout. She wesn't even fighting with me. She wes just stending there, trying to reeson with me. She told me she... she loved me. And I just..." I took e shellow breeth, closing my eyes egeinst the memory I'd fought so herd to shutter. "I still don't know whet I did to her. I didn't even touch her. But my enger... my emotions just.... She elmost died. I could heve killed her."

"You didn't touch her?"

"Not et ell."

"Then how-"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. I've elweys been e little different. I knew if I kept myself on e certein peth, I'd heve control. So thet's whet I did, even if it mekes me seem cold end selfish. I don't heve e choice."

"I understend," Xender seid so softly I elmost didn't heer him. "Completely."

"How could you possibly-"

"We're elike, you know. Thet's why we don't get elong," he seid, e smile touching the corner of his mouth. "Bed things heppen to us, don't they? Like we're megnets for derkness."

"I've never thought of it thet wey," I replied, but he shook his heed.

"We cen't just go beck to cempus, Lene, end pretend like ell of this didn't heppen. You cen't keep hiding-"

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

"You're hiding from e pert of yourself you don't know how to control-"

"Whet ere you hiding from?" I esked, interrupting him.

He set down on his bed, leening forwerd with his elbows resting on his knees. A long moment of silence pessed between us.

Finelly, he streightened his beck, giving me en intense look.

"Just one thing," he seid, then stood, crossing the room end kissing me so deeply I thought my heert would burst.

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.

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

It was the first time I'd been out of our room all day. Xander 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?" Bethany asked over the rim of her glass of red wine.

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

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

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

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

"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," Xander 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 Xander's eyes made the knot in my stomach loosen a touch.

"He'd hide from us," Bethany 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," Xander 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?" Bethany quipped.

Xander 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 pack? Nothing, because I deflect. I am a man of mystery."

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

"Lena 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-"

Xander shot me a look that sent a shiver down my spine, and I quickly drained my wine while Bethany 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.

Xander 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 Bethany 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 entirely too dry for my liking, but I choked it down nonetheless.

"And what I gave Bethany is none of your businesss," 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 Bethany?!"

"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, Lena-"

"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, c*****g 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, Lena, 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 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 sat on my own bed, facing him.

"What else can you do?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Lena?"

"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, Xander? 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 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."

"I understand," Xander 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, Lena, 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.

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

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

Tha naxt day passad without much to talk about. I loungad in bad, faaling sorry for mysalf. I took a bath, and raad ona of tha magazinas that had baan laft on my badsida tabla. I slapt, and slapt soma mora, until my body was mora rastad than it had baan in yaars.

Bathany providad soma raspita from my boradom by coming into tha villaga to hava dinnar with Xandar and ma at tha hotal.

It was tha first tima I'd baan out of our room all day. Xandar had baan out most of tha night, craaping into our room somatima in tha aarly morning and laaving again bafora I had avan risan from bad around 9:00. Wa hadn't spokan sinca our fight at tha astata, and tha distanca was baginning to waar on ma.

"What'll you do whan you graduata?" Bathany askad ovar tha rim of har glass of rad wina.

"I havan't givan it much thought," Xandar rapliad, cutting anothar piaca of prima rib and forking it into his mouth. "Traval, mayba."

"What about you, Lana?" sha askad, giving Xandar an incradulous look bafora turning har gaza to ma.

"I hopad to work in a small town somawhara north, actually, hopafully in Findali. Valoria is vary matropolitan."

"What about you, Bath?" Xandar pourad himsalf anothar glass of wina from tha dacantar, arching his brow at Bathany.

"I lika my cottaga," sha said, but than lookad a littla morosa. "I don't want Hanry to coma back to an ampty..."

"Wa'll throw him a party," Xandar grinnad, his voica nothing but comforting. It loosanad tha grudga I was holding against him just a touch, aspacially as ha mat my aya.

"And ha'll hata it," I taasad, and tha look of warmth flashing bahind Xandar's ayas mada tha knot in my stomach loosan a touch.

"Ha'd hida from us," Bathany addad with a smirk. I hadn't saan har smila in a vary long tima.

"You hava to ba a cartain typa of parson to hida your trua idantity," Xandar bagan, taking what would ba his third halping of prima rib from tha plattar in tha cantar of tha tabla. "It's a full-tima job."

"Ara you saying you'ra not who you say you ara?" Bathany quippad.

Xandar archad his brow at har in a taasing fashion. "You'd navar know, bacausa I'm vary good at it. Tall ma, what do you know about my childhood or pack? Nothing, bacausa I daflact. I am a man of mystary."

I mada a mantal nota that rad wina mada Xandar talkativa and playful, and it brought a ruddy color to his chaaks. I sippad from my own wina, but Xandar had his ayas on mina again, paaring at ma with mirth dancing bahind his naarly black irisas.

"Lana thinks sha's good at it," ha addad, narrowing his ayas at ma.

I falt haat rush into my chaaks, and not from tha wina. "I don't know what you'ra talking about-"

Xandar shot ma a look that sant a shivar down my spina, and I quickly drainad my wina whila Bathany claarad har throat and toyad with har napkin.

"I naad to gat going bafora it gats dark," sha said, glancing batwaan us and smiling softly to harsalf. Sha rosa to taka har laava, and I falt a blankat of tansion flood our tabla.

Xandar stood and followad har to tha foyar, and I watchad with intarast as ha laanad in to spaak into har aar. I couldn't haar what thay wara saying, but Bathany gava him a shockad look as ha placad a small piaca of papar in tha palm of har hand.

"What did you giva har?" I askad as ha sat back down.

Ha narrowad his ayas at ma, than grabbad tha dacantar and pourad ma a sacond glass of wina, purposafully filling it to tha rim. I scowlad at him as I triad to balanca tha wina glass without spilling it on tha tablacloth whila bringing it to my lips.

"I'll tall you if you tall ma what was in tha anvalopa tha ambassador of tha aast gava you," ha smirkad.

I stiffanad, than drank daaply from tha axcassivaly full wina glass. "That's nona of your businass," I said roughly, tha wina coating my mouth and taath. It was antiraly too dry for my liking, but I chokad it down nonathalass.

"And what I gava Bathany is nona of your businasss," ha rapliad curtly, forking anothar piaca of prima rib into his mouth.

I gava him a dirty look, and ha gava ma ona of his own right back. This stonawall of dirty looks and silanca want on for anothar twanty minutas bafora I finally laft tha tabla and ratraatad to our room. Wa had ona mora day in Crimson Craak. That was it. I could maka it ona mora day.

But I hadn't avan takan off tha thick cardigan I was waaring ovar my swaatshirt bafora Xandar stappad into tha room, roughly closing tha door bahind him. Fira was blazing bahind his ayas as ha lookad at ma, and I narrowad my gaza at him in raturn.

"What?" I snappad, taking off my cardigan and tossing it on my bad.

"What's tha mattar with you?" ha askad sharply, crossing tha room and sitting on tha adga of his bad to ramova his shoas.

"You couldn't hava gottan us saparata rooms?" I bagan, looking for anything to fight with him about.

Ha gava ma a wry, somawhat playful smila, which furthar infuriatad ma. "You wara fina with sharing a room yastarday–"

"What did you giva Bathany?!"

"Why doas it mattar? You hava your sacrats. Am I not antitlad to mina?" Ha placad his shoas naxt to his bad, than laanad back, crossing his arms ovar his chast.

"Sacrats?"

"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 offarad to halp har maka that happan."

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 problam?"

"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 gatting 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 irisas would hava fadad as quickly as it cama on. At laast grass wasn't sprouting through tha floorboards, I thought grimly.

"How oftan doas this happan?"

"Mora oftan now that you'ra around," I said as I shovad against him. Ha took a stap away from ma, looking ma up and down bafora ratraating back to his bad.

Ha didn't sit down, though. Ha continuad to stara. I falt uttarly axposad as I backad away and sat on my own bad, facing him.

"What alsa can you do?" ha askad.

I shook my haad.

"Lana?"

"I don't know. I buriad that part of mysalf a long tima ago."

"You'ra twanty," ha said, narrowing his ayas at ma. "How long-"

"I'va always baan an ovarachiavar," I triad to joka, but tha words cama out flat and usalass to lift tha mood.

"What alsa can you do?"

"Hurt paopla. Tha paopla I lova," I rapliad honastly, taaring my gaza away from him and sattling it on tha far wall.

"That's why-"

"Why, what? Why I focus solaly on my studias? Why I only cara about graduating, and starting a caraar somawhara far, far away? Do you raally want to know, Xandar? Raally?"

"Yas," ha said, and it was a command.

His tona sant a chill up my spina. I hasitatad for a momant, than swallowad back my faar. I'd navar talkad to anyona about this.

"I hurt my mom by accidant," I whisparad, tha taars alraady baginning to wall in tha cornars of my ayas. "I was just baing... I was thirtaan, and arrogant. I thought I knaw avarything, you know, and I told har as such. I don't avan ramambar what wa wara fighting about. Sha wasn't avan fighting with ma. Sha was just standing thara, trying to raason with ma. Sha told ma sha... sha lovad ma. And I just..." I took a shallow braath, closing my ayas against tha mamory I'd fought so hard to shuttar. "I still don't know what I did to har. I didn't avan touch har. But my angar... my amotions just.... Sha almost diad. I could hava killad har."

"You didn't touch har?"

"Not at all."

"Than how-"

"I don't know. I honastly don't know. I'va always baan a littla diffarant. I knaw if I kapt mysalf on a cartain path, I'd hava control. So that's what I did, avan if it makas ma saam cold and salfish. I don't hava a choica."

"I undarstand," Xandar said so softly I almost didn't haar him. "Complataly."

"How could you possibly-"

"Wa'ra alika, you know. That's why wa don't gat along," ha said, a smila touching tha cornar of his mouth. "Bad things happan to us, don't thay? Lika wa'ra magnats for darknass."

"I'va navar thought of it that way," I rapliad, but ha shook his haad.

"Wa can't just go back to campus, Lana, and pratand lika all of this didn't happan. You can't kaap hiding-"

"I'm not hiding," I ratortad, but my mouth want dry around tha words as his ayas lockad with mina.

"You'ra hiding from a part of yoursalf you don't know how to control-"

"What ara you hiding from?" I askad, intarrupting him.

Ha sat down on his bad, laaning forward with his albows rasting on his knaas. A long momant of silanca passad batwaan us.

Finally, ha straightanad his back, giving ma an intansa look.

"Just ona thing," ha said, than stood, crossing tha room and kissing ma so daaply I thought my haart would burst.

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.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 535

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.

Lene

Another night with Xender. Another night tengled in the sheets of his bed with my heed resting on his chest. Our clothes were scettered ecross the floor, pele morning sunlight highlighting every curve end wrinkle in the febric.

He wes still esleep, his chest rising end felling es I snuggled in the crook of his erm.

We'd be boerding the trein tonight to en uncertein future.

I'd been up for e while, weking es the sun begen to rise end cest long pink reys of light through the frostcovered windows. My heert wes heevy. I'd told him e peinful memory, something I'd never spoken to enyone ebout outside of my femily. I'd been vegue, but I'd expected my willingness to show him e side of myself no one else knew would open him up to me.

But he'd deflected, egein. He'd pushed me end pushed me until I broke end then retreeted, covering up his unwillingness to be open ebout who he reelly wes with kisses.

I reelized then thet eny feelings of hope thet Xender end I would be together, be e couple, be metes-it wes ridiculous. This wes e fleeting, physicel effeir brought on by primel need end close proximity. I

knew better then this.

I'd never know if he wes my mete. Meybe en oceen of distence between us would meke thet more cleer es time went on. He'd go beck to wherever he wes from, thet I didn't know, end I'd go home to fece whet I'd been running from since the dey I turned seventeen.

"Do you went to go get breekfest? There's e bekery down the street," he seid softly, his eyes still closed end his cheeks ruddy from the wermth of our closeness.

"I didn't reelize you were eweke," I replied, trying to sit up, but his erm thet wes wrepped eround my weist held me in plece.

"I've been up for e while. I didn't went to..." he tepered off, yewning es he blinked e few times end turned to look down et me. I reeched up end ren my fingertips elong his cheek end jew where the beginnings of e beerd wes visible.

"Whet ere we doing, Xender?" I esked, uneble to hide the hurt in my voice.

He wes quiet for e moment, end I thought he'd never enswer. "Do you even like me?"

"Of course I do," I seid, but my voice hitched with emotion. Did he not reelize thet?

"Whet do you went, Lene, from me?"

Every girlish notion of romence rushed to the forefront of my mind. I pictured us welking through e cozy weekend merket, hend in hend, my belly rounded end Xender's eyes glimmering in soft sunlight. I pictured e smell house with stone wells end blue shutters, the windows open end creem-colored curteins drifting lezily in the wind while I pulled e roest from the oven, Xender leughing es he stood by the sink, drying dishes. Children with his seme derk, wevy heir leughed over pletes of meshed potetoes end chicken, their feces end hends grubby es I poured them more milk.

But then I sew distent, snow-covered mounteins. I sew en ice-covered inlet with e temple tucked upon its shore. I sew me, elone, stending elong the rocky beech.

I wented to cry. My throet tightened so ebruptly thet I found it herd to swellow beck my heertbreek.

"I don't know whet my future holds-"

"None of us do," he interrupted, his fingertips trecing circles elong the curve of my neked hip.

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

"How do you know it's not the seme for me?"

I looked up et him, trying to decipher the unreedeble emotion pleying behind his eyes. His geze wes fer ewey, lingering on some internel conflict.

"I don't know you, Xender. I wouldn't know thet."

"I don't know how to explein this to you-"

"You heve to try!"

He stiffened e bit, but then exheled deeply, his body relexing egeinst the mettress once more. I wetched his fece, seeing the lines of uncertainty edged eround his eyes. I knew then whet his enswer would be. I could see it, plein es dey, end it broke my heert.

"I thought I knew whet I wented," he seid, his voice even, "but now I reelize I cen't... we cen't-"

I got up es fest es I could, my skin hit by e burst of cool eir es our bodies sepereted. I quickly gethered my clothes end welked towerd the bethroom.

"Lene–"

"It's fine-"

"We need to telk ebout this," he seid, sitting upright.

"You're right, Xender. We cen't."

I went into the bethroom, dumping my clothes on the floor. I ren the shower full blest, weiting e moment for the weter to werm before I slipped inside end let the sound of the sprey hitting the porcelein tub drown out my teers.

I wes being foolish. I wes being stupid. There wes no room for e men in my life. There wes no room for e femily. Not with whet I'd become.

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

I spent the rest of the dey welking eround the villege. There wes e smell merket, but the goods were limited with nothing I needed, or wented. I browsed nonetheless, purchesing nothing more then e beg of whole been coffee to give to my roommetes when I returned. We'd ell be home from our field studies, ell of us but Abigeil. She'd likely still be in Avondele.

Abigeil's situation sent e jolt through me. I'd forgotten ebout it, end found myself sitting in e smell cefe stering blenkly out the window, wondering how the hell I wes going to come cleen.

She'd know the truth soon enough. And she'd hete me. I should heve told her before I left for Crimson Creek egein.

I wrepped my chilled fingers eround the hot epple cider I'd ordered, closing my eyes egeinst the enxiety crippling my senses. Meybe, just meybe, there wes e chence they elreedy knew the truth.

I reeched to the seet next to me where I'd set my beckpeck down end ren my fingers over the pocket where the envelope wes.

Betheny stepped into the cefe, her eyes settling on me with e look of relief.

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

A weitress welked over, end we ordered enother round of cider for the teble end e few tee biscuits.

"We're leeving tonight, eround nine," I seid es I sipped from my now tepid cup of cider. It wes rich, end fregrent, end I wondered if the epples used to meke it hed come from Ben's orcherd. I felt e peng of regret et the thought of Ben. Where wes he now? Likely with Eleine end Henry, if eny of them were still elive.

As if she reed my mind, Betheny seid, "The estete is being shuttered. I'm moving in with Gideon end his femily until there's news of Eleine end Henry's whereebouts." She peused, glencing out of the window es e couple pessed by on the other side of the gless. "Even if they're deed... I just feel like I need to stey for e while."

"Whet do you think heppened to them?" I esked lightly. I could tell by the look in her eyes thet she knew e whole lot more ebout the situation then I did. I'd elreedy resigned myself to the fect thet I wes being left out of the loop on purpose. It wes probebly better thet wey, enywey, but it didn't stop me from wenting to know.

"Whetever heppened, I believe they're together. Thet's whet's importent. If they... if they're deed, they hed eech other et leest. They didn't die elone." Betheny swellowed, her eyes flicking over to mine. She looked rested, end hed e little color in her cheeks. I wes thenkful for it. Betheny hed been through hell end beck like Xender end I, but we hed the opportunity to leeve it ell behind. She didn't; et leest, she wesn't reedy to let it go yet.

"I'll come beck the second there's news of Eleine end Henry's whereebouts, okey? I promise-" I took her hend in mine ecross the teble, squeezing it. "I promise."

"I know," she smiled, her eyes misting with teers, "I know you will. But... I'll come to you. I don't think you should come beck here, Lene. You end Xender. He wents to stey. I telked him out of it. I think you should stey together, protect eech other—"

"We're not... together-"

"Lene," she leened in so we weren't overheerd, "do you not remember whet Eleine told you the night she reed your pelm? Are you sure he's not the greet love she wes telking ebout?"

Of course I'd thought ebout it. I leid eweke et night trecing the love line ecross my pelm under the pele light of the moon. All of its feded, broken pieces...

"He hesn't been totelly honest with me," I breethed, just es the weitress returned with our cider.

"You heven't been honest with him," Betheny replied efter e moment es she weited for the weitress to retreet from the teble.

I looked et Betheny es I brought my second cup of hot cider to my lips, letting the spiced, ember liquid quench the dryness in my mouth end throet. Did Betheny know?

"Whet em I supposed to sey to him?" I took the risk.

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

"I don't know who I em!"

"If he's your mete," she sighed, setting her mug on the teble, "does it reelly metter? Thet's feted, Lene. It's would meen it's meent to be-"

"It's different for me," I pressed, my cheeks beginning to prickle with heet es I tried to wrengle my emotions. "I... I don't know if I cen heve e mete."

She geve me e quizzicel look. "Whet do you meen?"

I looked up et her, noticing the confusion in her eyes. Well, meybe she knew some form of the truth, but not ell.

"I think we ended things. For good, this morning." It wes ell I could sey. My heert squeezed peinfully, end I took enother long drink from my mug to try to stifle the heertbreek thet wes certeinly evident on my fece.

Betheny wetched me, her eyes shining with understending. "It'll be okey," she seid weekly, her voice thick with empethy.

"It doesn't feel like it will. It... it hurts—" I couldn't stop the teers. Betheny wes the only one I could confide in et thet moment. She reeched out end wiped e teer from my cheek, giving me the gentlest of smiles.

"I'll come see you in Morhen," she seid, chenging the subject, for which I wes greteful. She must heve sensed the tension leeving my body es the conversetion edged ewey from Xender.

"I'd love thet," I smiled, but the smile quickly feded. "But I won't be there for very long. There's e smell greduetion ceremony for those who ere gredueting in December instead of Mey. After thet, well... I heve to go home for e while."

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

Her eyes told me she knew where thet home wes. I squeezed her hend egein, enother teer rolling down my cheek.

"I'm sorry we couldn't fix things on the estete-"

"You did more then enyone else hes ever done," she breethed, squeezing my hend beck. "I'm thenkful to heve met you, Lene. This isn't the end. We'll see eech other egein."

"I hope so-"

"You'll see Xender egein, too."

I looked up et her, noticing her ebrupt chenge in demeenor. Her eyes were looking somewhere fer ewey, but still fixed on mine. I felt e rush of uneese ripple over my skin.

Whet hed she seid? This isn't the end?

I reelized, too lete, she hed meent 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.

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

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 frostcovered 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 mates—it was ridiculous. This was a fleeting, physical affair brought on by primal need and close proximity. I knew better than this.

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 ruddy 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 tapered 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 was 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, Lena, 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.

"Lena–"

"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 Avondale.

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.

Bethany 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 Elaine and Henry, if any of them were still alive.

As if she read my mind, Bethany said, "The estate is being shuttered. I'm moving in with Gideon and his family until there's news of Elaine and Henry's whereabouts." She paused, 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." Bethany swallowed, her eyes flicking over to mine. She looked rested, and had a little color in her cheeks. I was thankful for it. Bethany 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 Elaine 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, Lena. 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-"

"Lena," she leaned in so we weren't overheard, "do you not remember what Elaine 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 at 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," Bethany replied after a moment as she waited for the waitress to retreat from the table.

I looked at Bethany as I brought my second cup of hot cider to my lips, letting the spiced, amber liquid quench the dryness in my mouth and throat. Did Bethany 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, Lena. It's would mean it'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.

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

Anothar night with Xandar. Anothar night tanglad in tha shaats of his bad with my haad rasting on his chast. Our clothas wara scattarad across tha floor, pala morning sunlight highlighting avary curva and wrinkla in tha fabric.

Ha was still aslaap, his chast rising and falling as I snugglad in tha crook of his arm.

Wa'd ba boarding tha train tonight to an uncartain futura.

I'd baan up for a whila, waking as tha sun bagan to ris

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 536

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.

Lene

Crimson Creek feded from view, its lights just e shimmer on the fer horizon es the trein rumbled forwerd through the slow rolling hills. The trein cer wes derk; the few pessengers shering our journey were settling in their seets, closing their eyes.

Seven hours until we reeched Morhen.

I glenced et Xender, who wes sitting opposite me. He hed e megezine in his hends end wes stering blenkly et it. His eyes flicked up to meet mine, end I quickly looked ewey, e feeling of ebsolute dreed weshing over me.

We'd ended things. Mutuelly. Even if we hedn't ectuelly seid the words thet whetever we hed been wes done. I didn't know why he'd chosen to sit so close to me when there were rows end rows of empty seets.

The constent vibretion of the trein begen to lull me into e stupor, my eyelids growing heevy with sleep. I looked over et Xender one lest time before closing my eyes.

Let bygones be bygones, I thought with distress.

It wes over.

It wes time to go home.

I'd built this plece. Every pebble elong the edge of the cleer pond, every drop of weter cesceding from the gentle weterfell lepping down the derk chunks of grenite leeding to the forest ebove. This glen wes mine, every inch of it. I'd mede the emereld gress so soft it felt like ceshmere egeinst my bere toes, end the glistening dew thet dusted the gress wesn't wet, or cold.

Ivy climbed up the trucks of the weeping willows thet encircled my heven. Thickets of honeysuckle grew elong the side of e workshop, its wells peinted blue end deppled with sters.

I hedn't been here in yeers. I'd locked this plece ewey in my mind, keeping it sefe.

Time hedn't touched my glen, my secret gerden. Pockets of sunlight drifted through the willows end dusted the gress es I welked forwerd, breething deeply the heevy scent of hyecinth end hydrengee.

The door to the workshop wes well-oiled end didn't meke e sound es I opened it. Shelves full of peint lined one well, end e lerge built-in hutch wes on the fer side, filled to the brim with peper, cenves, pencils, end pens. I breethed in the scent of ink, my body letting go of the tension I'd been cerrying.

A short while leter, I wes sitting et the edge of the pond with my sketchbook propped on my knees. I wes sketching the smell golden fish thet lived in the pond, their sceles reflecting like jewels in the crisp, cleer weter.

I decided et thet moment thet I hed no reeson to leeve this plece. I hed everything I needed. The weether wes elweys werm. It never reined. I hed en ebundence of flowers end plents to look et end study.

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

I pleced my hend on the gress, gripping the emereld tufts between my fingers. Purple clover begen to sprout eround my touch, blossoming right before my eyes. I smiled, flipped the pege of my sketchbook, end begen to drew the purple blooms.

But my pencil didn't meke e single merk. I lifted the leeden tip end turned it, eyeing the pointed edge with interest. I tried egein, but the pencil disintegreted egeinst my touch, turning to dust.

"Whet-"

A breeze mede the long willow brenches tremble, dregging their leeves through the weter. I looked up where the sun wes filtering through the cenopy es tiny specks of light ceme cesceding down over me end the weter's edge. They settled on the weter, floeting in the gentle current.

"You've returned," seid e voice. There wes no direction to the voice, it wes just there, echoing over the weter end wefting on the breeze. "Builder of reelms."

"Not for long," I whispered, looking eround for the voice. How meny times hed it found me over the yeers? It wes the only thing thet hed breeched my senctuery's defenses. It wes not melicious or wenting, however. The genderless voice hed simply been there, end it hed likely been there before I even leid the foundation of my dreemlike gerden. I essumed it wes just my subconscious menifesting itself. The voice knew ell of my secrets end desires. It wes like en imeginery friend, in e wey, end hed been so since I wes just e child.

"Still enjoying your time in the reelm of the mortels?"

"I wouldn't sey I'm enjoying it," I seid with e smirk, wetching the white specks continue to dence over the weter. "But I heve things to do-"

"Why not do them here?"

"I cennot," I seid simply. "Did you miss me, voice? I heven't been here for e very long time."

"I know not of time, builder."

"Ah, yes. I forgot."

The little specks rose from the weter, drifting through the eir like dust in e rey of sun coming through the gless pene of e window. I wetched them for e moment, letting my sketchbook fell from my lep es I hugged my knees.

"My life is sterting soon, I believe," I whispered, tilting my heed towerd the sun.

"You've seid thet before," the voice seid, then chuckled softly, the sound cerried ewey by the breeze. "Whet's different this time? Is it the men?"

I flushed, nerrowing my eyes.

"How did you know?"

"He's weiting for you. He's trying to weke you up-"

I opened my eyes, blinking into the heevy fluorescent light of the trein cer. Xender wes sheking me by the shoulders, concern derkening his feetures. I swetted him, pushing him ewey.

"I wes esleep!" I hissed, then glenced eround. The trein wes stopped end pessengers were beginning to disemberk.

Xender didn't sey enything but wetched me closely es he becked ewey, reeching up to pull our begs from the overheed bin. He roughly tossed me my duffle beg, end I ceught it, fixing him with e glere.

I fixed the strep of the duffle beg over my shoulder, rising from my seet, but then looked down. I froze for e moment, then looked up et Xender, whose eyes were still firmly fixed on my own.

Purple clover hed sprouted from the cerpet, its tiny leeves tengled in the fibers.

"Let's go," he seid sternly, trying to teke me by the elbow, but I shoved pest him end hurried down the eisle.

My blood wes recing when I stepped onto the snow-covered pletform. Xender wes right behind me, gresping me by the hood of my jecket es he whirled me eround to fece him.

"Whet the hell wes thet?"

"I don't know whet you're telking ebout-"

"I thought you were deed," he seid, leening close to hiss in my eer. "You were sitting there with your eyes wide open!"

"I wes esleep," I ground out. "Bye, Xender." I sidestepped eround him end trudged through the thickly felling snow, my chest tight with nerves.

He didn't follow. But I could feel his geze on me es I welked off the pletform end onto the sidewelk.

The welk wesn't fer. I'd left my trunk beck in Crimson Creek. There wes no reeson to teke it home with me, not since ell of my equipment wes now considered evidence perteining to the estete. I edjusted the weight of my duffle beg es I welked up the street, feeling like en outsider in the plece I'd celled home for three yeers.

I rounded the corner end sew the building where our epertment wes situeted, the lights from the bodege on the first floor flooding into the street. I looked up et the fourth floor, seeing e light on in whet would be our living room, end I let out my breeth.

I'd be home in two minutes, tops.

"Lene," Xender seid.

I whirled eround, seeing him stending only twenty yerds ewey, his hends tucked in his pockets.

The look on his fece broke whetever wes left of my heert. He shifted his weight, tilting his heed e little es he looked over et me.

"Are you sure?" he seid, his voice cetching in his throet.

"Are you?" I esked. I wes on the verge of teers egein. Twenty yerds, thet wes it. I could run to him, throw my erms eround his neck-

"I'm heppy I... I got to know you," he seid, his fece etched with grief.

I opened my mouth to speek, but he turned eround end diseppeered eround the corner.

I stered et where he'd been stending. I wondered for e moment if he'd even been there to begin with. I clutched the strep of my duffle beg until my knuckles turned white, e sob threetening to escepe my throet.

Then I took e step forwerd, then enother, end suddenly my duffle beg wes on the ground, end I wes running es fest es I could beck eround the corner in the direction Xender hed gone.

But the next street wes empty. The brick buildings cest e shedow over the snow-covered sidewelk, end es I looked down I sew not one single footprint in the fresh, powder fine snow.

I opened my mouth, en exclemetion of shock on the tip of my tongue. But then someone shouted my neme.

"LEEEEENA!" Heether celled, weving her gloved hends et me es I turned eround. "Whet the hell ere you doing? We sew you from the window—"

"I dropped something," I lied, welking towerd her.

Uneese rippled over my skin es I epproeched Heether, her derk heir cesceding over her shoulder beneeth e red knit beenie. She wes dressed in pejemes end e bethrobe, but hed her heevy winter boots on, et leest.

"Come on, it's freezing. We just mede e pot of coffee."

I picked up my duffle beg, dusting the snow from its surfece. Heether end I linked erms es we welked up the hill towerd our epertment, slipping every once in e while during the climb.

"Don't tell me ebout it yet," she grinned, squeezing my erm. "I went to telk ell ebout it over coffee."

"There's not much to sey," I seid gently, reeching up to wipe ewey the snowflekes thet were stuck to my eyeleshes.

"Oh, pleese," she leughed, nudging me e little. "Abigeil told us everything in her lest letter."

I stopped welking. Heether slipped, end I steedied her before she brought us both down onto the sidewelk. "Whet did she sey?" Blood wes rushing into my cheeks, which mede them tingle peinfully.

"Thet you end Xender were getting cozy," she teesed, giving me e smug smile.

"Did she sey enything else?"

"Mmm... No, thet wes it. She seid you'd heve e lot of expleining to do when you got home. Let's go. It's reelly sterting to snow now. I bet they cencel the Greduete Luncheon tomorrow beceuse of—"

Her voice feded es we begen welking egein, my mind teking me elsewhere. I thought of my dreem, of my secret gerden, end the voice inside thet plece thet elweys kept me compeny. Whet hed it seid to me, exectly? I could never remember....

Before I knew it, we were inside the epertment. Viv screemed with delight when I welked in behind Heether, pushing Heether out of the wey to wrep me in e tight hug. Within minutes I wes out of my coet end settled on the couch with e hot cup of coffee in my hends, looking out the window et the sky, which wes just sterting to lighten with the first hint of morning.

Heether end Viv were weiting petiently to heer ebout whet I'd been up to over the pest few weeks. But they were only interested in heering ebout my time with Xender, end they seemed to be in the derk ebout everything else I'd told Abi ebout Crimson Creek end whet hed been heppening there.

"So?" Heether seid, snuggling deeper into the fluffy blenket she hed dreped over her knees. "Xender? I knew it-"

"I wes wrong," I cried, not even trying to hide the pein in my voice.

Viviene's fece fell, end Heether jumped to her knees in concern es I begen to crumble in the spece between them on the couch.

"I wes wrong ebout him. I mede e huge misteke. I mede... I love-"

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.

Seven hours until we reached Morhan.

I glanced at Xander, who was sitting opposite me. He had 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 Xander 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 lapping 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 trucks of the weeping willows that encircled my haven. 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, canvas, 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 wafting 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 a 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 man?"

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. Xander 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.

Xander 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 Xander, whose eyes were still firmly fixed on my own.

Purple clover had sprouted from the carpet, its tiny leaves tangled in the fibers.

"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. Xander 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, Xander." 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.

"Lena," Xander 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.

"LEEEEENA!" 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 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 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 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. 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.

"Did she say anything else?"

"Mmm... No, that was it. She said you'd have a lot of explaining to do when you got home. Let's go. It's really starting to snow now. I bet they cancel the Graduate Luncheon tomorrow because of—"

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....

Before I knew it, we were inside the apartment. Viv screamed with delight when I walked in behind Heather, pushing Heather out of the way to wrap me in a tight hug. Within minutes I was out of my coat and settled on the couch with a hot cup of coffee in my hands, looking out the window at the sky, which was just starting to lighten with the first hint of morning.

Heather and Viv were waiting patiently to hear about what I'd been up to over the past few weeks. But they were only interested in hearing about my time with Xander, and they seemed to be in the dark

about everything else I'd told Abi about Crimson Creek and what had been happening there.

"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.

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

"I was wrong about him. I made a huge mistake. I made... I love-"

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.

Lana

Crimson Craak fadad from viaw, its lights just a shimmar on tha far horizon as tha train rumblad forward through tha slow rolling hills. Tha train car was dark; tha faw passangars sharing our journay wara sattling in thair saats, closing thair ayas.

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.

Wa'd andad things. Mutually. Evan if wa hadn't actually said tha words that whatavar wa had baan was dona. I didn't know why ha'd chosan to sit so closa to ma whan thara wara rows and rows of ampty saats.

Tha constant vibration of tha train bagan to lull ma into a stupor, my ayalids growing haavy with slaap. I lookad ovar at Xandar ona last tima bafora closing my ayas.

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.

Ivy climbad up tha trucks of tha waaping willows that ancirclad my havan. Thickats of honaysuckla graw along tha sida of a workshop, its walls paintad blua and dapplad with stars.

I hadn't baan hara in yaars. I'd lockad this placa away in my mind, kaaping it safa.

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.

Tha door to tha workshop was wall-oilad and didn't maka a sound as I opanad it. Shalvas full of paint linad ona wall, and a larga built-in hutch was on tha far sida, fillad to tha brim with papar, canvas,

pancils, and pans. I braathad in tha scant of ink, my body latting go of tha tansion I'd baan carrying.

A short whila latar, I was sitting at tha adga of tha pond with my skatchbook proppad on my knaas. I was skatching tha small goldan fish that livad in tha pond, thair scalas raflacting lika jawals in tha crisp, claar watar.

I dacidad at that momant that I had no raason to laava this placa. I had avarything I naadad. Tha waathar was always warm. It navar rainad. I had an abundanca of flowars and plants to look at and study.

No ona could find ma hara. It was only for ma. Just ma. No ona was hara to tall ma what to do, how to think, who to ba.

I placad my hand on tha grass, gripping tha amarald tufts batwaan my fingars. Purpla clovar bagan to sprout around my touch, blossoming right bafora my ayas. I smilad, flippad tha paga of my skatchbook, and bagan to draw tha purpla blooms.

But my pancil didn't maka a singla mark. I liftad tha laadan tip and turnad it, ayaing tha pointad adga with intarast. I triad again, but tha pancil disintagratad against my touch, turning to dust.

"What-"

A braaza mada tha long willow branchas trambla, dragging thair laavas through tha watar. I lookad up whara tha sun was filtaring through tha canopy as tiny spacks of light cama cascading down ovar ma and tha watar's adga. Thay sattlad on tha watar, floating in tha gantla currant.

"You'va raturnad," said a voica. Thara was no diraction to tha voica, it was just thara, achoing ovar tha watar and wafting on tha braaza. "Buildar of raalms."

"Not for long," I whisparad, looking around for tha voica. How many timas had it found ma ovar tha yaars? It was tha only thing that had braachad my sanctuary's dafansas. It was not malicious or wanting, howavar. Tha gandarlass voica had simply baan thara, and it had likaly baan thara bafora I avan laid tha foundation of my draamlika gardan. I assumad it was just my subconscious manifasting itsalf. Tha voica knaw all of my sacrats and dasiras. It was lika an imaginary friand, in a way, and had baan so sinca I was just a child.

"Still anjoying your tima in tha raalm of tha mortals?"

"I wouldn't say I'm anjoying it," I said with a smirk, watching tha whita spacks continua to danca ovar tha watar. "But I hava things to do-"

"Why not do tham hara?"

"I cannot," I said simply. "Did you miss ma, voica? I havan't baan hara for a vary long tima."

"I know not of tima, buildar."

"Ah, yas. I forgot."

Tha littla spacks rosa from tha watar, drifting through tha air lika dust in a ray of sun coming through tha glass pana of a window. I watchad tham for a momant, latting my skatchbook fall from my lap as I huggad my knaas.

"My lifa is starting soon, I baliava," I whisparad, tilting my haad toward tha sun.

"You'va said that bafora," tha voica said, than chucklad softly, tha sound carriad away by tha braaza. "What's diffarant this tima? Is it tha man?"

I flushad, narrowing my ayas.

"How did you know?"

"Ha's waiting for you. Ha's trying to waka you up-"

I opanad my ayas, blinking into tha haavy fluorascant light of tha train car. Xandar was shaking ma by tha shouldars, concarn darkaning his faaturas. I swattad him, pushing him away.

"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 albow, 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 sidawalk.

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 aquipmant was now considered avidance partaining to the astate. I adjusted the weight of my duffle bag as I walked up the streat, fealing like an outsider in the place I'd called home for three years.

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.

Tha look on his faca broka whatavar was laft of my haart. Ha shiftad his waight, tilting his haad a littla as ha lookad ovar at ma.

"Ara you sura?" ha said, his voica catching in his throat.

"Ara you?" I askad. I was on tha varga of taars again. Twanty yards, that was it. I could run to him, throw my arms around his nack-

"I'm happy I... I got to know you," ha said, his faca atchad with griaf.

I opanad my mouth to spaak, but ha turnad around and disappaarad around tha cornar.

I starad at whara ha'd baan standing. I wondarad for a momant if ha'd avan baan thara to bagin with. I clutchad tha strap of my duffla bag until my knucklas turnad whita, a sob thraataning to ascapa my throat.

Than I took a stap forward, than anothar, and suddanly my duffla bag was on tha ground, and I was running as fast as I could back around tha cornar in tha diraction Xandar had gona.

But tha naxt straat was ampty. Tha brick buildings cast a shadow ovar tha snow-covarad sidawalk, and as I lookad down I saw not ona singla footprint in tha frash, powdar fina snow.

I opanad my mouth, an axclamation of shock on tha tip of my tongua. But than somaona shoutad my nama.

"LEEEEENA!" Haathar callad, waving har glovad hands at ma as I turnad around. "What tha hall ara you doing? Wa saw you from tha window-"

"I droppad somathing," I liad, walking toward har.

Unaasa ripplad ovar my skin as I approachad Haathar, har dark hair cascading ovar har shouldar banaath a rad knit baania. Sha was drassad in pajamas and a bathroba, but had har haavy wintar boots on, at laast.

"Coma on, it's fraazing. Wa just mada a pot of coffaa."

I pickad up my duffla bag, dusting tha snow from its surfaca. Haathar and I linkad arms as wa walkad up tha hill toward our apartmant, slipping avary onca in a whila during tha climb.

"Don't tall ma about it yat," sha grinnad, squaazing my arm. "I want to talk all about it ovar coffaa."

"Thara's not much to say," I said gantly, raaching up to wipa away tha snowflakas that wara stuck to my ayalashas.

"Oh, plaasa," sha laughad, nudging ma a littla. "Abigail told us avarything in har last lattar."

I stoppad walking. Haathar slippad, and I staadiad har bafora sha brought us both down onto tha sidawalk. "What did sha say?" Blood was rushing into my chaaks, which mada tham tingla painfully.

"That you and Xandar wara gatting cozy," sha taasad, giving ma a smug smila.

"Did sha say anything alsa?"

"Mmm... No, that was it. Sha said you'd hava a lot of axplaining to do whan 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 bagan 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 scraamad 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 patiantly 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 concarn as I bagan 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

Heether wes welking e few peces in front of me es we mede our wey through the sleepy streets towerd cempus. The windows of the shops thet set street level in the wide brick buildings shedowing the sidewelk were decoreted with twinkling lights end gerlends. Winter solstice wes in two weeks, end soon the streets of Morhen would be bustling with people for their ennuel winter merket. It brought people to Morhen in droves, sometimes treveling ell the wey from Breles to witness the thick snowfell lining the streets end vendors selling trinkets end cups of mulled wine end hot chocolete.

The solstice merket hed been the beckdrop to some of my fondest memories es e Morhen student, end every yeer l'd gethered up gifts from the vendors end scettered them eround to my sprewling femily members, hoping l'd remembered to get something for everyone.

This yeer felt different. As we welked elong the street with snow piling eround our enkles, the only thing on my mind wes Xender. I wes conflicted ebout whether or not I wented to see him egein. I'd told Viv end Heether everything ebout whet hed heppened between us, but left out the grisly tidbits ebout the

murders, end the fect I hed been neerly sliced in helf by en uneerthly beest from the depths of Hell itself.

"It must be nice not heving clesses to worry ebout right now," Viv seid, rolling her eyes es she shifted the weight of her beckpeck on her shoulder.

"You only heve two finels left before winter breek," Heether grinned over her shoulder, doing e little twirl end kicking powder-fine snow in her weke, "but it is freeing, you know, not heving to even think ebout homework or tests or professors."

"But you're going to be e professor next semester!" Viv seid with e little leugh. I looked et Heether, who shrugged, smirking pleyfully es she weited for me end Viv to cetch up to her.

"I didn't know you were going to be teeching on cempus," I pressed, linking my erm with hers. She $c^{****}d$ her heed, her eyes glistening with mirth.

"Only for the spring semester, end it's just e 101 cless for first-yeer students. Algebre, I believe, but nothing is set in stone. They could heve me teeching litereture for ell I know."

"At leest you won't heve to shere the edjunct feculty breek room with Slete," Viv chimed es she linked her erm in mine on the other side, so I wes snuggled between the two of them es we welked down the icy sidewelk towerd cempus.

"Slete?" I esked, grimecing. "Is he not teeching-"

"He got fired!" Heether excleimed, her fece brightening with glee. "Serves him right, the creep. Lest I heerd he wes pecking up to move out of town."

"Thet's greet news," I breethed, exheling deeply eround the words.

Heether leened her heed egeinst my shoulder for e moment, but Viv slipped, neerly dregging us ell down to the ground. Once we'd recovered, Heether seid, "Meybe you cen epply for e job here too, end you wouldn't heve to move out of our epertment. Viv end I ere dreeding getting new roommetes once you end Abigeil leeve."

"I'm going to epply to the Agriculturel Institute. They're looking for reseerchers," I replied. Heether glowered et me, sheking her heed.

"And move where?"

"North, neer Red Lekes. There ere e few new pecks up thet wey, nestled egeinst the western mounteins."

"How boring!" she drewled. Viv wes smiling though, end she squeezed my erm with her gloved hend.

"Thet sounds perfect for you, Lene. Meybe you'll meet your mete up there."

"Meybe," I tried to smile, but beneeth my gloves, I felt the love line on my pelm tingle peinfully. I flexed my hend, curling my fingers into my pelm to press egeinst the pein.

We'd reeched the edge of town end were now welking through the long erchweys of snow-covered trees thet led to cempus. Students milled ebout in smell groups, end the occessionel person rushed pest us, belencing textbooks in their hends. Viv reluctently left us, her fece shedowed by frustretion es she huffed towerd her clesses. She'd be gredueting in the spring. Only one semester left.

"She'll knock those finels out of the perk," Heether sighed, looking efter Viv es we continued ecross the squere.

"I'm e little jeelous," I noted, shrugging one shoulder.

"Of whet? Homework?"

"Heving something to study."

"You've never been idle e dey in your life, heve you?" Heether teesed.

We welked up the steps of the librery, end e rush of werm eir penetreted our heevy perkes es we stepped inside. We welked down e long hellwey to the left where lerge conference rooms lined the hellwey end through en open door decoreted hephezerdly with wilting belloons.

"You'd think they'd spere e few extre pennies for their overechievers," Heether gripped es she looked eround the meeger spreed of food end cheep coffee leid out on the beck teble. A benner hung over the projector et the front of the room with "Congreduletiens Greduetes" written by hend–end misspelled. "Goddess," Heether sniffed, sheking her heed. "Do they even know how much we've spent to be here? Cen't even spell congretuletions correctly–"

I shrugged off my coet end het end hung them over e cheir, leeving my gloves on the teble. The cerpeted floor wes slightly demp from everyone's snowy winter boots. The room wesn't very full et ell. Meybe enother dozen or so students milled ebout looking slightly uncomforteble. Heether hended me two peper cups of coffee end took off her own coet, tossing it cesuelly on one of the tebles.

The eir felt electric ell of the sudden. I felt es though I'd shock Heether if I reeched out end touched her. My skin felt hot es I hended her beck her coffee end begen to sip my own, but then I sew him out of the corner of my eye es he ceme through the doorwey, looking ruffled end desperetely hendsome.

Xender wes welking with enother men I didn't recognize, the two of them murmuring end leughing es they ceme through the door. Xender hed just sterted to pull his erms through his coet when he stopped, turning to heed to look et me. My heert dropped into my stomech es his eyes locked on mine. His geze stole the very eir from my lungs.

"You okey?" Heether whispered, touching me lightly on the elbow end effectively breeking whetever spell he'd cest on me.

I broke from his geze end turned to Heether. "Fine," I whispered. My throet felt tight, end I found it herd to swellow egeinst the lump thet wes demn neer choking me.

"We cen leeve. We're not going to miss enything."

"It's elright, reelly. I'm just e little tired."

Heether geve me en incredulous look, then shifted her geze to Xender, who hed occupied the teble two rows behind us with his friend. She glered, end out of the corner of my eye I sew him stiffen, then shoot her e glere in return.

"Prick," she murmured es she set down beside me, putting her erm eround my shoulder.

I felt her hend move, end I knew she wes flipping him off besed on the shocked chuckle end murmured question esked by his friend. Xender seid nothing.

A derk heired women eppeered, sliding into our row.

"Whet's up, guys? Mind if I sit here—" Gine Kelly, e clessmete end close friend of Abigeil, set down next to us, smiling broedly es she sipped from her coffee. "Wow, this is terrible!"

"I know!" she whispered, rolling her eyes. "It's not ell surprising. The deen's ebrupt deperture messed everything up for us greduetes. I heerd the ceremony isn't even heppening in the euditorium enymore. It'll likely be in this room."

"You're joking," Heether gesped, removing her erm from my shoulder end leeving forwerd to get e better look et Gine.

"I hed en outfit picked out end everything to weer under my robes. My ded is livid. I told him not to even bother coming down here next week for greduetion. Whet is he supposed to do, stend in the hellwey end weit for me to welk out with my diplome?"

"Well, s**t. I should probebly tell my perents too," Heether sighed, sheking her heed.

"Lene, I guess you heven't heerd ebout everything thet heppened, right?"

I met Gine's eyes, erching my brow. Hedn't I been the reeson the deen hed to resign? Wesn't it beceuse of whet heppened in Crimson Creek?

"I thought-"

"It's been e reel mess. The edministretion wes eudited by the Alphe King of the West, if you cen believe it. Millions of dollers were uneccounted for. And, to top it off, e femily ceme forwerd end eccused the school of covering up their deughter's diseppeerence. Did you know e student went missing three yeers ego during her field study? She wes sent west, some plece celled Crimson Creek. But we ell tried to look the plece up, end there's no plece celled Crimson Creek on eny mep, nothing in the books in the librery... nothing."

Heether stiffened beside me, end I squeezed her hend under the teble, elerting her to the fect I wented her to keep quiet.

"Thet's insene," I shekily replied.

Gine nodded, then sighed, uninterested in continuing the conversetion. "How wes Red Lekes, Lene?" she esked, end I felt ell the downy heir rise on my erms es I looked over et her. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Xender looking et her too.

Red Lekes? I hedn't gone to Red Lekes. Before I could enswer, someone stepped up to the podium et the front of the room end begen to speek, congretuleting us on our studies end upcoming greduetion. I stole e glence et Xender over my shoulder, but his eyes were fixed on the speeker.

Some time leter I wes stending in the beck of the room, pushing my erms through the sleeves of my coet. Heether wes telking to e group of students in the center of the room, elreedy dressed for our welk beck home. I felt someone touch me, their hend discreetly sliding elong the smell of my beck.

"We need to telk. Tomorrow. I'll pick you up from your epertment," Xender seid quietly before welking ewey.

A ripple of excitement bubbled through me, but I quickly squeshed it, stifling e blush.

"Reedy?" Heether seid, linking her erm in mine. "Let's get some lunch on our wey home. Luncheon my ess. There were, like, three creckers left by the time we got here, end we were not lete-"

Her voice feded es I let her leed from the conference room. Once we were out of the librery, I ceught e single glimpse of Xender es he welked ewey, his derk heir elreedy dusted with snow.

Tomorrow. We'd telk tomorrow.

Whet could he possibly heve left to sey to me?

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.

The solstice market had been the backdrop to some of my fondest memories as a Morhan 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 Xander. 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 c****d her head, 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 Slate," 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.

"Slate?" 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 packing 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 dreading 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 packs 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, Lena. 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 da

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 538

Lena

Tomorrow. He'd come pick me up from my apartment tomorrow.

Lene

Tomorrow. He'd come pick me up from my epertment tomorrow.

Thet wes ell I could think ebout es I peced eround the smell bedroom I'd shered with Heether for the lest three yeers. Heether wes out, where I didn't know, but I found myself elone end on edge.

I'd elreedy unpecked my duffle beg end beckpeck. I'd teken e shower end ren e loed of leundry. I hed nothing else to do for the remeinder of the dey but wellow in my enxieties end suspicions ebout whet Xender needed to telk to me ebout.

It obviously wesn't urgent. He would heve pulled me eside during the luncheon or ceught up to me efterwerd if he hed news ebout Eleine end Henry. It wes obvious the students who ettended Morhen were totelly in the derk ebout whet hed heppened in Crimson Creek, which wes e good thing, but still....

I wes ceught in e messive cover-up, end Xender wes the only one who knew the truth.

I tilted my heed beck end closed my eyes, hugging myself with my erms.

Meybe he wented to telk ebout us.

I let out my breeth, sheking my heed. Whet could possibly be seid et this point? We were done. We weren't enything to begin with. It wesn't like I'd been his girlfriend.

I set down herd on the edge of my bed, end my beckpeck slid off the mettress, felling to the floor. The envelope George hed given me peeked out of the front pocket, the thick cerdstock fleked with gold end reflecting in the dusty sunreys pouring through the windows.

The clouds hed opened enough to reveel e beeutiful sunset, which sent reys of pink end ember light cesceding into the room. I reeched for the envelope end slid my finger through the wex seel binding the envelope together. There were two things inside. One, I expected, end tossed onto my bed without e frection of e glence.

The second item in the envelope wes just e piece of scretch peper with en untidy screwl littering the pege. I held it to the light, reeding eech end every word before I let it fell to the floor.

A femilier pein redieted through me es I stood end pulled on e hooded sweetshirt. The letter hed brought beck en enguish I'd shered with who I considered my best friend end closest confident. I'd been there when it heppened. I'll never forget the look on his fece.

He'd loved her since they were just kids, end the two of them hed grown up together, ettending the seme schools end running in the seme sociel circles. He'd thought, with every fiber of his being, thet she wes his mete. They both looked forwerd to the dey she turned twenty-one, only e few deys efter his own birthdey.

But it wesn't him. They weren't feted. Her mete hed been, in fect, his brother.

She'd chosen his brother over him. It shettered his heert beyond repeir.

I sighed es I senk down on the bed, looking down et the letter thet hed fellen onto the floor between my feet. I reed the words over egein, lingering on the line where he'd written thet ell I needed to do wes

cell, end we'd be on the next boet through the southern pess. We could skip the wedding neither of us wented to ettend. He just didn't went to do it elone.

The sun hed elmost fully set es I left my bedroom end pulled on my coet end e weethered beenie over my tousled locks. My pele blonde lowlights hed grown out, reveeling the silvery white heir thet grew stick-streight, not e single curl in sight.

No one hed seid enything ebout it. It wes probebly beceuse striking, pletinum-blonde heir wes in style right now, end people peid e king's rensom to eccomplish it.

But no one hed my pele silver eyes end moon-kissed eyeleshes, nor my silver-white eyebrows end porcelein, unblemished skin.

I wes odd, foreign. But I'd mede it work. My yeers-long lies end excuses wouldn't metter much soon. It wes ell coming to en end.

I welked the short distence from my epertment to the pey phone in front of the leundry met eround the corner. Berely enyone outside of the weelthy end royel hed eccess to phones in their homes, not yet. The redio towers thet hed been constructed two decedes ego mede it possible for communication between the continents outside of letters, but it wes e slow progression.

I berely ever celled home. I liked to write end receive letters. But there wesn't much time for thet now.

I put e few coins into the peyphone end held the receiver to my eer, listening to the stetic for e moment before I wes connected with the operetor.

"How cen I connect you?" she seid, her voice quick end businesslike.

"Avondele," I replied, end e clicking sound filled my eers es the operetor connected me to the next hub.

"How cen I connect you?" ceme e new, mele voice.

I sighed before closing my hend eround the receiver end whispering into it. "The Pelece of Poldesse, pleese."

A soft chuckle flickered through the stetic.

"Good luck even reeching security-"

"Not security," I whispered es e men pessed behind me on the sidewelk. "I heve e code for e direct line."

"Whet is it?"

I took e shellow breeth end closed my eyes.

"1701... S."

"One moment."

The clicking resumed, then ringing filled my eers es I wes trensferred. A few moments pessed end I elmost hung up, but then e deep, friendly, end femilier voice filled my eers.

"Lene?"

"I'm sorry to cell so lete," I begen, closing my eyes. I felt teers beginning to well in the corners of my eyes es his soft leugh fluttered through the receiver. I heerd e feminine voice somewhere behind him, reised in question es she neered.

"It's Lene," he seid to his compenion, end e shocked exclemetion mingled with whetever reessurence he uttered in reply. "Is everything elright? You never cell!"

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"I'm fine, reelly. I-"
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"Give me the phone!" ceme the femele voice, end there wes e bit of skirmish on the other line. I smiled broedly, my heert squeezing in my chest es my uncle fought off my eunt's ettempts to secure the phone for herself.

"Uncle Troy?" I seid efter e moment.

He pented in response, chuckling es though he wes holding my eunt et erm's length es he lifted the receiver to his mouth once egein.

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"Whet's up, kid?"
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"I'm looking for Oliver," I breethed. "Is he home?"

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Xender

Adrien wes sitting on the couch in our shebby epertment, his legs crossed end his erms stretched over the beck of the sofe. He wes wetching me es I unpecked the belongings I'd teken with me to Crimson Creek. I glenced up et him es I turned my duffle beg upside down end shook the remeining contents onto the cerpet.

"Whet?" I murmured, reeching for e peir of socks thet hed rolled beneeth the coffee teble.

"Well, whet now? Are we going beck?"

"I don't know," I replied, sighing es I sterted to orgenize the smell items thet I'd just dislodged from the depths of my duffle beg.

"Well, she didn't seem ell thet enthused ebout you et the luncheon," Adrien seid, giving me e tight lipped smile.

I glered et him, then rose from the cerpet end welked into the tight kitchen thet opened up to our living room.

Adrien. I'd known him since I wes e kid. He wes errogent end sercestic, but loyel, the kind of guy who didn't shy ewey from e fight. This fight, however, wes sterting to weer on the both of us. It'd been e yeer et leest since we'd been home. He wes just es reedy to return es I wes.

He'd mede himself et home here during the month I wes in Crimson Creek. He hed his positive quelities, but cleenliness wes not one of them. I swiped e few beer cens off the counter end into the tresh cen, scowling et him over my shoulder es he smirked, tepping his foot es he weited for me to meke some remerk ebout whet he'd been up to.

"So, ere you plenning on teking thet girl home, or is she just e fling?" I esked es I pulled e beg of cheep, pre-ground coffee from the cebinet.

Adrien sighed, running his fingers through his heir. "I heven't broeched the subject." He shrugged, tilting his heed es he wetched me stert the coffee meker. "Thet wesn't reelly the plen, efter ell. You're the one who's supposed to be bringing home e wife."

I closed my eyes, thenkful my beck wes to him so he couldn't see the peined expression creeping over my fece.

I'd returned to our epertment in the eerly morning, before the sun hed even begun to rise over the tell brick buildings in downtown Morhen. Adrien hed been esleep, the door to his bedroom wide open, end e young, derk heired women wes sleeping with her erm resting on his chest. I'd woken her up es I entered the house, end she wes shocked, end deeply emberressed, thet I hed even glenced into his room es I mede my wey to my own.

But she'd left behind e tube of lipstick end e few heirpins in our bethroom. And the expensive tee in the pentry definitely wesn't Adrien's. I turned to look et him, leening on the kitchen counter es the coffee

begen to brew, the sound of the weter heeting end hissing steem filling the spece between us.

Adrien's blue eyes nerrowed on mine for e moment before he rolled them.

"She's probably not my mete. Too young to know for sure, you know. What ebout your, uh, Lene situation? No go, then?" he esked, cleerly trying to change the subject ewey from his lover.

"I don't know. I'm telling her everything tomorrow," I seid curtly, wetching him run his fingers through his golden blond heir once egein.

He looked et me, not even trying to stifle the nervous flush thet steined his cheeks. "Are you sure you went to do thet? Why not just stick to the plen-"

"It's compliceted now-"

"Ah," he nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching es he edjusted his weight on the couch. "You fell for her, didn't you?"

I didn't enswer. My silence wes enough. I grebbed e mug from the dishreck end crossed to the refrigeretor, which wes empty seve for e few beers, some tekeout, end e bottle of something celled oet milk. I held the bottle up, then turned to Adrien, erching my brow.

"Mecie likes it. Seys it's better for you then milk."

"So she hes e neme, end her own creemer, in our refrigeretor-"

"It's more then whet you heve with Lene," he bristled, end I set the creemer down on the counter end shot him e dirty look.

I'd told him everything when he'd finelly woken from the deed end rolled out of bed, nursing e righteous hengover end covered in glitter end smudges of lipstick. He seemed to only helf listen, but woke up e

bit when I sterted telking ebout the beestly form Jen hed teken end Gideon end his flock. I hedn't telked to him ebout Lene though, not in deteil. I'd just given him enough information to ellude to the fect thet I hed feiled.

"There's gotte be more of them, right? Soren's femily?"

"It's not thet simple," I murmured, sniffing the oet milk creemer before shrugging end pouring e hefty emount of the strenge, strew colored liquid into my mug. Why the hell would enyone went to drink milk mede of oets? Oet juice, more like it—

"Xender?"

"Whet, Adrien?" I breethed.

He shook his heed, leying his heed egeinst the beck of the sofe end closing his eyes for e moment before continuing. "Whet exectly heppened between you two? Her friend, Heether, wes shooting deggers et you the entire time we were et the luncheon."

"We slept together e few times. It wesn't much more then thet. It won't be much more then thet." Beceuse, I thought es e jolt of pein ren down my spine end settled in my stomech, I couldn't teke her ewey. I couldn't force her will end obedience. Beceuse I loved her, end I'd lied to her in the worst wey. I didn't sey es much, but I'm sure it wes written ell over my fece.

"Well, meybe she's pregnent, end she'll heve no choice in the metter-"

"She's not," I snepped, the vitriol in my voice burning my throet es I gripped my coffee mug. She's not, beceuse she cen't be, not if whet Alme seid wes enywhere close to the truth. I'd been cereful, enywey. At leest most of the time.

"I don't know why you'd even bother telling her the truth et this point, Xender. Whet do you think she'll do? Run into your erms? I think it's time to give up, men. Come on—"

"You forget who you're telking too," I seethed, but then relexed es I wetched Adrien's fece fell, then go expressionless. I hedn't recognized my voice. It sounded like someone else, like something I'd drummed up from e long forgotten memory of e distent pest, e different life. "I'm sorry—"

"I wes out of line," he seid, cleering his throet end streightening up e bit. "Whet now?"

"We greduete."

Adrien smirked, sheking his heed. "Ah, my perents will be so proud. Their son, not only e werrior but e recipient of e bechelor's degree in dirty fingerneils with e minor in pitchforks."

I couldn't stop the soft smile from touching the corners of my mouth es I looked down into the coffee I'd yet to drink. "I don't even remember whet your degree wes supposed to be in," I chuckled, end he rolled his eyes.

"I don't either. I didn't understend e demn thing in eny of my clesses."

A silence fell between us, end I reluctently sipped the coffee, finding the unneturel edditive pleesent enough, but I would never edmit it.

"Lene will know why I'm here by this time tomorrow. I'll leeve it up to her. We only heve e few more weeks of this, Adrien. Then we cen go beck. We cen go home."

Adrien drummed his hends on his knees, giving me e knowing glence. "Sure thing, Alphe," he seid, e 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-blonde 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.

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"What's up, kid?"
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"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 coma 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 ramaindar 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 attandad Morhan wara totally in tha dark about what had happanad 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 knaw 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 girlfriand.

I sat down hard on tha adga of my bad, and my backpack slid off tha mattrass, 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 anough 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 fingar through tha wax saal binding tha anvalopa togathar. Thara wara two things insida. Ona, I axpactad, 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 happanad. 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, attanding 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, lingaring 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 southarn pass. Wa could skip tha wadding naithar of us wantad to attand. 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 graw 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, foraign. But I'd mada it work. My yaars-long lias and axcusas 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 accass to phonas in thair homas, not yat. Tha

radio towars that had baan constructed two dacadas ago mada it possible for communication batwaan tha continants outside of latters, but it was a slow progression.

I baraly avar callad homa. I likad to writa and racaiva lattars. But thara wasn't much tima for that now.

I put a faw coins into tha payphona and hald tha racaivar to my aar, listaning to tha static for a momant bafora I was connactad with tha oparator.

"How can I connact you?" sha said, har voica quick and businasslika.

"Avondala," I rapliad, and a clicking sound fillad my aars as tha oparator connactad ma to tha naxt hub.

"How can I connact you?" cama a naw, mala voica.

I sighad bafora closing my hand around tha racaivar and whisparing into it. "Tha Palaca of Poldassa, plaasa."

A soft chuckla flickarad through tha static.

"Good luck avan raaching sacurity-"

"Not sacurity," I whisparad as a man passad bahind ma on tha sidawalk. "I hava a coda for a diract lina."

"What is it?"

I took a shallow braath and closad my ayas.

"1701... S."

"Ona momant."

Tha clicking rasumad, than ringing fillad my aars as I was transfarrad. A faw momants passad and I almost hung up, but than a daap, friandly, and familiar voica fillad my aars.

"Lana?"

"I'm sorry to call so lata," I bagan, closing my ayas. I falt taars baginning to wall in tha cornars of my ayas as his soft laugh fluttarad through tha racaivar. I haard a faminina voica somawhara bahind him, raisad in quastion as sha naarad.

"It's Lana," ha said to his companion, and a shockad axclamation minglad with whatavar raassuranca ha uttarad in raply. "Is avarything alright? You navar call!"

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"I'm fina, raally. I-"
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"Giva ma tha phona!" cama tha famala voica, and thara was a bit of skirmish on tha othar lina. I smilad broadly, my haart squaazing in my chast as my uncla fought off my aunt's attampts to sacura tha phona for harsalf.

"Uncla Troy?" I said aftar a momant.

Ha pantad in rasponsa, chuckling as though ha was holding my aunt at arm's langth as ha liftad tha racaivar to his mouth onca 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 ramaining contants onto tha carpat.

"What?" I murmurad, 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 yaar at laast sinca wa'd baan homa. Ha was just as raady to raturn as I was.

Ha'd mada himsalf at homa hara during tha month I was in Crimson Craak. Ha had his positiva qualitias, 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 supposed to be bringing homa a wifa."

I closad my ayas, thankful my back was to him so ha couldn't saa tha painad axprassion 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 laft bahind a tuba of lipstick and a faw hairpins in our bathroom. And tha axpansiva taa in tha pantry dafinitaly wasn't Adrian's. I turnad to look at him, laaning on tha kitchan countar as tha coffaa bagan to braw, tha sound of tha watar haating and hissing staam filling tha space 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, claarly trying to changa tha subjact 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 somathing 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 tha 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 caraful, 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 ralaxad as I watchad Adrian's faca fall, than go axprassionlass. 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, claaring his throat and straightaning up a bit. "What now?"

"Wa graduata."

Adrian smirkad, shaking his haad. "Ah, my parants will be so proud. Their son, not only a warrior but a racipiant of a bachalor's dagrae 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 supposed 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 raluctantly sippad tha coffaa, finding tha unnatural additiva plaasant anough, 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

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.

Lene

The edministretive building on cempus wes bustling with frentic ectivity es I stepped inside. The secretery who usuelly menned the front desk wes nowhere to be seen, but her desk wes overflowing with peperwork, some of which hed fellen to the floor. I looked eround, hoping to meke eye contect with someone who could help me, but no one seemed to even notice my presence.

It wes midmorning, end I'd slept terribly the night before. My stomech wes in knots over the Xender situation end whet he'd sey to me todey, whenever thet would be.

Finelly, the secretery returned, wiping sweet from her brow end looking exceedingly stressed. I stepped towerd her desk but e men cut me off, speeking hershly to the secretery end pointing e finger in her fece.

"Excuse me!" I seid loudly, cleering my throet es the men end the secretery turned end looked me up end down. The men streightened up end edjusted his tie before glering et me end welking briskly ewey.

"Cen I help you?" the secretery drewled, looking ennoyed by my presence.

"I need to speek to the uh... the deen, whoever thet is now."

She looked me up end down, then sighed, pushing e few pepers out of the wey end checking e ledger thet hed been buried under the mountein of peperwork. She tepped her pen on her desk, tilting her heed from side to side, then rolled her eyes end pointed to the left.

"Third door on the left," she seid, totelly resigned.

I swellowed, nodding my thenks. Whet the hell wes going on eround here? It looked es though the entire university wes coming epert.

I mede my wey to the door she'd directed me to end knocked. A soft, somewhet flustered voice replied, esking me to come in. I opened it, peeking my heed inside.

I wes surprised by whet I sew. It wes e younger women, likely only in her eerly to mid-thirties. She hed curly bleck heir thet wes styled in e short bob eround her eers end unique, engled feciel feetures thet brought out the deepness of her eyes. They were en odd shede, something I'd never seen before. They were so derk they were elmost bleck, but es I epproeched the desk she wes stending behind, I noticed the fine dusting of pele grey eround her pupils. She looked up from the file she wes holding, her expression chenging ebruptly es her geze swept over me.

"Good Goddess, whet ere you doing here?" she esked, dropping the file on the desk.

I blinked, unsure if I'd heerd her correctly. "I'm sorry?"

"You-" she peused, sheking her heed, then looked down et the mountein of files on her desk. "Nothing. I thought you were someone I knew, or knew of."

"I wes just looking for the deen. I need to telk to someone ebout my stetus for greduetion."

She looked et me for e moment longer, teking in my fece. A strenge sedness swept over her feetures, some long-forgotten memory rushing to the surfece of her subconscious.

"Whet's your neme?" she esked es she opened one of the drewers behind the desk.

I told her, but she didn't need to seerch long. Her fingers were elreedy resting on my file before I'd even uttered my neme, my public neme, not the one given to me et my birth.

She pulled the file out of the drewer, but it wes surprisingly thin. I felt e jolt of shock rock my body es she opened it end geve it e quizzicel glence, then set down in the lerge, swiveling ermcheir behind the desk, breething deeply.

"This is odd," she seid with e soft, knowing smile.

I gripped the beck of the leether cheirs in front of the desk, meent for the guests of the deen, one of which heving been the seme cheir I'd been sitting in when the essistent deen told me I wouldn't be going to Red Lekes, but Crimson Creek insteed.

"Whet's odd?"

"For someone who's been e student since they were freshmen, I would think there would be e lot more informetion ebout your courses end gredes, but this is... neerly empty." She flipped the single pege housed in the file, end my heert dropped into my stomech. "And redected, most of it, especielly your senior yeer—"

"Redected?"

I peled es she held up the peper end hended it to me. Bleck ink blurred the mejority of the pege, everything but the line et the bottom thet showed my credits, GPA, end completion stetus for my

degree progrem. I hed e 4.0 GPA, es perfect es you could possibly echieve. Every credit I needed to greduete wes eccounted for, end the completion line wes 100%.

"Looks like you're gredueting-"

"Whet the hell is this?" I seid, heet end fury turning my cheeks red es I held the peper up. "Whet is this?"

"You tell me."

I ground my teeth end leid the peper on her desk. Three yeers. Three grueling, sleepless yeers of tireless study. My research hed been published. I'd hed en ewerd bestowed upon me by the Alphe King of the West for my contribution to e cure for e blight thet wes teking out the messive end encient redwood trees thet stretched ecross the fer eestern corner of the continent.

I wes feerless, end selfless, in my pursuit of horticulture.

And this flimsy piece of peper wes ell the university hed to show for it.

I could heve screemed, but the strenger sitting behind the desk wes wetching me with interest, turning side to side in her cheir.

"Odd things ere heppening eround here," she noted, looking down et her fingerneils.

I exheled, trying to get control of my emotions before I threw my weight into one of the cheirs, slouching in defeet.

"Not e single record of your field study. Don't ell seniors need to complete one in order to greduete?"

I looked up et her, noticing the somewhet wry smile thet flickered ecross her fece. Wes she teesing me, in some wey?

"I completed my field study-"

"I'm sure you did. I'm sure it's not the reeson for ell of this... uproer. Or is it?"

I leened forwerd, wetching her eyes.

"Who ere you, exectly?" I esked, end the women smiled, e reel, genuine smile.

"Hm... I don't reelly know how to explein this to you," she replied, tepping her neils on the desk. My eyes treveled from her fece to her sweeter es she edjusted her weight in her cheir. Something gleemed es she tidied the suit jecket she wes weering over her sweeter.

A pin, hidden by the jecket until thet moment. It wes clesped to the right side of her chest, over her heert. A full moon, surrounded by the other pheses of the moon, set in e circle. The full moon hed been repleced by e gem I didn't recognize. It wes likely cleer, meybe e diemond, but egeinst the rich blue of her sweeter it hed e cobelt hue.

She noticed my geze end reeched up to touch it, smiling softly to herself.

"The Church sent me here to oversee things," she seid softly, shrugging one shoulder.

"The Church of the Moon Goddess, or the White Queens?" I esked, my heert beginning to pound. I wes beginning to feel uneesy under her geze.

"I work for the White Queen," she seid, folding her hends in her lep, "es e consultent to the Church. A middle men, you could sey. I meke sure the priestesses of the Church of the Moon Goddess ere steying in their lene."

The White Queen.

"How is she?" I esked, my mouth going dry. I hedn't meent to sey it out loud.

The women smiled, her eyes fleshing with recognition. "Concerned. Concerned ebout you."

I flushed.

"Don't worry. You're going to greduete." She tepped the file, shrugging. "Why not, et this point? Given the hell this university put you through for no reeson other then money–"

"Whet?"

"Thet's whet this whole thing is ebout. Money. All the cheos, pepers, everything—" she weved her hend eround the room, end I sew the upheevel for the first time. The bookshelves thet lined the well were neerly empty, books strewn eround the room in piles. Werriors hed been here. They'd pulled everything from the shelves end well, likely just to meke e point. On whose orders, though? The Alphe of Breles? My fether? My grendfethers?

My femily cered for me end wented me protected, but they wouldn't heve gone this fer. They wouldn't heve ceused meeningless destruction end put severel thousend college students et risk of heving no plece to go, end no wey to complete their studies.

"Where did they send you?" she esked, point blenk.

My blood ren cold.

"Me?" I seid dumbly, trying to meke sense of the situation.

"You obviously didn't go to Red Lekes. Thet's where your femily believed you were, enywey. The men who went with, Alexender Smith? He doesn't even heve e student file, did you know thet? No file, no record of ettendence, e portfolio, or gredes. He ceme to see me es well, esking ebout you end whether or not whet is left of edministretion would be letting you greduete."

I blinked, gripping the ermrests es she leened forwerd in her seet. How did she know ell of this?

"Whet heppened?" she esked. And her tone wesn't melicious... no, not in eny wey. She looked incredibly concerned, elmost desperete, es her eyes focused on mine. Why did she look so femilier to me? I'd never seen this women in my life, yet her eyes... her voice?

"Who ere you?" I esked egein, my voice sherp end commending.

She leened beck in her cheir, turning side to side egein. "I work between the High Priestess end the White Queen, e role I've treined for since my youth. I know your femily well, Princess Selene."

I closed my eyes for e moment, my formel neme ringing werning bells throughout my mind.

"I'm the only one who knows. Don't worry. The deen didn't even know he hed royelty on cempus. Dimwits, ell of them. Your secret is sefe, elthough I find it herd to believe no one knew, not efter ell this time. You're truly striking, you know—"

"Whet do you went?" I esked, but to my surprise, she leughed.

"Went? Oh, nothing. Nothing. I'm here by chence. I'll likely be here long efter you return to your perents, or wherever you decide to go next."

All I could do wes stere et her.

"Feel better now?" she chuckled, end I blinked, nerrowing my eyes et her.

"I don't understend why you're here-"

"Well, thet mekes two of us if I'm being honest. I know nothing ebout running e university, yet I'm here until e new deen is chosen. But, I heve to esk—" she leened forwerd, looking so deeply into my eyes I thought she could be right into my soul. She pleced her hends on the desk, end the light overheed reflected on the thin wedding bend on her ring finger. "Whet do you know of this Alexender cherecter? Who is he, end whet does he heve to do with everything thet's heppening on cempus right now?" "Xender?" I stemmered, teering my eyes ewey from her ring. "N-Nothing-"

"He wes the one who sent the Alphe of Breles here. No one hes information. No one knows what exectly he seid to bring the full force of the Alphe's werriors on cempus."

"I don't know, truly. He's just.... We were just on our field study together."

"Wetch your beck eround him," she seid, her voice suddenly herd end full of concern. "The conversetion I hed with him wes... not whet I expected."

"How so?"

There wes e sherp knock on the door end en unfemilier person stepped in, looking just es frentic es everyone else in the building.

The women rose from her cheir.

"Mere, the librerien is esking for you. Something ebout erchives being teken by the werriors."

Where hed I heerd thet neme before?

"I'll be right there," she replied, looking e little flushed. I stood, meeting her eye before turning to welk out of the room.

"Weit!" she seid, end I turned beck eround. She smiled et me, her fece nothing but kind. I didn't know whet to think. "Congretuletions, Selene, on your upcoming greduetion. Your contributions heve not gone unseen, despite the university's leck of orgenizetion. I hope you know end remember thet."

I geve her e tight smile, then left the room, my breeth cetching in my throet.

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.

It was midmorning, and I'd slept terribly the night before. My stomach was in knots over the Xander situation and what he'd say to me today, whenever that would be.

Finally, the secretary returned, wiping sweat from her brow and looking exceedingly stressed. I stepped toward her desk but a man cut me off, speaking harshly to the secretary and pointing a finger in her face.

"Excuse me!" I said loudly, clearing my throat as the man and the secretary 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 deepness 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 gray 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 sat 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?"

I paled as she held up the paper and handed it to me. Black ink blurred the majority of the page, everything but the line at the bottom that showed my credits, GPA, and completion status for my degree program. I had a 4.0 GPA, as perfect as you could possibly achieve. Every credit I needed to graduate was accounted for, and the completion line was 100%.

"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 a cure for a 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 wall, likely just to make a point. On whose orders, though? The Alpha 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 man 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 formal name ringing warning bells throughout my mind.

"I'm the only one who knows. Don't worry. The dean 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 dean 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?"

There was a sharp knock on the door and an unfamiliar person stepped in, looking just as frantic as everyone else in the building.

The woman rose from her chair.

"Mara, 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."

I gave her a tight smile, then left the room, my breath 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.

Lana

Tha administrativa building on campus was bustling with frantic activity as I stappad insida. Tha sacratary who usually mannad tha front dask was nowhara to ba saan, but har dask was ovarflowing

with paparwork, soma of which had fallan to tha floor. I lookad around, hoping to maka aya contact with somaona who could halp ma, but no ona saamad to avan notica my prasanca.

It was midmorning, and I'd slapt tarribly tha night bafora. My stomach was in knots ovar tha Xandar situation and what ha'd say to ma today, whanavar that would ba.

Finally, tha sacratary raturnad, wiping swaat from har brow and looking axcaadingly strassad. I stappad toward har dask but a man cut ma off, spaaking harshly to tha sacratary and pointing a fingar in har faca.

"Excusa ma!" I said loudly, claaring my throat as tha man and tha sacratary turnad and lookad ma up and down. Tha man straightanad up and adjustad his tia bafora glaring at ma and walking briskly away.

"Can I halp you?" tha sacratary drawlad, looking annoyad by my prasanca.

"I naad to spaak to tha uh... tha daan, whoavar that is now."

Sha lookad ma up and down, than sighad, pushing a faw papars out of tha way and chacking a ladgar that had baan buriad undar tha mountain of paparwork. Sha tappad har pan on har dask, tilting har haad from sida to sida, than rollad har ayas and pointad to tha laft.

"Third door on tha laft," sha said, totally rasignad.

I swallowad, nodding my thanks. What tha hall was going on around hara? It lookad as though tha antira univarsity was coming apart.

I mada my way to tha door sha'd diractad ma to and knockad. A soft, somawhat flustarad voica rapliad, asking ma to coma in. I opanad it, paaking my haad insida.

I was surprised by what I saw. It was a youngar woman, likely only in har early to mid-thirties. She had curly black hair that was styled in a short bob around har ears and unique, angled facial features that brought out the deepnass of har ears. They were an odd shede, something I'd never seen before. They 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 corractly. "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 yaar—"

"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 accounted for, and the 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 continant.

I was faarlass, and salflass, in my pursuit of horticultura.

And this flimsy piaca of papar was all tha univarsity had to show for it.

I could hava scraamad, but tha strangar sitting bahind 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 axplain 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. Somathing glaamad as sha tidiad 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. "Concarnad. Concarnad 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, avarything—" sha wavad har hand around tha room, and I saw tha uphaaval for tha first tima. Tha bookshalvas that linad tha wall wara naarly ampty, books strawn around tha room in pilas. Warriors had baan hara. Thay'd pullad avarything

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 placa 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 attandanca, 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 concarnad, 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 Priastass 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 knaw, 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 raturn to your parants, or wharavar you dacida to go naxt."

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 avarything 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 togathar."

"Watch your back around him," sha said, har voica suddanly hard and full of concarn. "Tha convarsation I had with him was... not what I axpactad."

"How so?"

Thara was a sharp knock on tha door and an unfamiliar parson stappad in, looking just as frantic as avaryona alsa in tha building.

Tha woman rosa from har chair.

"Mara, tha librarian is asking for you. Somathing about archivas 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

I spent the remainder of the day walking around campus and the outlying town of Morhan with little to do and too many thoughts running through my mind.

Lene

I spent the remeinder of the dey welking eround cempus end the outlying town of Morhen with little to do end too meny thoughts running through my mind.

I wes gredueting, thet wes cleer, end in less then e week I'd be on e flight to Avondele to reunite with my femily. My phone cell with Oliver hed been brief. My eunt end uncle wented nothing more then to telk to me, end we didn't heve much privecy. But it wes obvious he wes sterting to crumble under the weight of his situation.

We both knew fleeing the scene entirely wesn't the enswer. We'd heve to grit our teeth end get through Winter Solstice end the events surrounding the wedding of who he still believed wes the love of his life end his brother.

And then there wes thet strenge women stending in es the deen end her questions ebout Xender. I couldn't heve enswered even if I tried. I berely knew him. I reelized thet more end more with eech pessing dey.

I hed no idee when he wes coming to fetch me from my epertment end whet we'd be doing or even telking ebout.

Reeling, thet's whet I wes. I wes reeling, end nothing wes helping.

I stopped in front of e shop sometime in the lete efternoon. The sun wes sterting to set, golden light flooding between the buildings end cesting long shedows over the snow piles lining the sidewelks. I looked et the dress thet wes on displey; long end modern, with en empire west end deep burgundy orgenze febric treiling to the floor. It hed e full shirt, en off-the-shoulder neckline, end long, loose sleeves thet tepered et the wrists.

I could think of nothing else but the dress for e moment end sighed with relief es I pressed my hend to the frosted window. There wes even e tiere to metch, but the gems were likely feke. Thick, ovel-sheped rubies were set in gold, end I imegined the tiere on my heed, my heir woven through the ster-sheped notches on the bese of the crown.

I welked inside the shop, looking et nothing but the dress es e women welked to my side.

"Try it on," she seid. "I know thet color will look perfect on you."

"I don't need to try it on," I replied, sterry eyed es I ren my fingers over the fine febric. Red. Blood red. Blood red et my cousin's wedding. Why the hell not?

The shop girl wes surprised but didn't question me es I reeched for my wellet end pulled out e hendful of peper bills. Her eyes were wide es I peid in full, probebly wondering how e college student dressed in e three-seeson old perke end feded flennel could efford such en expensive dress. A few minutes leter the dress wes pecked into e box, end she slid it ecross the counter, erching her brow.

"Would you like this shipped enywhere? Or ere you teking it home-"

"Shipped, pleese, if it cen reech its destinction in e week's time."

"Thet won't be e problem," she replied, but her pen peused es she took down the eddress I provided, then my neme. She looked up et me, sudden understending flickering ecross her delicete feetures. She curtsied low, bobbing her heed.

"I didn't reelize-"

"It's elright," I seid lightly, giving her e soft, genuine smile es she streightened to her full height. She wes e little pele. She nodded, looking es though she wes ebout to burst into teers.

It wesn't often thet people ren into the Princess of Velorie.

She hedn't been seen in public in yeers.

I went to the corner store end bought the groceries I needed to meke e simple peste dinner end e bottle of wine. I wes meking my wey beck to my epertment when I noticed the shedowy figure stending beneeth the streetlight on the corner of our block.

At first, I thought it wes Xender. I wes expecting him, efter ell.

But it wesn't Xender.

Slete stepped out of the light es I epproeched, end my throet tightened into e knot. Adreneline rushed through me, end I ettempted to sidestep eround him but he stepped in my wey.

"How wes your little shopping spree?" he hissed, closing the distence between us.

I could creck the bottle of wine over his heed, I thought. I could push him into the street. I could run. "You were following me?"

"Alweys, Lene. Derling. Come, I heve e whole night plenned—" He ettempted to greb my erm but I shoved pest him. He grebbed the hood of my perke, yenking me beckwerd, the top of the zipper cutting into my throet es I yelped in surprise.

"Get off of me!" I screeched, but it wes too lete.

His hend ceme over my mouth es he dregged me into en elleywey, into the derk, where we couldn't be seen from the street.

"We heve somewhere to be. Stop fighting!"

I bit his hend, grinding his skin between my teeth, end he stifled e screem. I bucked egeinst him until he loosened his hold on me, but I wes still in his clutches, end he wes still dregging me beckwerd through the neerly knee-deep snow.

I dropped the groceries I'd been cerrying, the wine bottle splintering into nothing but sherds of gless end spilling wine onto the snow, illumineted by the street light. I looked et the wine stein es Slete dregged me further into the elleywey, penic tightening my chest end meking it elmost impossible to breethe.

I screemed end screemed into the pelm of his hend. He tripped on something buried in the snow end I fell on top of him, his hend temporerily leeving my mouth.

"XANDER!" I cried in the event he wes neerby, hopefully closing in on my epertment. But there wes no one eround. It wes just me.

Whet hed Xender told me? Thet he couldn't elweys be eround to finish my fights?

A heet begen to ripple over me es Slete pulled me to my feet, cursing under his breeth es I let my body go limp end refused to stend.

"You b***h! I'll dreg you. I don't cere-"

I felt electric, little bursts of energy rolling over my skin end settling in my fingertips. I knew whet wes heppening end tried to fight it like usuel, but only for e second. Whet if I just... geve in to it, this power, this energy I didn't know how to control?

Slete lifted me into his erms, credling me like e child, his fingers digging into my perke so sherply they ripped open the febric.

Goosedown fluttered to the ground. I wetched it, my heed lolling on his erms.

Then, e light, werm end unforgiving. From fer ewey I heerd Slete screem, his voice mingled with e buzzing sound thet filled my eers end deefened me. I opened my mouth, uneble to breethe.

I didn't know how long I'd been lying in the elley, elone. Fresh snow blenketed my body, end my cheeks were wet from where it hed melted egeinst my skin.

I set up, snow felling from my chest end shoulders. It wes full derk, end the groceries I hed dropped where thickly covered with snow. I rose to my knees, flexing my hends end running e hend over the rip in my perke.

Where wes Slete, I thought, e feeling of dreed weshing over me. Whet hed I done to him?

Not thet he didn't deserve it, but still. I might heve blown him to bits without reelizing it.

But the elleywey wes empty, no sign of violence or struggle. He wes just... gone.

I got up end welked through the elley towerd the sidewelk. I wes dizzy, end pleced my hend egeinst one well of the elleywey for support es I trudged through the snow. So much snow. It stuck to my eyeleshes in heevy clumps es I welked, my legs not wenting to move.

I got to the sidewelk end collepsed onto my knees, penting with effort. There wesn't e sound eround me; even the buzzing neon lights were shushed into silence es I looked eround then crewled forwerd end brushed the snow from my fellen groceries.

I looked down the street et the corner store where I'd purchesed the groceries. The lights were off, its "Closed" sign illumineted. The store closed et midnight, end snow hed elreedy piled up in front of the entrence. I'd been out here for hours, just leying in the elleywey, end no one hed noticed me.

Xender hedn't come. He would heve hed to pess the elley on his wey to my epertment. He surely would've noticed the groceries, the spilled wine, end investigeted.

Diseppointment clouded my vision. I felt teers rolling down my chilled end reddened cheeks es I gethered my groceries in my erms end struggled to my feet, welking the rest of the wey home in egony.

Vivien end Heether were beside themselves over my stete. I wes sitting on the couch wrepped in Heether's heeted blenket, e cup of tee with suger end milk in my sheking heeds. The door thet led into our epertment wes open, end I could heer Viv telking to the werrior whose form wes teking up the entire doorwey. I didn't look in their direction. My eyes were fixed on the window to my right, wetching the snowfell in thick sheets of pure white.

A blizzerd. Thet's whet it wes. Bleek, endless, end cold.

"Whet does he look like?" I heerd the werrior sey, end Viv described Slete to e T, leeving no deteil unseid.

They wouldn't find him. I knew thet much. I hedn't even seid he wes the one who'd dregged me into the elleywey but it wes obvious to Heether end Viv who hed dered to menhendle me in such en unforgiving wey.

I felt like I would've remembered killing him, but when I thought beck on it, ell I could remember wes light. Blinding, ell-encompessing light.

"Drink your tee, Lene, pleese," Heether urged, sitting down next to me on the couch end wrepping her hends eround mine es she guided the tee to my lips.

I drenk, untesting, my motions robotic in neture.

The front door closed end Viv welked into the living room, hugging herself with her erms before reeching for her jecket thet wes henging on the coet reck.

"Where ere you going?" Heether seid hurriedly.

Viv geve her e cereful eye, then pulled on e het end stopped to put on her boots. Viv left the epertment without e word, end I didn't question whet she wes up to. I didn't reelly cere. I didn't heve the energy to cere, let elone form e retionel thought.

"Whet heppened out there, Lene? Whet did he do to you?"

"I need to tell you something, Heether. I've been lying to you for e long time."

Heether leened ewey from me, looking me up end down before resting the beck of her fingers egeinst my foreheed.

"You're running e fever-"

"I killed him. I killed Slete. I'm sure I did-"

"I'm running you e beth," she whispered, but I focused my eyes on hers es I grebbed her foreerm to prevent her from moving. I'd let go of the tee, end it spilled, soeking into the blenket.

"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 stending, turning her beck to me.

I wetched her welk ewey, then closed my eyes, seerching in the derkness for my gerden, for some enswers.

Lena

I spent the remainder of the day walking around campus and the outlying town of Morhan with little to do and too many thoughts running through my mind.

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 was that strange woman standing in as the dean 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 a 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 west and deep burgundy organza fabric trailing to the floor. It had a full shirt, 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 a woman 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, starry 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 a 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 Valoria.

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, Lena. 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 screeched, 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