

Kings Breeder 661

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Soren

Payne relayed Mila's background to me as we stood huddled around my desk with one lamp on.

"And you're sure there is nothing else?" I asked, frowning when Payne finished his report. I spoke softly so my voice wouldn't carry through the quiet inn.

Payne shrugged. "Were you expecting something else?"

"It seems strange... there was nothing else to her background?" I asked again for clarification.

"That's all I have," Payne said with a heavy sigh.

"All right, let's go over it again and see if we can find anything else," I ordered, laying my hand flat on the desk.

"There's absolutely nothing remarkable about this young woman. Mila was an orphan and a stray. When she was five, she strayed into Saboreef Pack and was taken in by a foster mother. Unfortunately, she was nothing more than a grubby, greedy, gambler," Payne told me again.

"Which doesn't exactly equal a happy, well-adjusted childhood," I muttered.

"I asked around about her and most people had to think hard just to remember her, even when I gave her name. I think because of her upbringing she was introverted and a loner. No one claimed to be her friend and it sounds like she mostly kept to herself," he elaborated.

"That sounds about right that she didn't interact with many people," I agreed with a nod. There was no way people wouldn't have a deep impression about her had they seen her face. The reason why not many remembered her, had to be because they'd never seen her.

Besides, based on my brief interactions with her, she was independent and preferred keeping to herself, looking out for herself, and being on her own.

Payne wasn't telling me anything new. We'd already discussed her childhood. It didn't give me any hints to pinpoint why Lee had been insistent on sending her away as soon as possible.

I knew Lee and he wasn't the type to make a big deal out of these things. Unless it was directly related to him or could lead to some disaster for all of us, he kept his mouth shut. He'd never say anything outright, but his prodding was enough to keep me alert for anything in her past that was suspicious.

"Did you think you'd learn something different?" Payne questioned.

"Well, yes. Based on Lee's reaction to her," I admitted, frowning.

"It is sad, but a lot of orphans end up in similar situations to her," Payne reported.

"What I don't understand is why, if her life is so unremarkable, does it seem like she's in trouble or like she is running from someone," I pointed out.

“From what I could gather, she was a chronic runaway. Unhappy with her life and trying to find something better. She had an impressive talent for survival but as a young kid, she could only get so far before the authorities caught up to her and returned her to her foster mother,” Payne said, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Why’d she run away this time? She’s an adult now. She can’t be trying to escape a foster mother anymore,” I pointed out. Thoughtfully, I stroked my chin.

“For that answer, I had to look at the pack politics, not her individual life history. Saboreef was rounding up their young, pretty women and selling them to the Norwind Pack,” Payne filled in.

“Norwind... that’s Alpha Chandler, right?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Payne nodded in confirmation.

“It was a surprise to me, too. Alpha Chandler’s Luna passed away years ago and everyone says he was very in love with her and loyal to her. It seems odd he’d look for a new luna,” Payne said.

“Perhaps he isn’t,” I muttered, thinking of the drunken night I’d recently had with Mila. Sometimes, it wasn’t about companionship, it was about loneliness.

“I thought about that too,” Payne agreed. “It’s been a while. A man has needs, besides physical desires, one of those needs is an heir. He may be looking to ease his loneliness or he may be looking for breeders. An Alpha like Chandler has a lot of money and he can buy whatever he wants, including an endless supply of pretty, young women.”

I didn’t comment on Payne’s explanation of Chandler’s purchase. It was none of my business whether he chose to ease the pain of his loss by jumping into bed with other women.

However, if he truly loved his Luna, what he did wouldn’t make him feel better. If anything, he’d feel worse. He would feel he had betrayed his mate.

That’s how I felt about Rosalie.

Though, when Mila showed up in my bed, she’d been a pleasant distraction from my unattainable yearning for Rosalie for several days...

I scoffed at myself. Afterall, I was just a f*****g hypocrite.

Payne’s voice cut into my thoughts.

“When I asked around about the young women being sold, apparently there was one that... refused to be traded like goods. She fell back on a Saboreef tradition, the Trial of Blackfire.”

“What’s that?”

“In Saboreef, if someone can survive the Trial of Blackfire, they are granted their freedom. One of the women being sold chose to test herself against the Blackfire poison, instead of being sold,” Payne explained.

Mila had shown up in bad shape. Poisoned out of her mind and Lee had not been positive about her prognosis until he learned that she had a natural immunity to it.

“It is a very potent, powerful poison, as you know. Most doses are fatal. However, some have survived it in what seems like miraculous cases. I guess this young woman thought it was better to take her chances with the poison than with being sold,” Payne continued.

I nodded absently, thinking about Mila’s determination. She was stupid, taking her chances with a poison that was almost guaranteed to be fatal! What was she thinking? With that face of hers, Alpha Chandler would have treated her well. He would have paid for a luxurious lifestyle for her, taken care of everything she needed, and if she became a favorite of his, she’d never need to worry about her next meal or a roof over her head.

She was pretty enough to become a favorite of the Norwind Alpha. That was obvious.

And yet, she chose to endure torture, pain, and near death just to win a chance her freedom.

It was insane but...admirable.

“Why’d she come here? Was it on purpose or an accident? What happened on her way here? Were you able to retrace her steps?” I pressed more.

“I wasn’t. It’s like, after she left Saboreef, her trail runs cold. No one saw or knew anything. I’m sorry, Soren, but if you want answers to those questions, we’ll have to get them from her,” Payne said.

“And she’ll be so forthcoming,” I said half-jokingly, looking at Payne.

Payne sighed and bowed his head. “If you’d like, I can go back out there now that things have settled down and try to retrace her steps again. I can start with the areas directly around Saboreef and branch out.”

“No,” I said, holding up a hand as he went to leave. “I don’t need to know those details right now. What we have is enough.”

Most likely she wouldn’t stay here for long, and what we knew was more than sufficient for the time being. We all had secrets and there was no need to waste more time and resources on someone who did not belong here.

Mila

I listened to the conversation between Soren and Payne. At first, I was only suspecting they were talking about me, but as soon as I heard the name “Saboreef,” I verified my guess.

It was obvious that Payne outlined my childhood and even what I’d put myself through to get out of there.

How had he learned so much about me?

Apparently, even though I tried to keep to myself, people always noticed me.

Well, now that they knew the truth...

I sighed with relief.

Before, I'd felt guilty because I thought Soren was helping me, nursing me back to health, as a free favor. Nothing in life came free, which was why I left my valuables.

I could stop feeling guilty for accepting his help because, just like everyone else, he wanted something from me. Why else would he be investigating my past and who I was?

The last thing I wanted was to feel like I owed him a favor. After all the medical care, the meals, and having a place to stay, that would have been a very, very expensive favor to pay back.

This was the rogue zone and Soren seemed like the type to collect on his debts. Why wouldn't he? There was no charity in this world. One must either earn it, or pay for it.

Being in the rogue zone, I could only imagine the cost of that would be even higher than normal. If I couldn't cover it financially, who knows what he'd want me to do for him!

I smiled to myself, thinking how I no longer had to worry about it. He'd been investigating me from the start which meant he wasn't doing this out of the goodness of his heart. Most likely, he wanted to see if there was a way he could use me for personal gain.

Now that he knew who was after me, I was far too vulnerable in this place—he could offer me up to Norwind for something in return. Or he could threaten to expose me to get something out of me.

Either way, he was no better than the freaks that were chasing me.

Earlier, I felt a little guilty running away without thanking him in person, for I thought Soren really was one of those few good guys out there, it wasn't enough to pay him back for the help he'd provided.

But now...

Well, now, I didn't have to feel guilty. I took what I needed to survive, I left appropriate compensation, and I'd discovered that Soren was an enemy. I didn't owe him anything after this point and I certainly didn't need to feel grateful toward him.

He saved me out of his own greed.

I sighed again, shaking my head. There was no point in hanging around and listening in more. They'd given me what I needed to get me on my way. Now that I knew the kind of people they were, I didn't need to linger or look back.

In fact, I had to get out of there as soon as possible. I needed to put as much distance between myself and this place as possible before they realized I was gone.

I thought of the full moon and how her strength filled me. It was time to go!

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My heart sank as I passed the office. Soren had seemed like a nice guy. I let myself believe that he was different and that he was good and decent.

But he wasn't. I had been very, very wrong. He was like everyone else I encountered.

Groaning under my breath, I headed down the stairs, taking one at a time to make sure nothing would creak.

As soon as I hit the bottom of the stairs, I heard muffled laughter and saw lights flooding most of the first floor of the inn.

“Crap,” I whispered.

It was late and I assumed everyone would have retired. Especially with Soren’s clandestine meeting by candlelight in his office.

The main floor of the inn, where there was a bar and food, was busy as ever. Well, that would make slipping out quietly and unnoticed more complicated.

I walked into the main lobby and everyone got quiet, staring at me. I glanced toward the front door as they watched me. It wasn’t the right time to try and make a run for it. I already knew I wouldn’t get far.

Instead of going to the door, I smiled awkwardly and turned toward the bar. The shifters in the lobby followed me with their eyes. It was unnerving how they never looked away from me.

As I passed by, I nodded to them.

“Good evening. I was just feeling thirsty and thought I’d grab a drink,” I said cheerily. I smiled brightly.

One of the shifters grunted and they went back to talking quietly to each other.

“The bar is open all night,” another said, smiling back and nodding toward the bar entrance.

Sighing in relief, I headed on my way. At least, they didn’t try to stop me.

Walking through the inn, I noticed something I hadn’t noticed before. The shifters in the lobby seemed more like guards on duty. There were shifters in the bar, too, that looked like they were there to guard rather than drink and have a good time.

This wasn’t just some random inn I’d stumbled into. They were organized and this seemed more like a base than a place to socialize. I saw a lot of the same faces in the bar as I’d seen the last time I was there.

That seemed strange.

At most inns, people came and went. But these guys seemed like they lived here.

Why would they live in an inn and why would they need to guard it?

That didn’t make sense for a simple inn, and I had been in plenty of those.

Thinking back, Soren having an office and everything also seemed out of place. I hadn’t thought about it while I was eavesdropping, but what inn converted a room into an office for one guy? Did he own the inn?

Even if he did, there should have been a manager’s office on the first floor. Why would he need to convert a bedroom?

If anything, this inn was more like a pack house.

But that made even less sense! I knew that I was for sure, without a doubt in a rogue zone. There weren't any packs or alphas here. These shifters were not a pack, either.

And yet... I'd seen the way they were with Soren. They never called him Alpha but they showed him a lot of respect and obviously revered him. He was their leader in some capacity.

I headed to the bar and ordered myself a drink. Everyone was pleasant enough, smiling at me and offering quick greetings. The news of my presence had spread to all of them, which wouldn't have happened if this was a regular inn.

There was definitely more going on here.

I took my drink to a table in the corner and sat down with my back to the wall. I could see the entire room from there while also remaining out of the way and unnoticed.

There were guards by the bar entrance, guards in the lobby, and more guards by a hallway to the left.

With all these guards, would I really be allowed to walk out the front door? Soren had been investigating me. It seemed more likely that he wanted to keep me around and get some answers, especially with all these guards hanging around.

Slowly, I turned my glass in my hands. I hadn't taken a sip yet, still pondering the best escape.

One thing I knew about guards was that they worked in shifts.

I took a gulp of my beer to make it look like I was just there to have a good time. I didn't need to draw any more attention to myself.

As time went on, people stopped glancing at me curiously. I had become a fixture on the wall, nothing special or out of place.

Suddenly, the guards at the hallway entrance straightened up and started walking off.

I glanced at everyone else in the bar. Some of them were passed out on tables, the rest were pretty bubbly and drunk.

The guards were changing shifts. Now was my chance!

I grabbed my backpack and slipped down the hallway. No one was watching me and the new shift hadn't arrived yet.

The hallway was dimly lit and I blended into the shadows. It would be much easier to stay hidden when the new guards arrived, and for that, I was grateful. I couldn't hear any voices down the hallway, either.

There had to be a side door on the inn, otherwise, why would the guards be protecting the hallway? There wasn't anything down this way but a big empty even room and a room with card tables.

Both were dark and empty and didn't look like they'd been used in a long time.

There wouldn't be a reason to guard it if there wasn't a way outside. At least, that was my thinking.

“Score,” I muttered when I came to the door. And once again, my knowledge of guards and escape routes had paid off.

I tested the door handle. It wasn't locked.

Suddenly, I paused. This was almost too easy. If they were really concerned about someone getting in, they'd lock the door and have guards in the hallway.

The inconsistency in security was troubling.

I chewed my lower lip debating whether or not I should turn the handle. There could be more guards waiting for me on the other side of the door. Either that, or there was a security system I hadn't considered.

This was an old inn, though, and no one would want to stand around outside at night in the frigid desert. That was cruel and unusual punishment.

In all likelihood, I was just being paranoid.

Sighing, I pushed the door open.

Screech! Screech! Screech!

An alarm blared and blinding lights flashed on in the hallway.

“Ow,” I groaned, covering my ears.

Squinting through the lights, I tried to find a place to hide. The doors to the event room and card room were too far away and over the screaming alarm, I could already hear approaching footsteps.

I crouched down in the white, blinding lights. Even if I did run, the guards had already seen me. They'd be down my neck in a second.

I could push out the door and try my luck in the village but I still wasn't up to full strength. My joints still ached and I wouldn't be able to outrun them.

Suddenly, shifters swarmed around me, pointing weapons at me.

I shuddered and looked around at them. There were five shifters. Two had guns, one had a spear. I couldn't see the weapons the other two had.

If I tried to fight my way out, I'd never make it. I had as much chance of surviving a fight against these guys and their weapons as I did in running away. Even at full strength, I wasn't a match for guns with my little knife.

There was no point in risking myself by attacking or doing something rash, either.

What would it accomplish?

My options were limited but there had to be something I could do!

The alarm cut off and the blinding lights dimmed.

That helped. I stood up straight and surveyed my surroundings. There had to be some way out of this that allowed me to escape and upped my chances of getting away safely.

The guards parted in front of me and Soren appeared. He saw me and pursed his lips as he approached.

“Are you leaving?” he asked, nodding to the partially opened door behind me.

I composed myself and nodded. “Yes. I will remember how you helped me and saved my life but I have to go now.” I kept my voice steady and looked right at him, showing I didn’t care what he thought about the matter.

“Hmm, well, you see, I’m not sure you’ve told me everything about you. If trouble happens to come looking for you here, who will compensate me for my trouble?” he asked. His voice was steady and smooth but there was no mistaking the threat under it all.

I narrowed my eyes at him. This had to be a trick question of some kind. He already knew my history, or enough of it. I’d heard him discussing it upstairs with his lackey.

What kind of game was he playing now?

I wasn’t going to answer quickly and lock myself into some kind of trap. He was testing me and I needed to figure out what to say so I could slip out of this situation.

Soren threw his head back and laughed, clutching his chest.

I stared at him, eyes wide as saucers. What the hell was going on? He had a split personality or something!

“Put your weapons away, she’s free to go,” Soren ordered, making a motion to the guards to put their weapons away.

None of them moved at first. I saw them exchange confused looks.

Soren shot them each a look.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” he asked.

He was so much like an alpha, I was shocked that he was here with a band of rogues. He should have been leading a pack. Clearly, he’d be good at it.

I wondered what secrets he had that landed him in a place like this. Maybe we had more in common than I thought.

The guards put their weapons away with inaudible mumbles.

“Step back, give her space,” Soren ordered them and this time, they didn’t hesitate. “Mila, go ahead. Know this... other places will certainly be more dangerous than here. If you need a safe place to recoup, you are welcome back here.”

I wasn’t expecting his invitation and I faltered for a moment. It was something a good guy would do. It was also something someone that wanted something from me would do. Make me feel safe and welcome until they could get what they wanted.

I licked my lips and nodded as I reached for the door handle again.

“Thank you for your kindness,” I said.

Soren nodded.

I threw the door open and flew into the night shadows. I was free at last!

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Soren

As Mila disappeared, I watched her figure grow smaller in the nighttime shadows. There were lights lining the village streets, which allowed me to see her more clearly as she ran under them but she seemed to be purposefully sticking to the shadows as much as possible.

There was no hesitation in her departure. She didn't look back and she didn't slow down. Clearly, she didn't want to be here. That was probably for the best.

Her scent clung to the door and the walls in the hallway. I breathed it in and held it at the back of my nose. In just a few days, her scent would fade completely and I'd forget it all together.

For some reason, the thought of forgetting her scent saddened me a little.

I frowned and looked at the guards still standing around.

“Return to your posts,” I told everyone.

The guards muttered their agreement and lumbered off.

More often than not, my men here was to keep people out, not keep people in. If Mila wanted to leave, no one should force her to stay.

However, as I stood in the empty hallway and stared out the door she'd left open, I couldn't help but wonder why she was in such a hurry? What was so urgent that she had to leave in the middle of the night?

I should have been relieved that she was gone. She had too many unknowns hanging around her. I only had a snippet of her past to go on and it was enough to know that keeping her around would be problematic.

Showing up out of nowhere, poisoned with Blackfire and an aphrodisiac, ending up in my bed... It screamed trouble.

Not to mention, her intentional poisoning with the Trial of Blackfire. Who would do that to themselves?

Then that night came back to my mind in a flood and I held my breath as flickers of her lips seeking mine, how her body felt in my arms, the way she begged me...

“Ugh.” I shook my head to get rid of those thoughts.

It was the one-night stand that lasted two weeks. I was glad it was over, wasn't I?

I just wanted to forget about her. I wanted to shake her off and move on... but I couldn't. Something deep inside clawed at me.

Disappointment.

I wasn't disappointed that she left, was I?

When she'd turned her back on me and ran, I'd been reminded of Rosalie again. They looked so similar from behind. I couldn't help equating Mila's departure to when Rosalie left me. That was where my disappointment came from, so I told myself.

When Rosalie left the islands years ago, had she been as determined and desperate as Mila to get away from me?

I balled my hands into fists. Who was I? I barely recognized this self-pitying version of myself. That wasn't me!

Sighing, I hung my head. The fact was, I might never see Rosalie again. Nor would I see Mila. I just had to accept that.

In Mila's case, it was probably a blessing. I'd known from the start that she was trouble. Now that I knew her history, I was more sure of it. So why did I feel like letting her go was a mistake?

Scoffing, I shook my head.

What was wrong with me? I had no reason to be sentimental after all these years. I'd made my peace with it all.

Getting roped into some mysterious beauty's drama was not something I needed to lose sleep over.

She was gone. That's how it was meant to be. That was the best thing for all of us.

I'd come here for peace and quiet and to be left alone. I had come here to forget about Rosalie and to live my life. Having Mila around only seemed to bring up memories of Rosalie. Now that she was gone, I could return to that desired lifestyle.

"Mila didn't know any better," Ashley said, her voice cutting into my thoughts.

I whipped around. I hadn't even heard her approach. I'd really zoned out.

"You gave her help and shelter. So did everyone else here. We all cared for her and she showed no appreciation," Ashley continued. "All she wanted to do was run off like you and your guys are the enemy. That's not fair. She doesn't know anything about you or these shifters. Kind of bratty, don't you think?"

I chuckled and nodded. That was Ashley's way of comforting me without being downright cruel.

"As you said, she doesn't know better. She's just doing what she feels she has to."

"Yeah, but she could have still shown appreciation. We helped her a lot," Ashley said snippily.

"I thought you wanted her to leave," I pointed out. "Have you changed your mind now?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

Ashley's cheeks flushed and she bit her lower lip.

"Well, of course, I wanted her to leave! It was plain as day from the moment she arrived that she was trouble. I mean, she was randomly plopped in your bed. Who does that? People that are trouble, that's who! I just feel bad for you. She wasn't worth the effort and care you gave her."

I shrugged. It didn't matter, did it? Saving her wasn't a big deal. It just happened to occur because she was in the right place at the right time. There was nothing more in-depth or complicated than that.

Simple, like if I'd come across a wounded animal in the woods and helped it. She was the wounded bird with a broken wing. I'd just put her back in her nest so she'd be safe from predators until she could fly again.

And now, she was flying on her own.

When I looked at Ashley, I saw that she was staring out the open door.

"You did a great job caring for her. She might not have survived without you. I'm sure she would have thanked you if she saw you and if she wasn't... in a hurry."

"Yeah... right. I'm sure she is just overflowing with gratitude," Ashley muttered.

I decided to change the topic.

"Now that tonight's excitement is over, don't you still have inventory to do?" I asked her with a chuckle.

Ashley grinned sheepishly. "I wasn't going to let you stand here like a statue and stare after someone not worth it."

"Ashley, bottles don't count themselves. While I appreciate your concern, I am a big boy and can handle these things. What I can't handle is running out of food and booze. No one wants to be at an inn that is out of supplies."

"Fine, fine," Ashley muttered. She headed down the hall, back to the bar.

As soon as she was gone, Payne appeared beside me.

I double-took, wondering where he'd just come from. Over the years, Payne's footfall had been lighter. One of the common traits of great warriors.

"You are even quieter than usual. How did you do that?" I turned around to look at him.

"Practice," he said, grinning.

I rolled my eyes at him. "I'd prefer it if you didn't sneak up on me."

"My apologies. I didn't want to interrupt that teaching moment with Ashley," he teased.

"She seems to be taking it hard," I admitted with a sigh.

"She'll get over it. I'm wondering though, will you?" Payne asked. He fixed me with a hard, knowing look.

Sometimes, I thought he knew me too well. I tried to keep my secrets to myself but Payne was the one I went to when I needed things I didn't want the others to know about.

"I'll be fine," I growled, to end the conversation.

"I know you will. But... well, she might not be," he said, motioning to the door.

I sighed and nodded in agreement. I'd thought the same thing.

Mila wanted to leave and I wasn't going to stop her or hold her prisoner. At the same time, I knew the dangers out there and I knew she wasn't up to her full strength.

She'd made a miraculous recovery from the Blackfire poison and she had somehow managed to escape and find shelter when she was drugged, after surviving a sandstorm.

I knew she could take care of herself but there were worse things than sandstorms out there.

"She's a survivor," I pointed out.

"Still, do you want someone to follow her just in case?" Payne asked.

I was a bit surprised. First Ashley, now Payne. They somehow seemed to be more connected to Mila than I anticipated and neither of them seemed to even realize that.

I thought about Payne's question for a moment and nodded.

It would be better to know what she was up to, anyway.

For some reason, wherever Mila's destination would be, I would like to see her get there safely. I didn't have that much interest in what she was up to, but knowing her location might come in handy—for what, I didn't know yet.

I just had to follow my instinct, for it was quite accurate most of the time.

"Just to keep an eye on her and ensure she doesn't send trouble our way. Have someone watch her at a distance. I don't want her to know they are there unless she's in a life or death situation."

"I'll make sure of it," Payne said. "Let me just make a few arrangements."

Alone in the hallway again, I turned to the open door. In the distance, I could still see Mila's silhouette getting smaller and smaller. Soon, she'd disappear completely.

"Take care, Mila." I whispered before shutting the door.

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With Mila gone, there was no need for me to keep sleeping in the guest room. I grabbed my clothes and headed to my own room again.

As soon as I walked in, I ran into a thick wall of her sweet, delicious scent. My mouth watered and I licked my lips.

What was I doing? There was no need to get all slobbery over a girl I'd never see again.

Huffing, I tossed my clothes into a drawer. I could fold them later. When I sat on the bed something clinked and I looked at the pillow.

I raised an eyebrow when I saw a small pile of jewelry and valuable knick-knacks.

There was one piece I recognized. A ring. It was the ring Ashley had told me would be appropriate compensation for us caring for Mila.

Slowly, I reached out and touched the ring. Had she left all these as payment? What was way more generous than Ashley anticipated. I wonder what she would say when she learnt about this.

I picked through the items on my pillow and examined that ring. It was too small to slide past my top knuckle on my pinky. The ring was so dainty, despite being antique and intricate.

After a close look, I felt like the design etched on the ring was familiar somehow. A distant memory nagged at the back of my head but I couldn't place it.

I tucked the ring in my pocket and went downstairs.

Payne was in the bar with the late-night security shift. None of them were drinking, because they were on duty, but they sat around chatting casually.

"Soren, I thought you went to bed," Payne greeted me as others slightly bowed their heads. I wasn't their alpha, but they didn't pay me less respect.

"I was on my way," I admitted.

"Looking for me for something specific?"

"Mila left her valuables behind," I said. "I think it was for payment."

"Did she?" Payne asked, but that wasn't really a question that I needed to answer. "Well, good for her. Now Ashley could shut up. We certainly didn't expect that."

"Neither did I..." I sighed and pulled the ring from my pocket. "Especially something like this."

I put the ring down on the bar between the two of us and waited for Payne's reaction.

His eyes narrowed and then he sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes widened and he creased his brow.

It looked like he was familiar with the ring.

After a moment, Payne's eyelids dropped halfway and I could practically see the gears turning in his head.

"You've seen something like this before?" I asked, flicking the ring lightly.

"I... maybe?" he said, scrunching up his face.

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"It looks familiar. If I have seen it, it was a long, long time ago. Like, before my pack was eliminated. So, I was maybe eleven or twelve..."

“Okay.”

Payne sighed and squinted his eyes, thinking real hard. He started nodding like his memories were becoming clearer.

“Right, I remember. I used to sneak into my father’s office and look for something interesting. Once, I found a wanted poster that he placed in his drawer,” Payne explained.

Wanted posters...If he had th poster, would he want to display it on a public wall so that the whole pack was aware of and could keep an eye out for that wanted person?

“On it, was a woman. She was wearing that ring. I’m sure of it,” he said.

Suddenly, Payne creased his brow again.

“For an eleven year old, you had a great memory to remember this kind of details.” I glanced at him, watching his expression.

He shook his head and explained, “The woman was dressed like a seer and she was from Miltern Pack. I asked my dad about her but he brushed me off and said it wasn’t my concern. He wouldn’t even tell me why she was wanted. He did tell me that if I ever saw this ring, I needed to tell him right away... I guess that won’t happen now.” Payne sighed heavily, “But that’s why I have this recollection.”

“Is that everything?” I asked softly.

Payne nodded. “It was a long time ago. I can’t be sure this is the same ring... but it is similar.”

I gave a pat on his shoulder. “Thank you, man.”

I didn’t press further, knowing it was hard for him to talk about his father.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

“That’s the perimeter alarm!” Payne jumped up.

“Someone opened the door from the outside!” I grabbed the ring and stuffed it in my pocket as Payne headed toward the breach.

He only got halfway across the bar when a dozen intruders swarmed in.

My guards immediately jumped into action, but I shook my head. I didn’t want a bloodbath and the intruders outnumbered us at the moment. Besides, I needed to learn what they were here for.

My men didn’t stand down but they waited for me to give further orders.

One man pushed to the front of the group of intruders.

“Where is the woman?” he demanded.

I clenched my jaw and tightened my fists at my sides, but I kept my silence.

Payne took a deep breath and asked calmly, “Excuse me, who are you looking for?”

When Payne didn't give them the answer they wanted right away, the leader of these goons nodded to some of the shifters behind them.

Laughing, they ran through the bar. One of them knocked a table over and kicked the chairs.

Another went to the bar and smashed several expensive bottles of wine.

My guys growled, but I held up a hand to hold them back.

Quickly, I assessed their clothing and stances. They weren't rogues or outcasts like us. They seemed organized and were all wearing the same uniform. Someone rich and powerful funded them.

Yet, they didn't wear any identifying marks or insignias. Their colors were too common to be related to a specific pack or alpha. Obviously, they intentionally hid where they were from.

The leader put his hands on his hips and glared at Payne.

"You don't look much like you'd be in charge, little pup," he snarled. He brushed past Payne, knocking him in the shoulder.

Payne grunted but he stood his ground. He wasn't going to disobey me, no matter how much these men insulted him.

The leader turned to me. "Don't play dumb. You know who I'm talking about. A girl named Mila."

"Why do you want her?" I asked, pulling the leader's attention to me.

"It is our business, not yours!" he snapped, glaring at me.

"No, not anymore it isn't," I said, glancing around my bar in disarray.

The men ruining the bar all stopped. After a moment's pause, they started laughing.

The leader clutched his chest and shook his head.

"Ahh, what are you gonna do about it?" he said, looking at me like I was an insect to be crushed. "A f*****g rogue wants to be a hero?"

I narrowed my eyes. "You're barking up the wrong tree."

"Huh. We're so scared!" he laughed sarcastically, "You're nothing but a desert rat that calls himself an innkeeper. Well, if that's what gets you off. Anyway, we know that Mila is staying with you in this dump. Just tell us where she is," he said.

I crossed my arms and smirked, "How about you get out of here right now and I'm generous enough to not charge you for the damage."

"I don't think so. Give her to us and we'll be on our way. If not, we'll go door to door in this dump hole and redecorate every room the same way we already did your lobby and this bar until we find her," he informed me.

He snapped his fingers and one of his followers punched a mirror on the wall. Another grabbed a nice vase off the bar and threw it on the floor.

Obviously, these men weren't looking for Mila to talk to her or reason with her. They were all riled up and I had no doubt they planned to hurt her. Maybe not kill her, but they'd rough her up and drag her off.

Even if I didn't want to get involved with her problems I wasn't going to set her up to get injured by those bastards.

As hard as I'd tried to stay out of her drama, it had caught up to me, regardless.

Quickly, I counted the guards in the bar. There were five total, including me and Payne. Five against twelve. We could win, but winning wasn't my goal, because they might have the chance to escape.

The others patrolling around would see the breach. They'd be gathering by the other doors, waiting for my signal. I just needed to give them a few minutes to gather in force. Once all together, we'd get all the exits blocked.

The lead intruder sighed and shook his head at me. He must have read my silence as intimidation.

"Listen, I don't really want to fight you. We're polite people, you know. So, I will give you two options. Either hand over Mila and we will let you off the hook for helping her. We might even be willing to cut you in on the gain from her capture," he offered.

I curled an eyebrow. "Or...?"

"If you insist on protecting that little b***h, don't blame us if you, your puppy, and the rest of your mangy, scabby, nasty rogues will have their pretty base destroyed... or set on fire... or... well, use your imagination," he said, chuckling darkly.

I smirked and shook my head.

Had I been in seclusion for so long that cockroaches like them thought they could walk in and out of my base like they owned the place? These f*****g arrogant bastards really thought they could come into MY inn and threaten ME?

"Those are your only options," the leader stared at me viciously.

I scoff, "How about I choose a third option?"

"What the—"

I leaped at the leader, shifting in midair. Then I landed on him in a pounce and threw him down on the floor, pinning him in place and growling in his face.

"Get them!" he shouted, struggling under me.

My men had gotten into place and were just waiting for my signal. We didn't need a mind link to be organized and deadly. They all knew where they were supposed to be.

I howled, signaling the others to attack.

Every door of the inn opened and my men swooped in, some of them shifted like me. They rushed in and attacked all the intruders.

I licked my lips and looked down at the leader pinned beneath me. He cringed and I bit into his neck. He groaned and his body collapsed.

That was right. I didn't care about winning.

I needed them dead. Every single one of them. So that they wouldn't have a chance to bother Mila again.

The fight ended quickly like I expected.

Well, so much for not wanting a bloodbath in the inn.

I still didn't know why they were after Mila, but it seemed unlikely that this was just about her getting sold to Alpha Chandler, and I doubt those were the only chasers sent after her.

Watching the bodies on the floor, I couldn't wave away the image of Mila being surrounded by those disgusting fuckers.

"Payne, you come with me. We're going to find Mila."

[Chapter 665](#)

Mila

All through the night, I stuck to the shadows and stayed close to buildings as much as I could. Every now and then, I glanced back to see if Soren had sent anyone to follow me. So far, I was alone.

When I got to the edge of the village, I headed in the direction of Miltern pack territory.

In my dreams, Helen had given me a road map. At least, that's what I thought it was. She'd shown me the way over and over again, but I'd never understood. Now that I could remember them more clearly.

She'd shown me that I needed to follow the desert north star until the white sands became paved roads and the sun began to rise.

It was cryptic, but I felt like if I just went after the north star, the rest would make sense, eventually.

When the sun rose, though, it didn't show me white sands and paved roads. Instead, a thick, dense fog hung over everything. I could barely see in front of my own face.

I stuck my arm out and swiped it side to side like I could push the fog away. It was hard to see far. There was no going back.

I took a deep breath and stepped into it, but the deeper I went into the fog, the more my stomach gurgled uncomfortably. Was this really the way I was supposed to be going?

I couldn't see anything. How could I tell where I was going?

I stumbled along until the sand beneath my feet felt funny. I glanced down and saw white sand under my shoes, fine and soft like powder.

This was Miltern pack territory. I made it!

Almost as if the fog could feel my excitement, it started to thin and then lifted a little and the Miltarn village came to my sight.

There were people on the streets. They walked around like the fog hadn't even been an issue for them.

I waved to someone close by and he wandered past me like he didn't even see me.

"Hey there," I said cheerfully.

Still, he kept walking and didn't even turn his head.

I glanced around and saw that no one else was looking at me either.

Could they even see me or hear me?

I stood still and watched as they moved around. They practically drifted through the streets like they didn't see each other either. It was like they were zombies or ghosts. I wondered if they were even alive or if they were just shadows of themselves.

None of them smiled. They had no expressions at all. They weren't happy or sad and they didn't talk to each other.

I saw a woman in her front yard gardening with a blank look on her face.

A man walked down the street with a basket over his arm, completely deadpanned, shuffling his feet along.

Several of them were heading toward what looked like a market. I could see vendors selling food and clothes, but none of them smiled at each other or shared any kind of greeting.

It was weird to watch them go through daily motions and not have any emotion about it or reaction to it. Based on how silent it was, I didn't think any of them were talking to each other, either.

An eerie feeling crept over me and I couldn't help but think that the whole pack was under a curse or something. It was like they all had a dark, gloomy cloud over themselves. But they didn't seem to be upset or sad. They weren't happy, either.

Just apathetic, emotionless.

Maybe they were just really unhappy about their lives. Or the morning fog just made them seem gloomy. I wondered if they'd perk up as the day went on and the sun warmed them up.

I walked up the street and bowed my head so I didn't have to look at these strange, gloomy people.

Turning a corner, suddenly I heard quick footsteps behind me. It didn't sound like the slow, sad shuffle of the people of Miltarn pack. These footsteps were deliberate and focused, and headed straight toward me.

Quickly, I ran down another corner, flew by a few blocks and turned again. I kept close to the buildings and did a loop around one block before doubling back.

The more I tried to outrun them, the closer their footsteps got. They were definitely chasing after me.

I wove through the town and ducked behind different buildings. None of the pack members paid any attention to me but I still tried to avoid running into them.

A guy opened the door to his house and I darted up the steps and rushed inside. He didn't call after me or try to stop me but I kept going. There was a woman in the kitchen making coffee and she didn't make a sound as I ran out the back door.

I got to another house and hopped through an open window. An entire family was eating breakfast. I landed right next to the table and they didn't even look up.

"Oh, sorry," I muttered.

They looked up at me, acknowledged my invasion of their home and went back to their food.

I ran down into their basement and out the bulkhead. It put me in their backyard. The house had a crawl space underneath. Dropping down on my hands and knees, I got into the crawl space and used my elbows to drag myself under the house.

When I got under the front porch, I could see an alley across the street. I couldn't hear the quick footsteps anymore.

It seemed like I lost my pursuer, but I wasn't taking any chances.

I crawled out from under the house and bolted across the street and straight through the alley. Out the other side, I kept running until a forest could be seen in the distance, and that was where my dreams told me to go.

Would Hele be in the forest waiting for me?

Maybe she could even tell me what was going on with all the freaks in this pack.

When I got on the path to the forest, I stopped running. My heart hammered against my ribs and my calves ached. My elbows were smudged with dirt and I had leaves in my hair.

It was the price of not getting caught. I could deal with it.

The path led me right to the forest's edge and I recognized the entrance point. Helen had given me very clear directions.

I took a deep breath and headed into the old, thick trees. The path got narrow but it was easy enough to see it winding through the trees and underbrush. It didn't look like anyone had walked on that path in a long time.

As I headed deeper into the woods, I noticed that it was getting darker and darker.

The sun had just risen! This wasn't right.

I tried looking through the treetops to check if the sun was still shining, but the canopies were so thick I couldn't see the sky at all.

I shivered and rubbed my arms as the darkness closed in around me.

The path was also getting thinner. I looked ahead as it narrowed more and more and suddenly, I couldn't see a path anymore.

What kind of path just ends in the middle of the forest?

Thinking I could just keep going in a straight line, I started walking around the trees, acting like I was still on a path. However, before long, when I stopped and turned around, I couldn't see the road behind me anymore.

I was lost.

Fog closed in on me through the darkness and started to get thicker.

I wondered if I should go back while I could still remember which direction I came from and wait until the sun was higher in the sky and maybe the forest wouldn't be so creepy, dark, and foggy.

The way the fog was thickening, I wouldn't be able to get back if I waited around too long. Mind made up, I turned around and headed back to the path.

Click. Clack.

Gibber. Gibber.

I froze. What the hell made that kind of sound?

Click. Clack. Gibber. Gibber.

Curiosity got the better of me and I abandoned my search for the path. I carefully followed the sounds to a little clearing and stayed hidden behind a tree.

The fog was light enough here that I could see what was going on.

There was a group of people moving through the woods. Based on their clothes, they looked like they'd come from the Miltern pack village.

Something was off about them, though. They were moving strangely. It was like their joints were locked and they couldn't bend or twist at all.

With stiff legs and arms, they tottered through the woods.

I wondered how they moved so well through the trees despite how awful their bodies looked.

It was just so weird!

They were moving away from me and I wanted to get closer to investigate. I wanted to follow them and see where they were going. I wondered if it would give me an idea as to why all the pack members were acting so strangely.

A gust of wind blew against my back and my hair whipped around my face. I grabbed the tree trunk in front of me and slowly turned around.

A man stood behind me. His eyes were fixated on me like I was a target and he was an arrow shot in my direction. He snarled and pointed at me with a long, gnarled fingernail.

“You’re coming with me!” he insisted. He spoke, so he couldn’t be from Miltern.

He was one of those who were after me!

Before I could react, he jumped at me. Growling and snarling, he thrust his hands at my face. His sharp fingernails aimed at my eyes!

I couldn’t dodge fast enough and his nail scratched my cheek.

Gasping, I pushed my shoulder into his chest, knocking him back. He hissed and spit furiously, regrouping for another attack.

This time, I was ready for him. I kicked him straight in the groin.

He grunted, his eyes rolling back. His legs wobbled and he fell to his knees.

I punched him in the face.

“You attacked the wrong girl,” I snarled.

The guy was weak. He might have been wild and crazed out of his mind but he was weaker than me.

While he writhed in pain, I headed back toward the path.

My legs ached and my arms were sore. I still wasn’t back up to my full strength since the poison.

As I walked toward the path, my legs trembled and my head swam.

“Ugh...” I leaned against a tree and held my hand to my temple.

There was still poison in my system. Evading that guy’s attacks took a lot out of me.

Something moved in the fog and I froze again. I looked around but saw nothing.

Then, I heard footsteps in the forest. They were the same footsteps, the same pattern as the person chasing me.

They were faster now, my pursuer closing in quicker than I had time to react. I tried to run back to the path but my legs wouldn’t move fast enough to get me away from this guy. I forced myself to move faster because I knew I wouldn’t be able to fight him if he caught up to me.

Panic raced in my chest as I tried to hurry back to the path. I felt a hand grab at my arm.

“Ack!”

I pitched forward and fell on my hands and knees. The wind was knocked out of me and I began to panic knowing that I was in real trouble. I rolled over onto my back, scooting away as best I could. I could see the greedy glint in my assailant’s eyes as he walked toward me tauntingly, step by step.

I tried to get up but pain from the poison and exhaustion from the day gripped me. I swallowed into a dry throat unable to call out for help as I anticipated being pounced on.

Suddenly I felt a cooling breeze as the fog shifted, and my assailant's eyes widened in fear looking just beyond me. I turned to see what pulled his attention from me. Just in time, my eyes landed on a large, beautiful, black wolf running at full speed.

My breath caught in my throat before he jumped through the fog, his gorgeous body stretching over me as he pushed my attacker away.

The wolf held a protective stance in front of me as the attacker staggered backwards.

My breath escaped my lungs slowly as the wolf turned to me, and my eyes became transfixed with the big, gray-blue orbs that locked onto them.

[Chapter 666](#)

Soren

Mila was knocked to the ground as I leaped over her and swatted at her attacker.

Payne was right behind me and took the first chance he got to flank the man that attacked Mila.

He stood between us, snarling and growling as he glanced back and forth.

I pulled my lips back, baring my teeth, growling and pawing at the ground.

He seemed to understand that he couldn't win a fight against both of us and he wasn't going to make it out alive if he waited around too long.

Hissing, he lunged into the nearest bushes and disappeared.

I growled and tossed my head in the direction he went. Payne nodded and took off after the guy. If he caught him, he'd interrogate the bastard. I had full faith in Payne's abilities.

For the time being, I wanted to stay with Mila. Quickly, I shifted and threw on a pair of pants. Payne and I had brought a backpack with spare clothes, anticipating we'd have to shift on the fly.

I turned around and Mila was still sitting on the ground. Her eyes were distant as she looked in the opposite direction of where her attacker had run.

"Did you see those people back there?" she asked, pointing a shaking hand. "I wonder what was wrong with them.

I knelt down beside her. She didn't seem to realize I was there and she was very dazed.

"I don't know what is going on with the people here. Everyone is behaving oddly. Mila, you don't look too good... We've got to get out of the open. We're too vulnerable. Maybe there is a place in town where you can rest," I suggested.

Sniffing, she snapped out of her daze and pulled back from me. "I'm fine."

I didn't believe her.

"But those poor people. I want to see what happened to them," she insisted.

She tried to stand up but she winced and her legs wobbled. Staggering to the side, Mila caught herself, barely, and her legs trembled.

I reached out and grabbed her arm, steadying her until she found her footing. When she tried to walk again, I stopped her.

"I need to see what happened to those people," she said, pulling against me.

"Or, I have a better idea. You need to rest and regain your strength," I stated firmly. "If you're attacked, you won't be able to defend yourself and you'll be no help to those people. You can't go after them in this condition, not without help."

"Then help me," she said with a scoff.

"Bad idea. There are still people out here that are after you." I told her, trying to appeal to her rationality. "It is too dangerous for you to investigate further."

"Fine, fine," Mila groaned.

She stopped pulling against me and I turned us in the direction of the Miltern pack.

"There's probably an inn back in town where I can stay," she said. She glanced sideways at me as I walked with her.

"I'll walk you back to town," I said when I saw the look.

She shook her head but didn't outwardly protest. Her eyes scanned me quickly and I could see the gears turning in her mind.

Desperately, I wanted to know what she was thinking. It was a completely illogical desire but I couldn't deny it.

Mila

Soren had come to my rescue and now he was watching out for me. It was so obvious that he wanted something from me. Otherwise, why had he followed me here?

Had he only been pretending to be generous and grant me my freedom? I thought that was most likely, seeing as he was here now. He was just like the others and he was just after me for something.

However, something inside of me told me to trust him and listen to him. Even though I thought he was after me and he was following me, he had also saved me from the attacker. What was it about him?

I glanced sideways at him again and looked him over.

He was handsome. I definitely couldn't deny that. He was tall and strong with a muscular body. His hair was dark and his eyes restless and stormy. I recognized that look in his eyes, the same desire for freedom that I had.

Not to mention, his wolf was beautiful! Large, black, and sleek. His wolf had been strong and protective.

Ugh, what was I thinking?

Just because he was the most good-looking man I'd ever seen didn't mean I needed to trust him and take him at his word. How stupid was that?

He'd followed me all the way to Miltern. Was there anywhere in the world I could hide from him?

I didn't see any scenario in which he didn't know where I was staying tonight.

Sighing, I tilted my head back. The sky was dark and I could see it now through the tree branches. The moon was out and shining brightly.

Before, the sun had been hidden in the trees but I could see the night sky clearly. That was strange.

During the day, the forest had felt suffocating. It had been like a maze and I had no idea how to navigate it. Now, for some reason, at night, I thought the forest was peaceful and charming... almost like I belonged there.

When I'd been alone in the forest before things had felt... uneasy. I'd even been a little afraid.

Now...

I glanced at Soren again. This feeling of ease and security, was it because he was here with me now?

"Why are you here?" I asked him when the silence between us became too much.

I wasn't expecting him to give me an honest answer. There was a large part of me that still wanted to turn and run from him but with my aching muscles, he'd be breathing down my neck in a heartbeat.

"Do you have enemies? Do you even know why people are after you?" he asked.

"That's none of your business," I stated, turning away from him.

Of course, he wouldn't answer my question, but he'd ask me questions and expect real answers. That wasn't going to work for me.

It just reaffirmed the fact that he was here because he was after something from me. He was working for those bastards now.

Ever since Norwind pack came out with a giant reward for my capture, everyone turned against me. And who wouldn't? Norwind pack was rich and well supplied. Even other legitimate packs wanted their reward.

There was no doubt in my mind that a rogue like Soren would want that reward, too.

Honestly, I didn't know why they were after me. Norwind hadn't released that information to anyone. Not that it mattered, the reward was enough.

I wanted to know more than anyone why they were after me. But I had no answer for Soren. Even if I did know, I wasn't sure I should tell him.

The only lead I had right now was Helen and my dreams.

Soren eyed me and chuckled.

My stomach fluttered when his smile widened and his eyes settled on mine. I couldn't stop staring at his smile, my mind feeling fuzzy and dreamy, and my reservations melted quickly.

"To answer your question, I came here because some of the people after you burst into my inn asking me to hand you over."

I scoffed. "They promised you something, didn't they?"

"Smart girl," Soren said with a nod. "They promised to share the future profit with me and leave my inn alone."

"So, you are here to take me to them then?" My heart sank and I looked at my feet. I f*****g knew it!

Quickly, I glanced around for the fastest way out. Where could I run to that would give me the best chance of escape?

There were some thorny bushes to my left. It would hurt like hell, but it would slow Soren down and I was smaller than him. I could slip through the thorns easier.

I might be able to get away from him by climbing a tree, but that would take a lot of physical effort and Soren was definitely stronger than me.

Soren chuckled again and sighed. "Well, that's not possible now."

I arched an eyebrow at him, forgetting about my escape plan. What did he mean by that?

"I've taken care of them and you don't need to worry about them coming after you anymore," he assured kindly.

Taken aback, my steps faltered.

He turned to me quickly, ready to offer help, but I caught myself and kept walking.

Soren didn't have to say it in words, but I got the impression that he killed the men that came looking for me. Killed, or injured to the point where they'd have to take a long time to recover before coming after me.

Did he know how much trouble he'd get himself into when the packs after me found out about that kind of violence against them? They wouldn't stand for an outlander raising a hand to them, even if they made the first move.

"You killed them?" I clarified.

"Did I say that?" he asked coyly, smirking.

I suppressed an eye roll. He must have thought I was dumb, and I wasn't!

For a moment, my chest unclenched and I felt relieved.

What if he was only telling me that because he thought it would get me to drop my guard?

"You're lying! If you took them out, then who were the others that attacked me in the woods just now?"

"You really don't know how many people are after you?" Soren asked.

I shook my head. How was I supposed to know something like that? Norwind pack could have sent the reward for my capture out to hundreds of smaller packs, mercenaries, and bounty hunters.

Soren frowned.

“Am I supposed to believe you’re not one of them?” I asked skeptically.

Soren sighed. “That would be nice.”

He didn’t seem to be lying. Already, he’d had plenty of opportunities to capture me and turn me over. He hadn’t taken any of them.

Instead, he kept showing up to save me in the nick of time. My presence in his life had clearly caused some problems for him, yet he was here, saving me for a second time.

Guilt twinged in my gut. I was safe now, thanks to him.

Slowly, I let myself relax with him. Underneath my defenses, I felt a strange pull toward him.

Was it possible that he was different from all the others I’d been on the run from?

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For a moment, I just stared at Soren.

This time, I wasn’t captivated by his gaze. I stared at him because I didn’t understand why he was asking that. I had gotten the feeling when I left his inn that he was in some way relieved to see me go.

He had said I was welcome to stay and even come back if I needed to. But still, there hadn’t been any great effort put into convincing me to change my mind.

Now he was asking who I was. It seemed strange since I wasn’t sure what more he expected to learn from me.

“Didn’t you already investigate me?” I asked, putting my hands on my hips.

I hadn’t let him know that I’d been eavesdropping before. It was something I was holding onto for a time when I thought it would be beneficial.

This seemed like the right time. I wanted Soren to be shocked that I knew he’d been digging into my past.

For a moment Soren’s jaw tensed and he narrowed his eyes minutely. He recovered quickly and gave a lazy smile.

“I have a feeling the details will be more interesting coming from you.” Soren chuckled and slightly arched an eyebrow. He gave me an expectant look.

Was he not going to admit to investigating me? He hadn’t known I was eavesdropping. Was this his way of denying it without lying?

He didn’t deny investigating me but he didn’t exactly admit it either.

“I don’t know what else I can tell you,” I muttered, shrugging.

“Whatever you want to,” he urged.

We started walking again and I recognized the path ahead. Soon, we’d be back in the village.

I shrugged and kept my eyes down. From what I’d heard when Soren and Payne were talking, he’d done a pretty thorough check into my background and even Saboreef pack traditions.

What was the harm in telling him what he already knew? Maybe, it would keep him from asking more questions if I told him my side of things. It wasn’t like I had to tell him things he didn’t already know.

“From what I understand, you already figured out most of it. I was an orphan, adopted by a greedy foster mother that didn’t have my best interests at heart. When Alpha Chandler wanted to buy all the young women from Saboreef, I saw that as my way out of that disgusting shithole,” I said snippily.

“The Trial of Black Fire,” Soren muttered.

I nodded. “I was an omega and the Trial was the only way out for me. It was the only way I could permanently sever all ties, even if that meant death. I was willing to take my chances.”

I glanced at Soren. He had a slight frown on his lips. It confused me. I thought that Soren would understand going to extreme lengths. He was a rogue and I imagined that he had to, a lot.

“You asked them to poison you,” he stated.

“Like I said, I wanted to get out and that was the only way. Not all pack traditions are sweet and fluffy,” I said calmly.

“Hmm.” Soren flashed a thoughtful look and nodded for me to continue.

“It is so rare for anyone to survive the Trial that after I was poisoned, I was dumped in a deserted building. They left me there, assuming I would die. I no longer have ties to them, based on the pack tradition with the Trial,” I added firmly.

We walked a few more steps in silence.

Sighing, I wrapped up my story.

“Most of them think I’m dead, which is why they never came after me. I don’t know how all these goons coming after me found out... at least I have no reason to return to Saboreef,” I said.

“It is odd that your own pack thinks you’re dead but there are others from all over coming after you,” Soren agreed. It seemed like he was just as confused about it as I was.

That was the one thing that hadn’t made sense to me before. If Saboreef reported that I was dead by poisoning to Alpha Chandler, why would he still send people after me?

I knew it wasn’t anything Soren hadn’t already figured out. When I’d listened to Soren and Payne talk about me, Soren had said he wondered why the pack abandoned me or sent me off on my own while I was still struggling with the poison. It was because they never expected anyone to survive.

I couldn’t tell him more than that.

“That does sound like an ordeal,” he said with a nod.

I pursed my lips, waiting for him to ask more questions.

He didn't have any. Not that I was complaining.

We were back in the Miltern village. Everyone was still wandering around unhappily with blank stares on their faces.

I couldn't help looking around and wondering again what was wrong with these poor people. This wasn't normal and it was no way to live!

"Where will you be staying?" Soren asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I hadn't thought that far ahead. When I first arrived in Miltern, I hadn't looked for an inn or hotel. I'd been a little preoccupied with the guys chasing me!

There was no way I was going to admit that to Soren. I didn't want or need his help. Besides, I didn't want him to know exactly where I was. It felt creepy.

"Now that we're safe in town, it would probably be fine if we split up. I don't need you keeping track of me," I insisted.

"Well, I'm going to keep track of you. You're still in danger, whether you think it or not. These people... they aren't going to help you," he said, motioning to the Miltern people wandering about aimlessly.

"I can take care of myself. In the village, I can evade anyone that comes after me," I explained. I'd done it before and was confident I could do it again.

"Perhaps. However, you have been nothing but trouble for me and I know you're not being honest about everything. I'd like to keep an eye on you for now," he said firmly.

"Ugh! If I'm so much trouble, what the hell do you want!?" I snapped, throwing my arms out.

"I don't want much, but I do want to know what you're up to," he said, as if that was the simplest, easiest request in the world. "Now, if you comply, I won't have to send someone to spy on you."

A shiver ran down my spine. I already knew Soren had the resources and manpower to spy on me and I'd never even know they were there. That unnerved me.

"You're spying on me now?" I challenged. "First you investigate me, now you're going to spy on me?"

"I wouldn't have to do either if you were honest with me," Soren pointed out.

I sighed and tilted my head back. I counted several stars in the sky, keeping myself calm and collected.

"So, you have two options. Either come with me or tell me where you're staying. In the end, it will save us both trouble," he said.

His ultimatum sounded like an accusation and a threat all in one.

He narrowed his eyes at me as I mulled over my options. Whatever I chose, I'd be stuck with Soren.

I didn't understand why he cared so much. He obviously didn't like being bothered and I had been troublesome for him. So, why did he care?

It felt less like I was a bother to him and more like he wanted to protect me.

That was just ridiculous, though! Soren didn't want to protect me, did he?

Sighing, I shrugged. "Okay, so I don't actually have anywhere to go."

"I thought so." Soren smirked at me.

"Just because I don't doesn't mean I'm incapable," I argued.

"Of course not," he patronized.

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "Alright, oh wise one, what do you have in mind, then?" I countered.

"There's a hotel here that I keep a couple of rooms at. They are fully paid for and very secure. You're more than welcome to one of the rooms," he offered, motioning down the street to a tall hotel.

I looked down the street and then back at his outstretched arm.

What choice did I have? I was a stranger in Miltern and didn't know where the hotels were. Not to mention, with how braindead everyone seemed, would I even be able to book a room?

No one wanted to talk to me and they mostly looked right through me.

"Alright, lead the way," I sighed. There really wasn't another option.

Soren gave me a triumphant smile and beckoned me with his hand.

We walked to the center of town and came to the hotel.

It was the tallest building I could see and the exterior was gorgeous. There were intricately carved statues carved right into the stone exterior. All the windows had red curtains over them.

When we went into the lobby, Soren walked right past the man at the front desk. He barely even looked at us as we went through the lobby.

The marble floor was carpeted with a silk rug and there were some lovely paintings on the walls.

It looked beautiful and was clearly a high-class hotel.

For some reason, I thought about how much more I liked Soren's inn than this one. Even though the building itself wasn't as nice as this, he had some interesting and unique decorations and furniture.

It was the atmosphere of the inn that I liked. There was such a homey, brotherly vibe with everyone there. It was friendly, warm, and welcoming.

As nice as this hotel looked, it didn't feel entirely friendly or welcoming.

In fact, it was kind of empty and eerie.

We went to the third floor where Soren showed me two rooms across the hall from each other. It was a narrow hallway, only three or four steps between the two doors.

We'd be staying very close together.

"I'll stay in this one, you can take that one," Soren said, indicating which one he wanted for himself.

"Thanks," I nodded.

I turned in the narrow hallway and reached for my door.

"Oh, Mila."

"Yes?" I asked quickly, whipping around to face him.

"If something happens, remember to knock on my door," he said, wrapping his knuckles on the wood. He smirked "Better not to escape on your own or I'll have to find you again, just like today."

My stomach twisted and I smiled nervously. Was that a threat?

I couldn't get a good read on him. Half the time he sounded like he was threatening me. The other half, it was like he was trying to protect me. What was I supposed to think?

Sighing, I pushed away those confusing thoughts and feelings. I could dissect them later. Or better yet, I wouldn't have to because Soren would be out of my life.

"I got it," I assured with a nod.

[Chapter 668](#)

Soren

I waited for Mila to go into her room and shut the door. I stayed there a few moments longer and waited to see if she'd try to run right away.

Going to her door, I listened in until I heard the shower turn on. Nodding to myself, I headed to my own room.

I shut the door and it immediately opened again. Payne came in and slouched down in a nearby armchair.

"I caught up with her attacker. It took a while, but I got answers out of him," he reported with a heavy sigh.

"What did you learn?" I questioned.

"The people after Mila tonight were related to Norwind. They aren't just sending their own tracking parties after her. It seems like Norwind has reached out to a lot of bounty hunters, the underground kind, to hunt her," he explained.

"And I guess the unsavory people she met in the woods are those bounty hunters?" I asked.

"Yes," Payne nodded.

Norwind was one of the most powerful, wealthiest packs. I couldn't fathom why they were after an omega.

Mila was certainly pretty, there was no doubt about that.

However, I doubted Alpha Chandler would recruit underground bounty hunters and waste so many resources just to come after a pretty face. He was smarter than that.

Besides, with his wealth, he could get whatever woman he wanted, and that meant he had his pick of beautiful women.

Whatever he wanted from Mila was something different than why he claimed to be buying young women. It had nothing to do with loneliness or companionship, otherwise, he wouldn't be so fixated.

Whatever her value, it wasn't common knowledge.

Mila had said it herself, Saboreef had left her for dead. They didn't care what happened to her. So, they obviously had no idea why Norwind was after Mila.

If they had, they wouldn't have let her poison herself. They would have demanded more money from Norwind and they would have kept a closer eye on her.

Saboreef had no idea what her importance was. If they did, a greedy, money-grubbing pack like that would have held onto her for longer. They would have created a bidding war among other packs to drive up her price.

Instead, they let her poison herself and then left her to die, or in her case escape.

To Saboreef, Mila was a worthless omega.

That was a shame. It meant going to Saboreef and doing more digging would be useless. But it would save time, now that I knew they were oblivious.

So, whatever Norwind wanted from Mila, they also wanted to keep it as a secret.

I wondered if revealing their desire for her would somehow be advantageous. It would make life very dangerous for her but it could create enough chaos that Norwind would be slowed down.

I shook my head.

That probably wasn't the best idea.

With Norwind after her, I couldn't help but wonder why Mila risked coming to Miltern. What was her relationship with this pack? She'd come here as soon as she was strong enough to move.

There was something urgent here she desired.

"Soren, I can hear you thinking. What's on your mind?" Payne asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I was trying to figure out why Mila came here. What her connection is to Miltern," I admitted.

It wasn't a coincidence. She wouldn't have rushed off if she didn't have a destination in mind. She had a ring from a Miltern seer. Did that mean this was her home pack?

Based on our little interaction, it didn't seem like she was planning to settle down here. It was more like she came here on a mission.

Payne rubbed his cheek and sighed. "Your guess is as good as mine. We hardly know anything about her, even after all our investigating."

"That's another curiosity," I said, shaking my head.

"Agreed. Although, in regards to Miltern, there is something that... Well, didn't you notice how strange this pack is?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. I'd been more focused on finding Mila and keeping her from running off again.

"In the woods, while I was chasing that guy, I saw a group of Miltern residents in the woods. I mean, I think they were Miltern. They looked ragged, insane, and... hopeless.

I nodded. "Mila mentioned them. She was trying to go back and help them.

"Was she? Help them from what?" Payne asked.

I shrugged. She hadn't told me anything about what she thought was wrong with them, just that she wanted to go after them.

"Well... anyway, I thought they were just some random outcasts. After dealing with the bounty hunter, I went to check them out and I checked out the town a little more," Payne told me.

"And, what did you find?" I pressed.

"I didn't notice it when we first arrived because we headed straight after Mila. But I checked out the town to familiarize myself with my surroundings. People were acting very strangely, a lot like the group in the woods, more or less," he reported.

Payne sighed and creased his brow. It seemed like he was having trouble thinking of the words to describe what he'd seen and experienced.

"The whole pack... it is like there is no hope or happiness here. I tried to get information out of them but they were very evasive. Most of them wouldn't talk to me and walked off. When I brought up the group in the woods, they locked up tighter than a bank vault. Everything here is cold... and I don't mean the temperature, the atmosphere," he continued.

I nodded slowly. When Mila and I came to the hotel, I hadn't given it much thought. The man at the front desk hadn't said anything or even spared us a glance. How did he know we even had rooms?

Suddenly, I gasped and rubbed my throat. It wasn't just the Miltern pack. I could feel it deep in my chest, an overwhelming feeling of sadness and hopelessness.

"You're right. Ever since we've come here there's been a depressing cloud over everything, even us. It seems like it is slowly draining our energy and happiness away," I agreed.

"No wonder not a lot of people live here, now. I thought Miltern pack was thriving but this... it is not what I expected," Payne said.

"It's true. This is different from the last time I visited," I admitted with a nod.

“Can you blame them? It is such a gloomy climate. There’s fog all day and the sun barely breaks through. Then at night, it clears enough to see the sky, but everything is dark. I can imagine it is hard to find happiness in a place like this,” Payne suggested.

“Hmm.”

“Do you think it is something else?” he asked me.

“Before we entered Miltern packland, it was very sunny and clear. Almost as soon as we crossed into the packland, a thick fog consumed us. It thinned throughout the day but it never fully dissipated,” I recounted.

“It had done a good job blocking out the sunshine,” Payne recalled.

“Is it blocking out the happiness too? Is there... something wrong with the fog?” I queried.

Before Payne could answer, I held a hand up to silence him. Footsteps in the hall pricked my ears.

They were light and quick. Whoever it was didn’t want to be heard or caught.

I glanced at Payne and nodded to the door.

He nodded his understanding.

We went to the door and Payne yanked it open.

Down the hall, I saw the flash of a shadow.

Without hesitation or an order, Payne took off after the shadow.

I hesitated and looked around. There was a bouquet of fresh flowers resting in front of Mila’s bedroom door.

I quirked an eyebrow and bent down. Carefully, I peeled the wrapping back and looked over the flowers.

They were common daisies. Nothing special but nothing out of the ordinary, either. I didn’t smell anything wrong with them. There were no poisons or toxins in the flowers. They were completely harmless.

There was a small envelope tucked into the bouquet with Mila’s name written on it.

Carefully, I pulled the envelope out and took the card out from inside. The note was handwritten in lovely, cursive handwriting.

“Tonight. Central Temple. Please Help!”

The flowers were safe, but someone was using them to reach out to Mila.

Not to mention, how many flower delivery services run at night?

I slid the card back in the envelope and replaced it in the bouquet. Carefully, I set the wrapping back in place. I didn’t want it to look like the bouquet had been tampered with.

Whoever left the card was reaching out to Mila for a reason and it wasn’t just an everyday, average gift.

I returned to my room and shut the door. Eventually, Mila would come out and see the flowers.

Kneeling down, I kept my eye pressed to the peephole and watched her door.

Mila was nothing if not a woman of secrets. What she'd told me about herself hardly elaborated on what I already knew. Though, since she'd heard what Payne learned about her, I suspected that was the purpose behind what she told me.

If Lee's reaction was anything to go off of, and it usually was when it came to people mysteriously immune to poisons, she was something special.

Couple that with Alpha Chandler's desire to get his hands on her, I could only imagine what she was hiding.

Whoever sent those flowers was leading her into something. Perhaps, something that only Mila could do based on her secrets.

I needed to know what it was about.

Ideally, she'd see the flowers and then come to me and we could figure this out together. I wasn't taking chances, though.

A few moments passed before Mila opened the door. She took one step into the hallway and the flowers crunched under her feet.

"Oh..." she whispered.

So, if it wasn't for the flowers, why had she stepped into the hall so secretively? Was she going to make another run for it?

Well, that didn't matter now. What was important was what she did next.

Her eyes widened as she bent down and picked up the flowers. I saw her read the little card. She turned on her heel and disappeared into her room, shutting the door swiftly.

Minutes later she came back out. She'd changed into something different, something a little sleeker that would help her be stealthy.

She paused in the hallway and looked at my door.

I waited for her to close the distance and knock. After all I'd done to impress upon her that I was not her enemy and I would help her, now was her chance to show me that she believed me.

Sighing, I hung my head when Mila darted down the hall as quietly as possible.

Of course, she would think she could handle this herself and go off on her own.

If I wasn't so irritated, I might have been impressed with her independence and confidence.

As it was, she was just creating more headaches for me.

I was positive she was following up on what the card said. Otherwise, why would she change?

Payne was still tracking the flower delivery person so I scrawled him a quick note and left it on the bed.

“Payne, Central Temple ASAP.”

I slipped out of the room and followed after Mila.

Outside, the fog had started to thicken again. That probably meant dawn was coming.

I caught sight of Mila through the fog. She was disappearing quickly into the thick chowder. I tried to run after her but she was gone, swallowed up.

“f**k, why couldn’t she just listen?”

[Chapter 669](#)

Mila

The fog closed around me like a blanket. I had to admit, thick fog was the best way to stay hidden and move unnoticed through a creepy village like Miltern.

My feet seemed to know exactly where to go as I moved closer to the center of the village and the Central Temple.

I hesitated and glanced back toward the hotel. It was completely hidden in the fog.

I snuck off again. I couldn’t help but feel uncertain about neglecting to tell Soren I was leaving.

Soren had been nice to me and saved my life. What if he could help me?

Shaking my head, I kept forging through the fog.

“Get a grip, Mila,” I muttered to myself.

Soren could play the “nice guy” all he wanted but he had secrets and ulterior motives.

I sniffed. And he accused me of being the secretive one! Hadn’t he made some big deal with his men about not prying into anyone’s past? Why did he feel the need to pry into mine?

Groaning, I picked up my pace. It was so quiet in the night and no one was around but my steps barely made a sound, like the fog absorbed them.

When I got to the center of the village, the fog parted slightly and moonlight streamed down on a large, majestic building. Or, it would have been majestic...

The temple was a huge, square pagoda that rose so high it practically blocked out the stars. Crows sat on the edge of the roof tiers, pecking and warbling to each other. I could see their eyes flashing in the dim moonlight.

They looked like guardians of the temple, or maybe they were harbingers of death.

Did they ever sleep?

Vines and moss clung to the exterior of the building. In some places, the walls had crumbled away and the plants had forced their way inside.

It must have been abandoned for a long, long time.

What kind of person would want me to meet them in a creepy place like this!?

Looking at the temple, I thought it felt familiar. Not the way it looked now. I could almost imagine what it looked like when it wasn't falling apart. A green, tin gilded with gold. The stone exterior polished and carved with familiar designs.

I could practically envision the cherry trees growing out front with their pink and white blossoms. Those trees were rotted, now.

How was it possible I could imagine what a building looked like that I'd never seen before? My imagination wasn't that good.

This temple must have been great and beautiful once. My heart thrummed and I felt a strong desire to see it restored. It was a symbol of hope and life, two things Miltern was desperately missing.

If their temple was restored, perhaps their vibrancy would be too.

Sighing, tears stung my eyes. Seeing the temple so ruined and broken made my heart ache. I didn't know why it was so sad, but my heart went out to the people here.

Why did I care if their temple was destroyed? I had no ties to these people.

But I couldn't shake the feeling or the desire to see it back to its former glory.

A crow cawed and suddenly, all the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end. A shiver ran down my spine and I stared at the looming, eerie temple. The fact was, this place wasn't as beautiful as it once was and it was falling apart.

It could be dangerous to go inside, for more than one reason.

I chewed my lower lip and glanced around. Maybe, I shouldn't go in...

I sucked in a sharp breath and shook my head. No, I'd come here for a reason. I'd come here for answers and I wasn't leaving without them!

I climbed the crumbling stairs and went inside. Wrinkling my nose, I looked around in the dimness. Rotten wood permeated the air and I could see why. Several beams had rotted through and fallen across the temple. Plants clung to them, devouring them back into the earth.

Crows pecked at the outside of the temple, sending horrible, clicking echoes throughout.

I waved my hand in front of my nose but the smell remained strong.

It was so dark I had to squint my eyes to see anything at all. Other than invading plants and fallen beams, there wasn't much to see. Everything else had either been destroyed or removed.

There was one, narrow path that had been cleared through the rubble. One path that led deeper into the temple and into darkness.

I took a step forward and paused. Something was scratching and crawling around in the corner, a rat or a mouse. When I listened more carefully, I could hear other things moving around on the edge of my vision.

Mice squeaked and I heard the buzzing of insect wings. Shuddering, I wrapped my arms around myself. My skin crawled and I tried to rub the goosebumps away. The beams creaked, threatening to break apart even more. The stone walls seemed to shiver and tremble and I wondered if it was even safe to walk through this place.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I muttered to myself.

The card that had been left with the bouquet didn’t have very good instructions.

Sighing, I pulled the card out of my pocket and examined it again. Before, I’d had the hotel lights on when I read it.

Now, in the dim light of the moonbeams that penetrated holes in the temple roof, the card looked completely different. The edges were gilded in a silvery, glow with a lovely, elegant swirling pattern.

Something new was written on the card now, in the same invisible, moon-activated ink.

“The end of the path, where it meets the moonlight.”

I flipped the card over, wondering if there were more hidden instructions on the other side.

Well, that wasn’t very descriptive. My eyes wandered down the dark path again. It looked like I had no choice. To get my answers, I’d have to follow the path.

I hesitated again and then slipped the card into my pocket. I’d come this far on my own and so far, I had no answers. I didn’t come all this way to leave empty handed!

Holding my breath, I carefully maneuvered down the narrow path. I sucked in my stomach and navigated around fallen beams and crumbling walls. If I nudged anything at all, the carefully balanced temple might crumble on top of me.

The cleared path led me out the back of the temple. As soon as I was outside again, I took a deep breath of fresh air. I fanned myself with my hand, sweat making my shirt stick to my body.

That had been hairraising.

I looked around at all the stone statues I’d wandered into. There were some that were so beautifully carved with intricate detail. Others were less elaborate and only had names written on them.

“Oh...”

I was in a graveyard. Swallowing hard, I rubbed my hands on my thighs. Meeting a stranger at night in a foggy graveyard. I was counting the ways this could turn into an urban legend.

The fog seemed to clear again and a moonbeam lit up one specific gravestone. The others stayed hidden in shadow.

Shrugging, I headed toward the illuminated grave. I couldn’t get a clearer sign than that. Maybe it was magic or the Moon Goddess guiding me.

The headstone I approached didn't have a name on it. At least, not one that I could read. There were deliberate carvings on it that could have been a language or some kind of writing. It was faded and did not have any symbols or characters I was familiar with.

The headstone was made out of white marble. It was a carving of a woman in a flowing dress. She was kneeling down, her arms wrapped around the neck of a large wolf. The statue was absolutely beautiful, even if it was a headstone.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was what I was looking for.

I walked around the headstone and ran my fingers over the smooth marble. Maybe there was a secret compartment or hidden button that would lead me to the next clue.

There was nothing... I examined the headstone twice just to be sure.

"What now..."

I tapped my foot on the ground and the strong scent of freshly turned earth hit my nose. Glancing down, I noticed that the ground at the base of the headstone had been disturbed recently.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," I grumbled.

Was I seriously going to dig up a grave!?

Maybe it wasn't a grave. Someone had obviously moved the dirt around and maybe they buried something else here.

I pulled my knife out and dropped to my knees. Careful to limit my search to the area where the dirt was freshly turned, I started digging with my knife blade.

I dug and dug until my knife hit something with a loud thud. Setting my knife aside, I started clearing the dirt away.

"Please don't be a coffin," I whispered to myself.

I brushed the dirt away and saw a wooden box buried at the base of the gravestone. It definitely wasn't a coffin! The box was small enough for me to hold and I pulled it out of the dirt.

There were no markings on it but it had brass hinges and a matching lock. I tipped the box this way and that. A locked box... that's what I'd come here for.

Of course, whoever led me here couldn't be bothered to put a key in the flower bouquet.

That was another puzzle for another time. The point was, I found what I came here to find.

"Why are you digging up a grave?"

I froze, box in hand, halfway between kneeling on the ground and standing up.

I set the box down and grabbed my knife. Jumping up, I blocked the headstone from view and swiped at the air with my knife.

"Don't come any closer!" I warned, slashing again.

“Mila, put your knife away. It is just me,” Soren’s voice said with an amused sigh.

“O-oh,” I whispered, relaxing slightly. “Do you make it a habit of sneaking up on people in cemeteries?”

Soren chuckled and came closer so I could see him better. I kept my knife raised. If he tried to take the box from me, I’d defend it.

“Why did you follow me? What do you want?” I asked the same questions I’d been asking him all day.

“Tsk. Tsk.” Soren crossed his arms and shook his head. “We had an agreement. You were supposed to come to me if you needed anything.”

“Well, I didn’t come to you because I didn’t need anything from you. This is none of your business,” I pointed out snippily.

“Put the knife down,” he said again, ignoring my reply.

He walked around me and I turned, keeping my eyes on him at all times. Soren c****d his head when he saw the gravestone.

“This is... interesting,” he said, squinting in the darkness.

“What is?” I asked. I relaxed my knife hand.

“I haven’t seen this language in... well, since I arrived in this kingdom. It is an ancient language, long- lost to most,” he explained.

I licked my lips and looked at the headstone again. All I saw were little scratch marks. To Soren, they actually made words.

“A dear one who couldn’t rest in peace,” he translated. “That’s gloomy.”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me. So, I’m going to be going now,” I said. I reached for the box and Soren grabbed my elbow firmly, pulling me toward him.

Frustrated and pissed off I burst into tears. Why couldn’t he just leave me alone!? Why couldn’t he just let me find my answers in peace? Didn’t he want to be left in peace?

Soren immediately released my arm. He creased his brow, looking worried that he hurt me.

I sniffled and blinked my tears away. Thinking fast, I punched him in the chest.

Soren groaned and staggered back.

I grabbed the box and scrambled to the other side of the gravestone.

“Get back here,” Soren rasped, rubbing his chest where I struck him.

“Don’t come any closer,” I warned when Soren took a step. “I will destroy this box and then neither of us will get what is inside.”

I raised my arms up, ready to smash the box against the headstone.

[Chapter 670](#)

Soren

Growling, I rolled my eyes. My chest felt bruised where she'd hit me. It was a strong punch.

I still couldn't figure out if she'd burst into tears because she was upset, because I'd hurt her, or because she was trying to distract me. Whatever the reason, she'd wasted no time in using my hesitation against me.

Perhaps she was more dangerous than I'd considered before. All this time, I thought it was her secrets and her past that would cause trouble and bring danger. She had some of her own power too.

"Calm down, Mila," I hissed. "I'm not here about the damn box."

"Y-you're not?" she asked, creasing her brow.

I sighed and shook my head. When I looked her over, pity swelled in my chest. This poor girl had never known friendship, love, or trust. She was so closed off and defensive, so mistrustful that she was suspicious of everyone and everything, even when they were trying to be nice to her.

I felt sorry for her, always living with the mindset that she had to be on her own and had to survive at all costs. Until that moment, I hadn't really considered the drawbacks of her life or how they had damaged her in ways I couldn't even imagine.

"I came here to make sure you were safe," I said in a gentler tone.

Mila scoffed and shook her head. She clutched the box to her chest like she thought I'd leap over the gravestone and wrestle it away from her if she relaxed her grip for a second.

Her mistrust filled the space between us. I didn't really need her to trust me but I would have liked her not to be so suspicious and paranoid. She probably couldn't help it at this point. Her expectation that everyone just wanted to use her or get something from her or make money off of her was a part of her DNA by now.

"I'll stay out of your way, Mila. I don't even need to know what is in the box, but you should come back to the hotel with me," I said, holding an arm out to the path through the temple.

"Why?" she snarled. Her knuckles were white as she clung to the box.

"You have no idea what is out here or how many people are after you. That box could put another target on your head," I pointed out.

Mila glared at me but I could see the wheels turning in her mind.

"I can take care of myself. I've done it all my life," she insisted with a firm nod.

"Like you did when you were poisoned? Or when you were attacked in the woods?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Mila scoffed and shook her head. "Those were extreme circumstances. I'm feeling a lot better now, stronger. I won't let myself get caught again. That's how I avoid trouble."

"I know you are a very capable woman, but stealth and secrecy can only get you so far. Alpha Chandler has some of the worst, most dangerous, most successful bounty hunters after you. They will anticipate all your moves," I warned.

"You can't threaten me to stay with you!?" Mila snapped.

I sighed heavily, my shoulders rising and falling. There was no way to break through her mistrust, was there? I wondered how she'd react if I told her about the night we spent together.

From what I gathered, she was still fuzzy on the details. It might shock her into compliance...

No, it wasn't the time to reveal that, not when she was so up in arms. She probably wouldn't believe me, anyway.

"I'm not threatening you. I'm merely suggesting that having some muscle looking out for you might not be such a bad idea," I explained.

"You know, I believe that you really believe what you're telling me," Mila said, her voice softer. "But I think it is all an act. You've convinced yourself that you want to protect me for my own good but that isn't the truth. It never is."

"I'll say this, you know as much about me as I know about you. Keep your inaccurate assumptions to yourself," I snarled.

Mila's eyes flared with anger. "You're just a faker! Pretending to be nice to me, pretending you want to protect me. At the end of the day, all you want is to use me, just like everyone else."

She glared daggers at me and snarled.

Taken aback, I didn't know what to say to her angry outburst.

"I'll give you props. No one has attempted to befriend me in order to use me before. You can't trick me into trusting you or letting my guard down!" she snapped. "You're just like the others, only worse because you're trying to play on my emotions."

"Like the others? I saved you twice," I reminded her again. "Have you already forgotten?"

"And how do I know that wasn't just some part of your elaborate game? No one offers their help like that without expecting something in return," she insisted, stamping her foot.

I snorted a humorless laugh and ran a hand through my hair. She was impossible to reason with.

"So, I'll pay you back for your assistance but I'm not giving you anything more than fair compensation and you're not going to be able to hold it over my head in order to use me," she explained with a firm head nod.

"I never asked for payment. Nor do I expect anything in return. Not now, and I won't come calling to collect in the future," I assured.

"Then you'll stop following me and leave me alone?" she asked. "Because you're never going to get what you really want from me!"

I smirked and chuckled. She was quick and clever. I found myself enjoying the challenging conversation.

“What do I want from you?” I asked.

Mila paused for a moment. That seemed to confuse her.

“Why ask me? Shouldn’t you be asking yourself that question?” she retorted.

“Hmm.”

I couldn’t deny that I was curious about the box. Whatever was in it, Mila could have and use however she wanted. But it was strange to me that she’d been able to find the box when all the card in the flowers offered was a time and place to meet.

Something else had guided her to the graveyard and the headstone where the box she hadn’t as buried. That was worth being curious over. I didn’t think Mila was a seer or psychic. She hadn’t given any indication that she had power like that.

I’d met a few psychics before and talking to them was head spinning. It was like they lived with one foot in another dimension and they were seeing and experiencing two lives or timelines at the same time.

But Mila was steady and grounded. She was focused and intense. That didn’t go hand in hand with psychic powers.

So, how had she learned about the box? She’d only dug up one place in the graveyard.

Sighing, I shook my head. All I ever wanted from her was honest answers. She seemed incapable of giving me that.

“Soren?” Payne’s voice drifted through the darkness.

“Over here,” I called out automatically, keeping my eyes on Mila.

Payne showed up and stopped dead. He glanced at Mila, tilting his head slightly.

She was still standing behind the headstone, box clutched to her chest. It was easy to see that she was standing on a springboard, ready to launch herself and run off at any moment. She was still glaring straight at me.

“What did you find out?” I asked, calling him back to the issue at hand.

“Uhh...” Payne looked at me and sighed. “A woman.”

“A woman delivered the flowers,” I said, nodding absently.

“She was wearing a cloak and I didn’t see her face or her features. By the time I caught sight of her, the fog hid everything, including the color of her cloak. She was fast and I lost her the moment the fog wrapped around her,” Payne reported.

“No scent?” I asked.

“If there was, I think the fog absorbed it. That stuff is harsh... it really messes with my senses. I feel like I can barely hear, see, or smell when it is thickest,” he said, a visible shudder running over him.

I'd felt the same. Fortunately, I knew where I was going and who I was following which made it easier to track Mila.

"There was something else," Payne said.

I flicked my eyes away from Mila for a moment to see the concerned expression on Payne's face. Then I looked back at her, holding her in place with my gaze.

"What was it?" I pressed.

"Even though it is night time, I saw several new faces entering Miltern. They are obvious because they aren't walking around all dazed and miserable. Although, based on how they look and the weaponry they are toting, I think we know why they are here." Payne nodded toward Mila.

Mila stiffened and I wondered if the news would be enough to convince her to remain with me for protection. She probably thought Payne was lying since he was loyal to me...

"They were knocking on doors and shaking people down for information on Mila. I don't think they'll stop there. They look like the type to kill anyone that gets in their way," he added.

I turned my attention to Payne and stroked my chin. These bounty hunters were determined and focused. They wouldn't easily fall for a false lead but I knew Payne and I could think of a way to send them in the wrong direction.

Movement caught the corner of my eye and I glanced at Mila.

She was running away from the graveyard. Every so often she glanced back, as if she expected to see us chasing after her.

Did she really think she could get away from me? I'd tracked her down in that thick, sense muddying fog!

Should I go after her? That was the bigger question.

She'd made it clear she didn't want me following her. Perhaps not following her was the only way to gain an ounce of her trust.

Then again, not following her meant not protecting her.

I'd tried to avoid getting entangled in her problems but the more I tried to stay out of it the more I was dragged in. I'd already dealt with two threats against her but they kept popping up out of the woodwork.

At this point, I couldn't pretend nothing had happened. I couldn't pretend there wasn't something between us.

Maybe it was simple curiosity about her past or why Alpha Chandler wanted her. Not because I wanted to use her to my advantage but knowing an alpha's weakness, especially one like Alpha Chandler, could be most beneficial.

If Mila wasn't so self-involved, she'd realize there were bigger things going on than just her. And that included my relationships with alphas.

I wasn't in the business of trading one life for my peace and freedom. However, knowledge of Alpha Chandler's desires and plans could be most advantageous.

There was still the unresolved matter of our one-night stand. As much as I wanted to brush it off as just that, a one-night stand, the fact that she didn't know about it didn't sit well with me.

I'd never taken advantage of a woman before in my life. Whatever was in her system that night had made her need and want that connection but I couldn't let her live her life without knowing it had happened.

There hadn't been a good time to address it since she was always trying to run.

I didn't know what was between us now. It could have been something entirely different, but we were connected. Whether she wanted to admit it or not.

It wasn't like I was doing joyful backflips over the idea.

I continued to watch her as she faded into the distance.

Trouble, that's all Mila was and all she'd brought so far. At this point, I'd invested far more in her than I had in anyone else in a long time. It would be a shame to let that all go to waste if she were to be killed.

I decided right then and there that the only repayment I needed for the help I'd offered was that she live a long and healthy life. Long enough, hopefully, to make friends, learn to trust, and be happy.

Everyone deserved that...

Now, I just had to see it through. Anyone that wanted to come after her would have to come through me first. I'd destroy whoever tried to take that chance from her. It was me, my healer, my protection that gave her a new chance at life and I wasn't about to see it ripped away.