

Kings Breeder 681

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Mila

After a long, much needed shower, I finished cleaning up the mess I'd made with the flowers and the water. My palm still stung from my cut but the bandage Soren had put on was still in place.

I tried not to think about our conversation but after I'd finished cleaning up, I couldn't keep the thoughts out.

Plopping down in a chair, I put my elbows on the table and glared across the room.

Soren was so annoying! He'd basically forced me to tell him about my past and then brushed it all off. At the same time, I was almost relieved that he'd gotten me to talk about it so I could face some of those buried memories.

Was there a reason I had chosen to share with him?

A lot of those memories I needed to remember and process. I'd been burying them for so long. Now that they'd flooded to the surface I had a better understanding of myself and why I was always trying to run.

But I could never outrun what I'd done. I'd been responsible for the deaths of so many witches. My own kind...

And now I knew. I was grateful to know the truth, no matter how horrific it was.

As the sun set, I watched the darkness descend out my window. Along with the darkness came thicker, denser fog.

I went to the window and looked down at the street. With the fog, I could barely see the street lights down below.

Were we going to make it back to the temple in this mess? I don't think I'd seen fog this thick since we arrived. Was it an omen that we shouldn't go? Was it a warning?

My stomach gurgled and I rubbed it to calm it down.

After Soren made his threat, I wasn't going to risk calling his bluff. There was a big part of me that thought he was bluffing but... I couldn't take that chance. Not with how many bounty hunters were roaming around.

As much as I didn't want to, I was going to have to work with him. Sure, I'd asked for his help, but I didn't realize he'd want to babysit me every step of the way.

Sighing, I bowed my head. I supposed he'd have to if he was going to protect me. I already knew I couldn't outrun or hold off all the bounty hunters on my own.

When the clock struck ten, I changed into an all black catsuit to help me blend in with the darkness. I opened the hotel room door and saw Soren waiting for me in the hallway. He stood stoically in the shadows, his arms crossed.

He had changed, too.

Like me, Soren was wearing all black. His outfit was skin tight and I could see the outlines of his muscles through the black, stretchy fabric.

I raked my eyes over the lines of his exposed muscles, and the ones carefully hidden by his shirt. Even with a shirt on, I could still clearly imagine what his chest and abs looked like naked.

My cheeks reddened and I looked down. Flashes of his bulging arms and thick... muscles covering me flickered in my mind. I felt a memory of his fingers on my skin, his lips on my neck.

A tremble shot through my legs and my lower lip quivered. I chewed the inside of my cheek and shook my head, forcing the memories away.

A shiver ran down my spine and I turned away quickly.

My heart hammered in my chest and I tried to gain my composure. He'd just make fun of me if he thought I was acting like some lovestruck little girl. I had to be serious because I didn't want Soren to think I was an overly emotional mess after this morning.

I took a few deep breaths and steadied myself before turning back to him.

He hadn't moved and his face was still expressionless.

My heart continued to hammer but I ignored it, hoping he wouldn't hear it in the quiet hallway.

Out of the shadows, Payne and Ashley emerged. They stood on either side of Soren.

Behind them, I saw even more silhouettes of other shifters. Probably those loyal to Soren.

"So... are we going to go or are we just going to stand here all night?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Soren smirked. "We were waiting for you. I thought you'd run off again."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. I wish I could. But... here we are."

"Lead the way," Soren said, holding his arm out down the hall.

I nodded and headed down the hall. Soren and all the others started following me. I felt them closing in around me. I could sense some of them getting even closer.

Covertly, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Payne and Ashley flanking me. They were closest to me.

I wondered if they were here to protect me or to keep me from running off.

Soren wouldn't need this many people to subdue me or track me down. I had a feeling, the extra muscle behind him was for protection. They'd hold off any bounty hunters that came after us.

Payne's face was flat and expressionless. He kept his eyes on me like he was ready to spring at any moment.

Ashley, on the other hand, looked like she didn't want to be there. She looked everywhere but at me and her feet dragged with every step.

Soren was behind both of them. He had a little smirk on his lips as he watched me.

Was he waiting for me to bolt too? Probably. He'd made it clear that he didn't trust me to follow his orders. Why else would he have threatened me like that?

His eyes flickered with amusement and I shook my head, looking forward again.

Outside, the fog was so thick I could barely see my own hand when I stretched my arm out all the way. The village was eerily quiet.

At least, that would make it easier to hear any bounty hunters sneaking up on us. Unless it was the fog that made it seem so quiet...

I headed toward the temple. Even in the dense fog, I felt like there was a string on my heart tugging me in the direction of the temple.

The footsteps behind me started to fade and I stopped walking, waiting for them to catch up. They couldn't feel their way toward the temple like I could. I didn't want anyone getting lost in the fog. Tonight, the village felt dangerous and as much as I loathed Soren's constant presence, I didn't want those loyal to him put at risk.

"Why are you stopping?" Soren asked softly, coming up beside me. He put his hand on the small of my back and urged me forward.

"It sounds like everyone was getting further away," I said.

My anxiety immediately eased when he touched me.

Had I really become so helpless that I had to rely on him for safety and security?

He had proven himself. He'd saved my life several times and continued to give me help and protection. I knew I wasn't at my full strength and having him there just felt safer.

"It is the fog, Mila. It plays tricks on your senses. Don't worry about Payne or Ashley or the others. They know where they need to be and they'll do their jobs," Soren assured.

He pulled his hand from my back and I bit my lower lip to stifle a whimper that rose in my throat. I didn't want him to pull away.

He stayed beside me, his arm brushing mine.

"How much further to the temple?" he asked.

"Not that much further. I don't think... It is hard to tell..."

I glanced up at a street light overhead. It was barely noticeable through the fog but the light was bright and strong.

"When we get to the last street light, it won't be much farther," I said, pointing up.

Soren nodded.

We walked in silence for a time.

The strong lights were shrouded in fog but from the base of one, we could see the soft glow of another in the distance.

It was like following breadcrumbs through the woods.

I stayed close to Soren, making sure my arm brushed his at all times. Shaking my head and laughing to myself, I couldn't believe how much I'd come to rely on him in just a short time. Once this poison was out of my system, I'd have to break myself of that habit.

I didn't need anyone and I didn't want to need anyone!

"Here it is, the last street light," I said. I stopped and placed my hand on the post.

Soren stopped and looked back.

I followed his gaze. Through the fog, his followers emerged. They were sticking pretty close together. Most of them glanced around, looking and listening for potential threats.

Suddenly, the light overhead flickered. I looked up just as it blinked out.

"CAWW!"

A crow screamed in the darkness and dove off the lampost. It dove straight toward me! Its sharp beak and talons aimed at my face.

"Ack!" I covered my head and turned away from the attacking bird.

I turned right into Soren's arms. His arms came around me and he pulled me close.

Immediately, I wanted out of his arms, once the crow was gone, but he wasn't ready to let me go.

His lips grazed my ear.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he purred.

"Who's afraid?" I countered snippily.

Soren chuckled but he didn't say anything else.

My cheeks burned hot and I kept my head down so he wouldn't see. Why had I reacted so foolishly? I wasn't normally a jittery person.

This fog was messing with me. It had to be the fog.

We were all feeling it.

I tried to step away from Soren again but he kept a firm grip on me. He grabbed my wrist and held my hand up. From his pocket, he pulled something out that glinted in the very dim lighting.

Soren pressed the cool, smooth object into my hand. I closed my fingers around the object, creasing my brow.

Opening my hand, I looked at what he'd given me. It was a delicate charm bracelet. The bracelet was made of small, interlocking silver loops that charms could be easily clipped to.

There was already one charm clipped to the bracelet. It was a single, black flower petal in the shape of a curved teardrop.

The crease in my brow deepened and I turned the bracelet over in my hands a few times. What was this, some kind of apology? Or was it a leash? I couldn't ever remember getting a gift that didn't have some other meaning to it.

Soren smirked.

"Other than the flowers you burned, it was impossible to find fresh flowers in this foggy place," he said.

I looked into his eyes. They curved slightly as he grinned at me.

"Hopefully, this will be an adequate substitute," he added.

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My heart fluttered and I gasped. The bracelet was beautiful, regardless of the reasons why Soren had given it to me.

As much as I wanted to fight it, I really couldn't deny that I was feeling something for him. Something more than what I wanted to feel.

How had I let myself fall for Soren?

I kept trying to tell myself the bracelet was a bribe or a leash of some kind, but my heart kept fluttering and kept telling me that it was a romantic gesture. Was that what I wanted it to be?

Thoughts raced through my head and I wondered if I had offered my body to him to make this deal or if I'd really wanted to share that with him.

How could this have happened?

He was so cold, indifferent, and infuriating. He was controlling and distant. That didn't exactly spell out warm and fuzzy feelings...

But the moments we'd shared and how he was always looking out for me, it had softened my heart without me even knowing it.

Swallowing, I tried to pull my hand away but Soren's fingers tightened around my forearm. He whisked the bracelet out of my hand and deftly clasped it around my wrist. The cool metal touched my skin and it hung there, elegantly.

"It looks good on you," he said softly.

I held my arm up in the street light. It had flickered back on after the crow flew off. The bracelet really was pretty.

I pulled it closer and looked at the charm. The petal was oddly shaped. I thought it was a curved teardrop but it was a little more intricate than that with smaller, secondary petals flaring out of the base.

It almost looked like a little campfire. But it was black.

"I thought I should at least get you a 'thank you'," Soren said, cutting into my thoughts.

"A thank you?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

What did he have to thank me for?

Again, my heart started to pound in my chest. I swallowed and willed with all my strength that Soren wouldn't hear my heart.

"Yes," he confirmed without elaborating.

Apparently, he wasn't going to tell me what he was thanking me for.

I touched the little charm. "What kind of flower is this from?"

Soren's eyes widened and he pursed his lips. "That is a blackfire petal."

"Blackfire!?" I asked, gasping. I stared at the little charm again.

The poison I'd taken was called Blackfire but I didn't know it was made from a plant or a flower. Especially not one that looked so beautiful. How could something that unique and gorgeous be so dangerous?

"This is where the poison comes from?" I asked.

"It is. The flower is very rare, so the poison is too. This charm was even harder to come by," he said.

Soren grinned and covered the bracelet with his hand.

I smiled. "Well... thank you for the gift. It is a forever reminder of what I put myself through."

I stuck my tongue out a little so Soren would know I was teasing him.

He smirked. "Or, a forever reminder of what you survived."

My heart jumped into my throat and I nodded. I couldn't do anything else.

"Soren," Ashley called out.

She stormed through the mist, her hands on her hips. Her dark glower fixed directly on me.

It occurred to me again that Ashley might really like Soren. She always seemed to interrupt when he and I were having a moment. Either that, or she was very protective of him and she didn't trust me.

Whatever the case, I had the sudden urge to remind her that Soren was an adult and perfectly capable of taking care of himself and making his own decisions.

I swallowed the impulse quickly and leaned toward Soren.

"Is she mad?" I asked.

It wouldn't help our mission if Ashley was pissed off. She might try to sabotage things or get in the way. As far as I was concerned, Ashley and I were on good terms but I didn't want her emotions to get in the way of what I had to do.

“Ashley?” Soren asked, raising an eyebrow at me. “Oh, she’s fine.”

He waved off my concerns.

“We should probably get going again. Lingering in one place in this fog isn’t wise,” I suggested to help diffuse the situation.

“Agreed.”

We continued down the path to the temple. As we got closer, the fog thinned out and cleared a little. It wasn’t much but just enough that I could see the stars overhead. They were veiled and very dim.

“Oh!” I gasped and covered my mouth as I stared at the temple.

The entire thing had crumbled since the night before. It was nothing but a pile of ruins and rubble.

My mind spun. How had that happened since last night? How had we not felt the tremors of the entire temple coming down?

It hadn’t been the sturdiest of structures but it was still standing. What could have caused it to collapse so quickly?

“What is this place?” Ashley asked.

“It’s not a temple, it is a pile of rubble,” Payne pointed out.

“It wasn’t like this last night,” I argued.

Payne and Soren had both seen it. They knew what it was supposed to look like.

Shaking my head, I started to move through the rubble.

Soren and his followers stuck close to me.

With any luck, the cemetery wouldn’t be disturbed. That was where I’d found all the useful information anyway.

I made it to the other side of the temple and stopped dead. The sight of the cemetery made my stomach lurch. I covered my mouth and took deep breaths to quell the rising nausea.

All the gravestones had been overturned or smashed into millions of pieces.

Worse than that, the graves were dug up.

Caskets were tossed around, open, and splintered.

Bodies littered the ground. They were bent over stone debris and piled on mounds of dirt. All of them charred and burnt to a crisp. Some were even still smoking.

“What the hell...” Ashley came up beside me.

“Payne, take a team and do a sweep of the perimeter. Check for clues of what could cause this,” Soren ordered, his voice calm and steady.

I glanced at him. Could he have been expecting something like this or was he just that calm in a crisis?

He didn't look shocked or upset at all. His eyes were dark and he seemed somber, like it wasn't the first time he'd seen something like this.

Payne nodded and grabbed a few of Soren's followers. They disappeared into the fog.

My heart sank. I doubted they would find anything in this mess. Whoever, or whatever, had done this would cover their tracks. This wasn't a taunt or a statement. It was clean up.

Soren grabbed my arm and dragged me to a corner of the rubble. I was too shocked to resist.

Ashley tagged along.

Soren released me and turned to her. "Stay here. Keep an eye on Mila and remain alert," he ordered.

"Yes, of course," Ashley said, nodding. "Where are you going?"

"To do my own investigation," Soren said gruffly.

He stalked toward the original entrance of the temple. There wasn't anything left there but even from where I stood, I could see what looked like a chasm that had opened up underneath the temple. A massive hole in the ground.

I tried to follow after Soren but Ashley grabbed my arm.

"You're staying here," she hissed.

"No. I want to check out that chasm," I argued.

"Bad idea. You've already caused enough trouble," Ashley insisted. She held my arm firmly.

Her tone made me realize that she wasn't at all pleased to be around me again. She was even more dissatisfied with her assignment to protect me and guard me. But it was an order from Soren and I understood that she wouldn't disobey or let him down.

"I can handle a little investigation," I insisted.

"No!" Ashley enforced. She pulled me further back into the corner.

There was something else in her tone now. She was trying to protect me and she really thought that whatever Soren was investigating could be dangerous to me.

I did not want to be the damsel in distress!

"Don't worry. I can do this. I'll just take a quick look. You can come along if you want," I offered, using a more pleasant tone.

Ashley sighed and shifted her eyes back and forth like she was thinking. "Okay, fine, but stay close to me."

I nodded and we headed toward the chasm.

Suddenly, the ground trembled and the shadows in the temple rubble began to move. The chasm groaned and flying, shadowy creatures like black ghosts burst from the hole.

They rushed straight at me in a torrent of wind and groans. I threw my arms up to protect my face.

“Get down!” Ashley shouted.

She tackled me and covered me with her body, keeping me safe on the ground. I landed with a heavy thud. My shoulder ached from slamming into a stone slab.

Ashley landed just as heavily on top of me, practically knocking the wind out of me. I groaned and rolled onto my back. She still covered me.

The shadows swooped around us. Even with Ashley protecting me, they reached out with spindly fingers, trying to grasp me.

Ashley swatted them away. They didn’t seem at all interested in her and if she got close, they would back off and swoop around for another attack.

It was like they only wanted to get to me and wouldn’t bother with anything else in their way.

“What are these things? What do they want from you?” she asked.

“I... have no idea...” I admitted.

Ashley growled. “Of course, not.”

“RAWWWR!”

I glanced up to see a beautiful, sleek, black wolf bursting out from the rubble.

My heart lifted.

It was Soren in wolf form. He snarled and growled, scraping his front paw on the stone as he prepared to charge. He charged right at us, snapping at the shadows. They seemed to tremble before him and started swooping back toward the chasm.

Soren’s majestic wolf battled them ruthlessly, not holding anything back. He swatted at them in the air and chomped at them with his teeth. It was hard to tell if he was hurting them or if they were anything more than moving shadows.

Whatever he was doing, he was winning.

They retreated into the chasm.

As soon as the shadows were gone, I pushed Ashley off of me. Jumping to my feet, I headed toward Soren to thank him, yet again, for his bravery and for saving me.

“Mila, get back here!” Ashley called after me.

She jumped to her feet and ran up to me. When she grabbed my arm, I pulled away and kept walking toward Soren.

Soren glanced at me with deep, glassy wolf eyes. He bowed his head and I realized he was about to do something insanely stupid.

“No...” I whispered.

I reached toward him just as Soren bolted toward the chasm. He disappeared into the darkness with the shadows.

“No! Soren!” I shouted.

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I stared at the hole where Soren disappeared. Blood rushed in my ears and I felt numb. I couldn't hear anything or feel anything. All I could do was stare at the chasm.

Worry crept into my veins. Was it only seconds that passed or had hours gone by? Time stood still completely and I held my breath, waiting for him to emerge.

I didn't expect to be worried about him but it felt like too much time had passed. No sounds or movement came from the darkness.

“Screw it,” I muttered. I was going to go in after him and find out what happened!

I slipped away from Ashley, vaulting over a nearby piece of rubble, and launched myself straight toward the chasm.

A strong arm looped around my waist and pulled me to a halt. I lurched, the wind getting knocked out of me again.

Gasping and heaving, I tried to catch my breath. All I could do was glare at the person that stopped me.

It was Payne this time.

“Don't worry. The boss knows what he's doing. You don't need to do anything risky,” he warned.

“But...”

“Just wait. He'll come back. He always does.” There was a strange hint of sarcasm in Payne's voice.

Together, we stared at the chasm.

Again, it felt like hours could have gone by. I didn't understand why the rest of Soren's loyal followers were just standing there.

Didn't they care about him? Didn't they want to save him?

Grunting and heavy breathing came from the chasm.

I clutched my heart as Soren's large wolf form appeared. He was dragging something with his mouth. It was a woman. Her body was limp and unmoving.

Soren dropped her on the ground near my feet. He bowed his head and then disappeared behind some rubble.

“See, he knows what he's doing. You just have to give him a couple of minutes,” Payne said, nodding.

“A couple of minutes?” I whispered to myself.

I shook my head thinking Soren had been gone a lot longer than that. Hadn't he?

Looking down at the woman at my feet, I noticed she was very pale. I couldn't see any wounds on her or smell blood, so I didn't think Soren had injured her. She was dressed like the residents from Miltern pack and in her early twenties.

"That's the woman who delivered your flowers. I recognize her cloak and her scent," Payne said.

"She attempted to attack me. I rendered her unconscious," Soren said. He reappeared from around the rubble, his black clothes on his body again.

"You didn't hurt her, did you?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

"She'll be fine," Soren assured. "What do you want to do with her?"

Ashley scoffed and put her hands on her hips. She glared at me and pouted slightly.

"Why ask Mila? What does she know about anything that's going on here? She doesn't even know what those things wanted," she argued.

"Ashley!" Payne reprimanded.

"Hmph." Ashley turned away from us.

Apparently, when she didn't need to protect me, she didn't have much of an opinion of me at all. It didn't bother me. I was used to people turning against me and not giving me any kind of respect or benefit of the doubt.

I kept looking at the woman at my feet. She winced and slowly opened her eyes.

Sitting bolt upright, she stared at us. On her hands and knees, she spun around, her eyes wide. She looked like a cornered wild animal.

"Shh, don't be afraid," I said. I crouched down and spoke softly to her. "My name is Mila. What is your name?"

She looked right at me and the panic settled. I could tell she was uneasy about the presence of the other shifters but she seemed okay with me.

"What's your name?" I asked again, holding her gaze so she could shut out everyone else.

"A-April," she stuttered.

"You reached out to me for help, April. I'm here now. What can I do for you?" I asked.

April glanced at Soren and then at Payne. She shook her head and retreated slightly.

I could tell she didn't trust them. I'd felt the same when I first met them. I still didn't think I could trust them but they were here for me and they had my back for the moment. We were working together.

"It's okay, I promise. These guys are my... my f-friends," I forced the words out. It barely sounded convincing even to me.

I saw Soren shake his head and give me a look. I glared at him for a moment and then turned back to April.

Her eyes were still wide as she looked over at Soren.

“But... last night, you two were fighting in the graveyard. I saw you,” she said frantically.

I glanced at Soren and he shrugged casually.

“Right...”

“Well... there’s an explanation for that...”

April turned back to me. She waited expectantly for my explanation.

“It was a bit of a misunderstanding, but we’ve worked things out,” I said in a rush.

Yeah, we worked things out all night long in bed...

My cheeks flushed and I chewed the inside of my cheek. Hopefully, April wouldn’t pick up on what I was implying.

“And now, he’s helping me. They all are. You trust me, right?” I asked.

“Y-yes.” April nodded.

“Then I’m telling you that you can trust them, okay?” I pressed.

She nodded.

Suddenly, she dropped onto the ground in a low bow, her forehead and palms pressed to the dirt. The top of her head almost touched my shoes.

“Please, Mila, please save the Miltern pack!” she begged.

“Um... I would love to. But what do I need to save you from?” I asked.

I glanced around nervously. Soren, Payne, and Ashley just stood there. None of them were going to jump in and help.

April lifted her bright green eyes to mine and smiled widely. She nodded and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, kissing the back of my hand.

Tears wet her cheeks. She looked so relieved and happy.

I would have felt warmer if I had any idea what she needed my help with. She was awfully happy for someone that didn’t know if I really could help or not. Whatever she needed, she seemed convinced I was the one to do it.

Not Soren, not Payne, not any of the other shifters.

Me.

Did that have to do with my witch heritage? It was the only thing I knew of that set me apart from the others.

Slowly, I pulled away. “April, I need you to tell me what is going on.”

“Please, I need you to lift the curse on us,” she begged.

“Curse? There’s a curse on Miltern pack?” I asked.

Oh boy, I clearly was in way over my head.

“Can you start from the beginning? I don’t know anything about a curse or what is happening here,” I told her.

April nodded. “Fourteen years ago, something... a curse was cast on Miltern pack. It crippled and devastated us. At first, it wasn’t noticeable. But after a few months, we realized that none of us could leave. We were stuck here.”

“No one has been able to leave this village for fourteen years?” Payne asked.

April shook her head. “No. And after that, it got worse. The fog rolled in and it numbed us. No one could feel anything. Everyone went about their regular lives but they were dead inside. No happiness, no emotions, and unable to use their senses beyond basic seeing and hearing.”

“We’ve all felt that in the fog,” Payne muttered.

Soren nodded in agreement.

I glared at the two of them.

“Can you let her finish the story!?” I snapped.

Payne made a motion of zipping up his lips. Soren just closed his mouth, his jaw tensing. With all the interruptions, I was amazed April hadn’t given up on telling us what was happening.

This was the first time I’d encountered anyone that could answer my questions about magic, and possibly why I’d been called to Miltern in the first place. I didn’t want them to spook her or overwhelm her with their added commentary.

“Everyone lost the meaning of life. So, they just go through daily tasks meant for basic survival. There are no dreams, ambitions, or passions. No one falls in love or searches for answers. We are stuck in this never-ending purgatory,” April finished with a sad sigh.

“Who did this to your pack? Who...”

“No one knows,” April jumped in. “It was so strange. As soon as we realized we couldn’t leave anymore, the fog rolled in, like it was waiting for us to realize we were cursed and doomed before delivering the final blow.”

Listening to the story of the curse made my stomach rumble. I had felt that something wasn’t right from the moment I got here. The people were like zombies. I hadn’t considered it was because of a curse.

For an entire village to be cursed... That had to be a powerful spell. What kind of magic and magic- doers were we dealing with here?

“And that was when everything changed?” I asked.

April nodded. “Yes. It has been like this since.”

“What about you? You seem... normal,” I said.

“Well, I’m a seer. Curses aren’t as strong over seers and healers. I feel it sometimes, tugging at me and trying to pull me into that numbness, but I can fight it,” she explained.

“If you’re a seer, why haven’t you tried to lift the curse?” Ashley asked, glowering.

“Seers can’t lift curses. Neither can healers. That’s why we need you,” April said, keeping her eyes on me.

“I don’t know,” I said, shifting my weight from one foot to another. “You might have the wrong person. I have no idea how to break curses! I don’t know anything about magic!”

April’s face fell and she curled her knees to her chest, hugging herself.

“If you don’t know how... no one knows. We really are doomed,” she whispered.

That couldn’t be true. I knew for a fact that another powerful witch was in these parts. Helen had lured me here herself.

If April really was on my side and trying to help me, wouldn’t she know that?

“What about Helen?” I asked, testing her. “Would Helen know what to do?”

April looked up at me in surprise. She tilted her head to the side and then shook it.

“My teacher disappeared more than fourteen years ago... before the curse even... If she had been here, this wouldn’t have happened. I know it,” April insisted.

It was my turn to be surprised. I dropped down to my knees and put a hand on April’s shoulder. All my searching and I was finally making progress!

“Helen was your teacher?” I asked.

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“Yes, Helen was my teacher,” April confirmed with a soft nod.

My heart fluttered and years of questions rose to my throat. I swallowed them down and settled for a bright smile.

“Where is she? I need to find her and talk to her,” I said.

April’s eyes fell and she shook her head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where she is. It has been years since I’ve heard from her at all. She hasn’t even reached out to me in my dreams,” she said somberly.

I bit my lip and glanced at Soren quickly.

April hadn’t heard from Helen in years, but she’d been able to reach out to me in my dreams as recently as a few days ago. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have come to Miltern. Was it the curse that kept her from talking to April or was it something else that allowed her to communicate with me?

I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. My heart sank and I looked down.

All this way I'd traveled, and Helen wasn't even here. Was it even her that had reached out in my dreams or was it April pretending to be her?

That didn't make sense. April seemed surprised that I even knew who Helen was.

"So, she's a seer too, if she's your teacher?" I asked, hoping she could give me something useful.

"Oh no," April said. A soft, respectful smile crossed her face. "Helen is much more than that! She's a witch."

Her joy and respect toward Helen confirmed that she was telling the truth. April hadn't left Miltern in fourteen years. Otherwise, she'd know that witches had been hunted and that their very existence was taboo.

I glanced at Soren and our eyes met. He gave me a sympathetic look but I understood that whatever I chose to reveal to her was up to me.

April was already so scared and panicked, I didn't want to freak her out more by telling her a lot of witches, possibly all of them, had been hunted and destroyed.

I caught Ashley shifting uncomfortably and I glanced over. Payne's expression had changed, too. He looked a little pale and stricken.

They knew something about witches. Soren hadn't mentioned that.

Crack!

In unison, all our heads snapped in the direction of the noise.

I held my breath.

Silence descended around us.

"It isn't safe here," April whispered sharply.

"That was nothing, just some temple debris," Soren reported.

"No. It isn't safe," April insisted, shaking her head. She looked at me with pleading eyes. "Get back to the hotel. You'll be safe there."

"What about you? Will you come with us?" I asked.

"I have a place to stay. Don't worry about me." She rose to her feet and brushed off her dress and cloak.

"Where can I find you?" I asked, grabbing her arm.

"I'll find you. We're counting on you, Mila. The pack's fate rests in your hands... help us, please," she said.

Before I could respond, April slipped off into the darkness. I stared at my empty hand. Apparently, I hadn't had that tight of a grip on her.

“Follow her,” Soren ordered.

“No,” I said. “I trust her. She’s been through enough and doesn’t need to be frightened or traumatized anymore.”

Soren narrowed his eyes at me but he nodded.

“Belay that,” he agreed.

Ashley scoffed but I didn’t look at her.

Our group headed back to the hotel. Soren stuck close to me with Ashley, Payne, and the others following behind.

The weight of April’s final words hung around my neck like an anvil. She seemed convinced that I was the only one who could break the curse and save Miltern pack. I didn’t even know where to begin.

I’d only just accepted that I had witch ancestry and I had no idea how to use magic or break curses. I wasn’t even sure I knew the difference between witches, seers and healers.

And somehow, I was supposed to break the curse and save the pack?

April made it sound like if I didn’t make it happen, the pack would be cursed forever. As if finding out I was a witch that was responsible for several other witch deaths wasn’t enough pressure. Now, I had this looming fate that I didn’t understand.

I shook my head and kept my eyes down all the way back to the hotel. Payne and Ashley watched me closely, like they could sense my tension. I didn’t say anything and neither did they.

What could they say?

This was a burden I had to carry myself.

They couldn’t promise me that we’d figure something out. They couldn’t offer to help because they weren’t witches.

It was a lot of responsibility for me but all of Miltern pack was counting on me.

I headed straight to my room without talking to anyone.

The box I’d collected from the cemetery still sat closed and useless on the bed.

Suddenly, I wondered if the box was the key to breaking the curse. Maybe there was something inside of it that would give me the information I needed. Some kind of tool or scroll that would allow me to break the curse.

Did April mean I was the only one who could do it because I was in possession of the box?

After all, she’d been the one to lead me to it.

I picked it up again and started turning it this way and that.

Picking the lock hadn't done any good. There was a round divot on the bottom with some grooves in it but it just looked like a dent in the wood. Like someone had carelessly banged the box around at one point.

I turned it over again and my finger grazed something on one of the brass brackets. I looked closer and saw some uniform lines lightly carved into the metal. I hadn't noticed them before. They were very faded.

They weren't just random lines, either. They were the same language I'd seen on the headstone.

A language that Soren could read.

Groaning, I tilted my head back.

I'd have to ask him for help. But I couldn't! I already told Soren I knew what was in the box. Bringing it to him and asking for help would mean I had to admit I lied.

He'd never let me live it down...

But this could be the way to break the curse. April, Miltern, they deserved freedom. It was my only lead.

Soren had promised to help me. Would he once he learned I'd lied?

Well, if he didn't, then he was a complete bastard. This was about saving a pack from a horrible curse, not about whether I trusted him.

Tucking the box under my arm, I collected myself and went across the hall to Soren's room. I raised my hand to knock and hesitated. Sighing, I dropped my arm to my side.

This was either going to go very badly or be the salvation Miltern needed.

Sighing again, I lifted my hand and knocked.

Soren opened the door, an amused smirk on his face.

"Another late night visit. This is becoming a habit of yours," he said as I strode into his room.

"I need your assistance," I said bluntly.

"Oh really?" He came up behind me and put his hands on my hips.

A shudder ran through me and I bit my tongue. Pain shot through my face and I pulled away from him.

"With this," I said, holding up the box.

Soren frowned. He scanned the box and c****d his head to the side.

"I thought you said you opened it," he said curtly.

"Are you that shocked I lied?" I challenged.

The light returned to Soren's eyes and he grinned. "No, I suspected you were exaggerating your success. Why come to me? Aren't you able to handle everything on your own?"

“We have a deal, right? You agreed to help me. I thought we could work on this puzzle together.” I smiled coyly.

“Oh, is that the reason?” he asked, arching an eyebrow. He gave me a suspicious look like he didn’t believe me.

Not that I expected him to.

He was challenging me, though, like he wanted me to admit that I needed his help. I didn’t want to admit that to him but I knew it was the truth. He knew it was the truth too.

Sighing, I looked at the box and juggled it from one hand to the other.

“Are you going back on our deal?” I asked.

Soren chuckled. “Not in the least. I’m just curious as to why you’re bringing this to me now. You’ve been so adamant about doing everything else on your own. It isn’t just the deal that brings you to my door tonight. I want to know why.”

He smiled slyly and I realized he knew exactly what he was doing and all the buttons he was pushing.

I rolled my eyes and groaned.

“Fine, I need your help. I can’t open the box and I know you know the language that is engraved on it. I can’t do this without you. Is that what you wanted to hear?” I snapped.

Soren arched his eyebrow and pressed a hand to his chest.

“Bestill my heart. If that isn’t the kindest way anyone has asked me for a favor,” he taunted.

I glared at him even harder. He really wanted to make this as uncomfortable as possible for me.

Hugging the box to my chest, I turned away from him. Sighing, I bowed my head slightly and I let go of my frustration and anger. I needed his help, regardless of what I wanted.

Slowly, I turned back to him.

“Please, will you help me?” I asked softly.

Soren chuckled and amusement flickered in his eyes.

I cursed at myself for getting drawn into his antics and for getting drawn into his smile, again!

“Alright, let me take a look,” he offered, holding his hands out.

Reluctantly, I handed the box over.

“That language from the tombstone is on the brass brackets. I thought maybe if you could translate it, that would be some kind of magic password,” I suggested, pointing to where the letters were engraved.

Soren squinted, like he had trouble making out the lines too.

“It says: To seek what cannot be found, a treasure must be offered, to open the gate, close the ring.”

“That makes no sense,” I blurted out.

“Well, it wasn’t a magical password. The box is still locked,” Soren said, straining his fingers as he tested it.

“I tried picking the lock, that did no good,” I admitted.

“You’re the witch, why don’t you say the words aloud and see if it works.”

I shrugged. “Okay. To seek what cannot be found, a treasure must be offered, to open the gate, close the ring.”

Again, nothing happened. Soren tried to open the lid but it remained stuck in place.

“Look!” I gasped. The light carvings melted into the brackets, disappearing.

“All the good that did. We lost our one lead...” Soren muttered. He continued to examine the box, eyes focused.

I sighed and walked away. This was useless! How could I save all of Miltern if I couldn’t even get into a box!?

“What’s this?” Soren asked.

I turned back and looked at the divot in the bottom of the box.

He ran his thumb over the grooves.

“I don’t know. I figured it was a dent made by someone mishandling the box.”

“No. This kind of box would be magically protected from harm. This is part of the design. These grooves...”

“What are you thinking?”

“To open the gate... a treasure... the ring...” Soren muttered to himself.

He was onto something and I felt inadequate. If he figured out the puzzle before I did, I wouldn’t know how to feel about myself!

“The ring you gave me. It is an heirloom and it could fit in these grooves,” he said.

“It’s a riddle?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Precisely.”

Soren handed me the box and went to the table beside the bed. He opened the top drawer and pulled out the ring I’d given him. I found it odd that he’d brought it all the way here with him.

“Turn the box over,” he instructed.

I did as I was told.

Soren pressed the ring into the divot, the gemstone design slid neatly into the grooves. He pressed down and the brass lock clicked.

Gasping, I flipped the box over and threw the lid open.

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My heart raced as my fingers slipped on the box lid. I couldn't get it open fast enough. All I could think was that when I opened this box, I'd have the answers to save Miltern pack.

As soon as the light from Soren's room dipped into the box and revealed what was inside, my heart sank like a stone and I scrunched up my face.

"What is it?" Soren asked, peering over my shoulder.

"A feather, a book, and a rolled-up piece of parchment." I listed the items.

What was I supposed to do with any of that?

The book didn't have a title or anything. It was just an old leather-bound journal from the looks of it. The rolled-up parchment was tied with a black string.

I tipped the box toward Soren so he could get a better look.

His eyebrows shot into his hairline.

"That's the feather of justice," he said, pointing to the feather.

I looked over the feather again. It wasn't anything special. At a glance, I couldn't tell what kind of bird it came from. It was white with some fluffy down at the base and it curved in an unusual angle for a feather.

"The feather of justice?" I asked.

"It is a pack artifact. Supposedly, it is a feather from the Moon Goddess's arrow," Soren explained.

I creased my brow. It all sounded like fairy tales to me.

"If it is an artifact, does it have some special significance or use?" I questioned.

"All artifacts are special for a reason. The pack artifacts tend to have specific powers or uses," Soren explained.

"I wonder... what's it used for?" I searched Soren's face.

He was still staring at the feather. It seemed like the last thing he expected to uncover in the box. If anything, he seemed almost disturbed to find a pack artifact in such an unusual place.

Soren shook his head and sighed.

"There isn't a lot of documentation on artifacts. Most of what exists describe them but not what they do. There is so much myth and legend around artifacts, I don't think anyone has fully documented what they can do. And a lot of what is written is... exaggerated," he said.

"Is that a nice way of saying it is all bullshit?"

Soren chuckled. "I've read plenty about pack artifacts. A lot of it seems unbelievable and I have rarely seen an artifact live up to the legends written about it."

I picked the feather up and it thrummed in my hand. There was power in that feather. How I could access it or use it, I had no idea!

Setting the feather back in the box, I looked at the book and the rolled-up parchment. As disappointed as I was when I first saw them, the answers could have been hidden inside. I would need time to examine them.

Soren was still looking at the items in the box. He hadn't tried to pick any of them up or hold them.

I wondered why that was. Maybe he was being respectful toward me and letting me take my time. He could have wanted me to be the first one to examine them.

I chewed on my lower lip. Did I want to examine them with Soren looking over my shoulder? I didn't know what answers I would find and I wasn't sure I wanted him to see those answers yet.

Those documents could tell me a lot more about myself, my family, and my witch heritage. There was a part of me that wanted to get those answers and process them without an audience.

I'd already had one breakdown in front of Soren recently, I really didn't want to have another.

Could I ask him for privacy? He'd just helped me open the box. He had a right to see what was inside. If I asked him for privacy, he might get offended or use that as an excuse to impose further. He did like to turn things around on me.

But if I let him see what was inside and it turned out to be valuable, like a pack artifact, what was to stop him from taking these things from me? If he was like any of the other people I'd tangled with, there was a good chance he might do just that.

It was a risk I couldn't take.

In my heart, I knew I wasn't ready to share these things with him. But if I told him that, he'd probably accuse me of being closed off and come up with reasons why he should see them.

I swallowed, gathering my courage to ask for privacy.

Soren grunted and turned away from the box. He grabbed a jacket off the bed and slipped it on.

"I'm going out for a drink," he said.

"You are?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. "N-now?"

Why did he suddenly want to rush off? He'd been so interested in the feather and was just staring into the box, mesmerized.

"Yeah, I'm parched. Stay here, and stay inside out of harm's way. If you need anything, get Payne and he'll come get me, alright?" he asked.

He headed toward the door.

"Um... okay," I said softly.

I was relieved he wasn't going to be pushy about seeing what was in the box but there was a part of me that was disappointed, too. I almost wanted him to stay while I examined things because I was a little concerned about what I was going to find.

"Is that okay?" Soren asked, glancing over his shoulder at me.

"Yes," I said with a sharp nod. "I can stay alone in a hotel room for a while without getting into trouble."

Soren chuckled. "I'll believe that when I see it."

I smiled gratefully at him, conveying my thanks for the respect he was showing me.

He wasn't leaving because he was thirsty and he wasn't leaving because he had no interest in the items. He was leaving because he wanted to give me space and privacy to understand why these things had come to me.

I felt a little guilty for suspecting him and comparing him to other people I'd had dealings with.

The more I got to know him, the more I realized Soren wasn't like that at all.

Was that what kept drawing me to him?

He was the first person I'd met that showed me respect and kindness. Not to mention, smoking hot!

I shook my head to get rid of those thoughts.

If nothing else, I appreciated him more. He'd helped me open the box and hadn't demanded anything in return.

My heart swelled and I was starting to understand why he was so popular in the rogue zone and why all his people were so loyal and called him "boss." Soren had the charm and natural leadership skills that attracted others to him.

He made them feel like when they put their trust in him, they were safe, secure, and respected.

I was starting to feel that from him too.

Why would someone with such natural leadership skills and an ability to charm others choose to live as a rogue? Why not have his own pack?

He had all the makings of an alpha.

Questions about who Soren really was and about his past swam in my mind.

The hotel door clicked shut and I snapped out of my trance.

Questions about Soren could wait. I had more pressing matters.

I made myself comfortable at the table in Soren's room. Taking the feather out of the box, I set it aside. The feather was unusually heavy and I noticed that it didn't flutter or threaten to blow away as I moved the other items around.

I took the journal out and the rolled-up parchment, laying them side by side on the table.

Curiosity about the journal got me first. If it was written by someone that was connected to me somehow, it could answer a lot of questions.

I untied the leather knot that held the journal closed and flipped open to the first page. It was covered in small lines and dashes.

“Ugh!” I groaned. It was the same language on the tombstone and box.

Of course, the journal would be useless without Soren.

I glanced out the window at the moon.

“Very funny,” I mumbled.

Was this some kind of instant karma because I’d wanted Soren to leave me to examine these things alone?

I flipped through several more pages wondering if any of it was written in a language I could read.

It wasn’t. The entire thing was written in the same script.

I noticed that several of the pages had what looked like headings or titles. In the margins, there were drawings of plants, stones, and different tools, like a mortar and pestle or a knife.

A lot of the pages had bullet points that could have been lists of ingredients or instructions.

Maybe it was an ancient spell book. Either that or a really complex cookbook.

Unfortunately, without Soren’s help, the book would be useless to me right now. I could chase after him, he hadn’t been gone long, or go to Payne.

Instead, I pushed the journal aside and picked up the rolled-up parchment. I could get Soren’s help with the book later. It wasn’t like it was going anywhere.

I untied the thread around the parchment and unrolled it on the table. There was another piece of paper inside, folded up tightly. I set the folded parchment aside and looked at the one I’d unrolled.

It was a letter and I was relieved to see it was written in a language I understood.

“Huh,” I muttered, examining the script.

The handwriting seemed familiar somehow. It was like something I’d seen in a dream or as a child. I couldn’t place the memory so I read the letter.

‘Helen,

The chaos has started. We can’t stop them all and they are coming after it. If it falls into the wrong hands... well, you know as well as I.

Kaleb and I decided to break it down and scatter the parts. We’ll hide them in places no one else will think to look. Never again must the pieces be reunited or this chaos will never end.

I hope there will never come a time when it is needed or used for such dark, sinister purposes.

The other night, I had a dream about Miltern pack... I hope it was just me overthinking and not a prophecy...

Please, get yourself somewhere safe.

May the Feather of Justice bring you what you need.

Peace be with you, my dear friend. I fear we may not meet again, so I will leave the secrets in your hands, lest our enemies try and steal them from me.

All my love,

Jessica'

The letter was vague but when I was done, my heart thudded in my chest. What had happened to Jessica and Kaleb? Had their enemies caught up to them?

Paralyzing fear gripped my chest as I thought about all the things she alluded to yet didn't describe. She'd taken measures so that no one would ever learn about what she'd done, the pieces she'd hidden.

The pieces of what... I didn't know.

I picked up the folded parchment and laid it flat on the table next to the letter. Gasping, I covered my mouth, my heart pounding even heavier.

It was a map... and based on the letter, I thought I could guess what the map led to.

[Chapter 686](#)

Soren

As much as I wanted to see what was in the box, I had a feeling Mila would prefer to look it over on her own. Besides, I caught a familiar scent and I had something important to check up on.

The door to my room clicked shut and I saw Thomas lounging casually, leaning against the wall outside my room.

"Thomas, it is good to see you." I grinned and held my hand out.

Thomas smirked and ignored my hand. He pulled me in for a quick hug.

"Don't be so formal, Soren, we've known each other too long for that," Thomas teased.

I rolled my eyes and gave him a one-armed hug.

"It is rare that you reach out to me these days," Thomas said. "Regarding that thing you asked me to look—"

I held up a hand and shook my head, silencing him.

"Did you book a room?"

"Of course."

"We'll talk there," I said.

“What’s wrong with your room?” Thomas asked, nodding to the door behind me.

I thought of Mila in my room, eagerly reading through the journal and looking over the items in the box.

“It is occupied,” I grumbled.

Thomas grinned and nodded. “Ahh, I see.” He chuckled and clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s just go to your room,” I insisted.

Thomas nodded and led the way. He switched to the mindlink as we walked. Since he was the only person here from my old pack, we could still use the mindlink.

‘I looked into that woman, Helen, like you asked. She’s a witch, did you know?’ Thomas asked.

‘I just found out but I did suspect,’ I admitted through the mindlink.

We got to Thomas’s room and he shut and locked the door. In the corner, there was an old stereo and he put on some music. Soft enough so we could talk freely but loud enough to keep anyone else from listening in.

“Well, she disappeared many years ago and people of Miltern were forbidden from mentioning her,” Thomas informed me.

I stroked my chin and nodded. “Perhaps that’s why April couldn’t bring her up until Mila did.”

“What was that?” Thomas asked.

I shook my head. “Just thinking aloud. Tell me what you know.”

“There is a lot of secrecy around Helen and Miltern. I couldn’t find out the details but this fog that hangs around, it has something to do with Helen,” he reported. “People don’t seem to think she caused the fog but they do think it is related to her.”

“Related to something she did or someone she crossed...” I muttered.

“Perhaps. There are rumors that she pissed off Norwind pack. They might have retaliated. I can dig deeper into it if you’d like,” Thomas offered.

Absently, I nodded.

We needed to know more about Helen. She was the key to all of this. Somehow, she was related to Mila. Whether that was a blood relation or just because they were witches... I didn’t know. Given Helen’s age, and Payne’s report of her being wanted when he was a child, it was possible that Helen had a daughter.

Could Mila be that daughter?

It would explain why Mila dreamt about her and why Mila could do magic. She could be a lot more closely related to a witch than I initially guessed. She wouldn’t just be a descendant of powerful witches from hundreds of years ago. She’d have a strong, active witch bloodline.

I glanced at Thomas. “Does Helen have a daughter?”

Thomas creased his brow. Slowly, he shook his head.

“No.”

“You’re sure?” I pressed.

“I’m more than sure. She was always alone, living in hidden and dark places. There’s no record or rumor of her having a mate or a family. No one knows who her relatives are or were. It’s like she’s a ghost.”

“That’s... unfortunate.”

“I will continue to look into Helen and investigate her family ties. But Soren, there is something more pressing we need to discuss,” Thomas told me.

I arched an eyebrow at him, pushing thoughts of Mila and Helen away. Thomas sounded serious, almost a little nervous, and that was never good.

“What is it?” I asked urgently.

Thomas licked his lips. “I’ve heard that there are several packs gearing up to search for something. A lost artifact that has been missing for more than a decade,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes and stroked my chin.

Lost artifacts were usually lost for a reason. Usually, when a pack ‘got wind’ of one and went after it, it was a wild goose chase. But if multiple packs were getting ready to search, someone had a solid lead.

“Good. They can kill each other off fighting over it,” I scoffed.

“Soren, be serious! You know that lost artifacts are lost because someone hid them, and usually for a good reason. I’ve heard about the rumored power of this artifact and it...” Thomas sighed, his shoulders sagging.

“What about it?” I demanded, beckoning him with my hand.

“Some say that it can raise the dead. Others say it can kill without a trace. And others say that it can do both.”

I chuckled and shook my head.

“That’s just embellishment,” I insisted.

“Maybe, maybe not. We don’t know the full powers of any pack artifact, least of all one that has been missing for over a decade,” Thomas pointed out. “Now, like all artifacts, it can only be used by the alpha blood of the pack it belongs to.”

“Then there is hardly a rush on finding it. If it has been lost so long, I doubt any of the packs searching for it have the bloodline to use it,” I said, waving dismissively.

“Do you want to take that risk?” Thomas asked.

I sighed and shook my head. As unlikely as it was that a powerful and dangerous artifact would be located a decade after someone carefully hid it and would just happen to fall into the hands of the alpha bloodline that could use it, I couldn't take that chance.

"No. There's something else I'm going to need you to do," I said, meeting Thomas's eyes.

"Name it," Thomas agreed with a nod.

"Start a rumor about a rare, powerful artifact being found here in Miltern. Don't describe it in detail but use small visual clues to make it sound more mysterious. I don't care how you spread the rumor, but make sure people believe it and believe that the artifact is powerful," I instructed.

Thomas raised an eyebrow and gazed curiously at me.

"There's more going on here, isn't there?" he asked. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm just dealing with this artifact dilemma before it gets out of hand."

"You expect me to believe that?" Thomas asked, crossing his arms. "This is personal for you. Asking me to investigate this Helen woman, spreading rumors about an artifact to draw trouble to yourself. What have you gotten into? There's something more at stake in this for you."

I snarled and shook my head. Thomas knew me too well and at times like this, it was annoying.

"Don't tell me that the leaf in the wind Soren has finally decided to settle down and create his own pack. Perhaps even settle down in other ways, too," Thomas said, chuckling.

"No," I said vehemently.

"Then this is about someone else..."

Shrugging, I waved off his concerns. "Living as I do, sometimes I get dragged into unwanted trouble. Unfortunately, this is one of those times. Everything I'm doing is for self-preservation. That's what I'm best at."

"Well, I won't argue with that," Thomas muttered

It wasn't the packs and the artifact I cared about. In this case, self-preservation would be turning tail and minding my own business. The less I was involved, the better.

I knew I could handle the other packs. They didn't scare me and this artifact they were after didn't scare me. I'd already faced and handled far worse.

But there was Mila... she'd dragged me into this trouble and because of our arrangement, I now had the responsibility to help her, which is what I was doing by having Thomas spread rumors and investigate Helen.

Was it just our deal, though? Or was I using that as an excuse to learn more about her? From the moment she turned up in my bed, I couldn't deny that I had been curious about the young woman that walked through a sandstorm, poisoned, and not only survived but had the capacity to seduce me.

There was still more to learn about her. But would I go to such lengths just out of curiosity or for our deal?

"I'm sorry, Soren, I didn't mean to pry," Thomas said, eyes studying my face. I'd actually be happy for you if you decided to settle down and look for your mate... whether it is fated or chosen..."

At the word 'mate,' Rosalie flashed in my mind. I tried to blink her away, but she transformed into Mila.

Mila's face swam in my mind, smiling and biting her lower lip. She still looked so young and innocent, even though I knew she wasn't.

Groaning, I shook my head at myself. It was bad enough that I still thought of Rosalie when the word 'mate' came up. I had tried for a long time to let her go.

What was worse was that now that I felt like I was letting her go, someone else had taken her place. Someone that got under my skin in all kinds of obnoxious ways.

I scoffed and shook my head.

Mila and I were involved simply due to our business arrangement. We could benefit mutually, and take what we wanted from one another, but it had absolutely nothing to do with mates!

A shudder ran through me just thinking about that word.

Smirking, I shook my head and chuckled lightly. "I doubt I have a mate."

"Don't joke about that," Thomas chastised.

"I'm serious. I think the Moon Goddess forgot about me," I said. I grinned so Thomas wouldn't think I was actually being serious. "I don't see it as a bad thing. This way, I will always be free."

Thomas grunted and shook his head. "Right. Are you still hung up on Ro-"

"No! Thomas, no," I insisted.

Thomas clamped his mouth shut. He sighed heavily and nodded. Thomas was the only person in the world, this world anyway, that knew about Rosalie and my past with her. We had a silent agreement not to talk about it.

"I'm sorry, Alpha, I-"

"Don't call me that," I growled.

Thomas nodded again and held his hands up in surrender.

Sighing, I smiled lightly. "There's no need to apologize. The past is the past. I should have moved on years ago. You're the only one that has been with me through all this shit."

Thomas grinned. "Well, I won't deny that I've been waiting to hear that from you for over ten years."

We chuckled together.

Knock. Knock.

"That's probably for you. No one knows I'm here," Thomas said, nodding to the door.

I opened the door and saw Payne and Mila standing there together. Payne was the only other one that would know where to find me.

Mila looked at me and then at Thomas. She hardly spared him a glance before looking back at me.

Thomas got closer and peered over my shoulder.

"Oh, who's this?" he asked.

I shook my head. "What do you need?"

"Is this who was 'occupying' your room," Thomas teased.

Growling, I shot him a warning glance and he backed off.

Mila scowled at me when I looked at her again.

"Just ignore him," I muttered. "What is it?"

"I need to see April again," she stated.

[Chapter 687](#)

"Alright, we can track her down," I said, nodding.

"Thank you," she said back stiffly. Her teeth clenched behind her lips.

Her eyes darted to Thomas several times. As much as I wanted to keep Thomas at my side, Mila didn't seem like she trusted him. Not the way that she had come to trust and accept Payne's presence.

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I stopped dead, my heart thudding against my chest. Her look of gratitude stopped me in my tracks, literally. I flashed back to Thomas’s comments on finding a mate.

Growling under my breath, I shook my head and kept walking. Fortunately, Mila didn’t seem to notice my momentary lapse.

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“What?” she gasped.

I put a finger to my lips.

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Mila nodded and stepped closer to me, tucking herself against me.

I focused my senses on the scent and sounds of the person up ahead rather than the warm, softness of her body close to mine. It was hard to keep focused and I kept glancing at her out of my peripheral vision.

A waving lamp shone through the fog and April stepped out of the shadows, lantern in hand.

Sighing, I released Mila and relaxed.

“April, what are you doing here?” Mila asked. She smiled and ran up to her like they were old friends.

“Waiting for you, of course,” she said, giggling.

She seemed much happier and lighter than before. Her clothes were clean, hair washed. She wasn’t cowering or terrified anymore. I could see strength in her.

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“Follow me,” April instructed. She nodded to Mila and to me.

April headed into the temple and we followed. Payne was only a few paces behind. Now that we were in the temple, he didn’t need to hang back so far.

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“Wh—”

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“Come on,” April said, stepping down on the steps. She waved the lantern into the darkness.

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But she knew the most about the temple, and I noticed that the burned and charred debris had been moved away from the trap door before our arrival. April had anticipated bringing us here.

I walked by Mila and Payne on the stairs and joined April in the lead.

"You burned the temple down, didn't you?" I asked, a hint of accusation in my tone.

"Yes, I did," she said, not even trying to deny it.

I arched an eyebrow at her.

"Why?" Mila asked with a soft gasp.

"Miltern has enemies. They haven't gone away just because we were cursed. Once the curse is lifted, they'll come back. I know they will." April shuddered and pulled her cloak around her tighter.

"But this temple was a symbol to your people," Mila argued.

"Yes, it was. It was a sacred place where all our most beloved secrets and treasures were buried with our most important people," she explained with a nod.

"The graveyard. You desecrated that, too?" Mila asked.

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"We should be safe here," she told us. She set the lantern down.

"I wish you hadn't had to destroy your pack's secrets and history," Mila said softly.

"As do I, but it is better this way," April assured.

"April... I want to help you. I just... I don't know where to begin," Mila admitted, chewing her lower lip.

I knew how hard it was for her to admit that. Part of me wanted to reach out and comfort her and assure her that we could figure it out together.

Thomas's words came back to me again and I clenched my fist tightly, resisting the urge.

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"Well... there is one thing. I could go into your dreams and... connect you with your deepest memory. Your mind could fill in the gaps from there but..." April trailed off.

"But what?" Mila pleaded.

"It's dangerous," I filled in.

April nodded in agreement. "You could get lost in your dream forever without a tether or an anchor. If that happened, you'd never wake up."

Mila gasped and covered her mouth.

I shook my head. "Then make an anchor."

"I don't have anything here... not something strong enough. It has to be someone or something that Mila has a deep personal connection to..."

"Send me into the dream too," I said immediately.

Between the deal we'd made and the few nights we spent together, we had a deep personal connection, even if I didn't want to admit that.

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"Are you worried for me?" I challenged, bouncing my eyebrows.

Mila blushed. She glanced down, her rosy cheeks absolutely adorable!

"I..." she sighed and shook her head. "I just don't want you stuck in my head forever."

"Of course. Which is why we won't get stuck," I insisted.

Mila continued to look at her feet, her cheeks getting even redder.

"Decision made," I said, nodding at April. "Payne stay awake and keep an eye on things."

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"Okay, I need the two of you to lie down on the floor. Face each other," she instructed.

I followed her instructions but Mila was slower to comply. She got down on the floor slowly and we laid down, facing each other like we were on opposite pillows on a bed.

April stepped between us and grabbed my hand. She placed it over Mila's.

Quickly, Mila tried to pull away but I tightened my grip on her and held her hand firmly. Mila sighed and relaxed.

"Close your eyes," April said.

I waited until Mila closed hers and then I shut mine. Her breath was soft and sweet on my face.

"Take these minds into the dark, into visions and dreams. Surrender yourself to each other and find peace in this sleep."

Drowsiness clouded my mind and I didn't fight it.

[Chapter 688](#)

"Alright, we can track her down," I said, nodding.

"Thank you," she said back stiffly. Her teeth clenched behind her lips.

Her eyes darted to Thomas several times. As much as I wanted to keep Thomas at my side, Mila didn't seem like she trusted him. Not the way that she had come to trust and accept Payne's presence.

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[Chapter 689](#)

Soren

Mila raced up the steps and I was hot on her heels. I glanced around at the bodies and realized this was the burnt out remains of a pack house. It was the pack members' bodies all over the lawn, their blood staining the walls.

I slowed slightly and took a closer look around.

If this was a pack house, then the couple we'd seen playing with their child on the swing were the alpha and luna. There was no doubt in my mind. This was their pack and it had been decimated.

Worse than that, I suspected this was Mila's birth pack, which meant those two were her parents.

The only thing I couldn't figure out was why the girl had bouncing, curly blond hair as a little girl but now, as an adult, she had soft, brunette hair.

The rest of it made sense. Her parents and their pack had been wiped out, which was why she'd been orphaned. If the pack had survived, someone else would have raised her as the daughter of an alpha and luna. Instead, she'd been left to fend for herself.

I hadn't been sure what we were seeing was a memory of Mila's family until I saw the tears in her eyes and the reaction she had when she saw the mansion destroyed.

It must have been shocking to look back on the loving family she'd lost, especially compared to the horrible upbringing she'd had with her foster mother. Finding out the truth wasn't always a blessing.

Mila had needed to know who she was. And now, she did, but was that enough?

Inside the mansion, Mila sobbed and looked around.

"Where are they? They were just here! What happened to them?" she mumbled to herself, looking at the different bodies lying around.

I stood near the door, letting her look. She needed space to process this. I couldn't force her to come to terms with it.

My ears pricked up and I heard voices outside.

"I don't understand! What happened to them? They were strong enough to fight this," she wailed.

"Mila!" I snapped. I grabbed her and pulled her down so we were crouching near a broken window. I put my hand over her mouth. "Shh, listen. There are people outside, they might tell us more. But you need to calm down."

I felt Mila swallow and she nodded against my hand.

Slowly, I released her mouth but I kept my arm around her, pinned against me as we listened. If we were going to find out what happened here, we had to collect all the information we could.

Mila sighed and relaxed against me.

Smirking, I brushed her cheek with my fingers. "Good girl."

It was good to know that she could snap out of an emotional haze and be calm when it was required.

I eased my arm around her waist and lifted my head just enough to peer over the broken window. I didn't think these memory people could see us. It wasn't like we could change the past in a dream. We were just observing.

Of course, that was just a theory.

There were two burly, greasy shifters outside. They were searching the dead bodies, stripping them of valuables, and stuffing their treasures in sacks.

I sniffed and shook my head.

"Disgusting," I muttered.

"What?" Mila asked, looking over the window. She gasped and covered her mouth.

One of the men had an unusual tattoo on his face. It made him very noticeable.

The other man was missing an eye and his face was covered in a scraggly, gray beard.

"Where the f**k would she have hidden it? We searched the mansion and all the dead bodies... So, where is it?" tattoo-face snarled.

"Who knows... we've tried everything possible to... entice her to talk. But that b***h won't say anything! She hardly even screams, which is so boring," one-eye grumbled.

"What does this thing even look like?" one-eye asked gruffly. He kicked one of the bodies disrespectfully.

"I don't know. Alpha just said 'artifact.' I guess that means it is shiny and fancy looking," one-eye answered, shrugging. "Damn! Check this out."

He ripped the hand right off a dead body and held it out to his tattooed friend.

"s**t, that's a nice ring," tattoo-face agreed with a smug grin.

"If I could just..." The one-eye shifter snapped the finger off the severed hand and pocketed the ring. Laughing, he tossed the hand aside.

So, they were searching for the artifact, and they had no problem defiling dead bodies and stealing from the dead to get what they were after.

I glanced at Mila. Her face was pale. She must have known something more than she'd told me.

It wasn't the time to ask.

"I heard that b***h was stubborn. Is it true they cut off both her arms and legs to get her to talk?" tattoo-face asked.

"They sure did," one-eye said, licking his lips.

"And she still didn't say anything?"

One-eye chuckled. "Not a peep. She barely even grunted in pain. I couldn't believe it! There I was, watching them cut into her. The interrogators were having so much fun, I really wanted to join."

Beside me, Mila tensed and I saw her fists clench and shake.

"I was hoping they'd give me a chance with her before her limbs were cut off. You know, get in on that f**k action. It's not often you get to f**k a witch... But after they cut her up... That's just nasty!" the one-eyed shifter complained.

"Man, that would have been a nice ass to get my hands on... too bad she's all stumpy now."

I frowned and glanced at Mila.

Her eyes were bloodshot, nostrils flaring. She winced as the shifters began laughing.

Before I could stop her, Mila roared and ran out the front door of the mansion.

I raced after her as she picked up a sword lying beside the nearest body.

Swinging the sword and slicing at the air, Mila roared and raced toward the men.

"I'LL KILL YOU, YOU BASTARDS!" she shouted, the sword flailing around.

"Mila!" I called after her.

She was out of my reach.

When the two shifters just kept laughing and shaking their heads, Mila stopped charging. Her arms dropped to her sides and the sword slid to the ground.

I reached her side and put a hand on her shoulder.

"We're just figments here, remember? Ghosts... This has already happened. You can't change it, you can't influence it," I reminded her.

Mila scoffed and went up to the one-eyed creep. She tried to punch him and her hand went right through his head.

Sighing, her entire body sagged and she stepped back.

"We're just here to watch and listen," I said, putting my arm around her shoulders.

“Well, you know, if she’s too tore up to be pleasurable, I heard she has a daughter,” tattoo-face said through chuckles.

Mila’s face went paper white again and I squeezed her against me.

“Ugh. Come on, man. That’s a f*****g child!” one-eye groaned and scoffed.

“True. But children grow up. She might have her mother’s looks, and all her limbs,” tattoo-face laughed again.

“That’s something. But not anything that helps right now,” one-eye growled. He grabbed his crotch obscenely.

“She might have information. Little kids see things, you know?” tattoo-face asked.

“I’m sure she did know something, which is why her brutal mother made sure she’d never talk.”.

They resumed picking through the dead bodies and stripping them of their valuables.

“What do you mean, ‘did’?”

“That Jessica b***h, she’s f*****g ruthless! I heard she burnt the little witch to death,” one-eye explained.

“Her own daughter?” tattoo-face asked, looking more impressed than concerned.

“Yeah. Apparently, she thought it would protect her or something,” one-eye said, shrugging.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to keep looking for the artifact,” tattoo-face groaned.

“Easier said than done,” one-eye grumbled. “Nobody knows what it looks like, let alone where it is.”

“If that’s true, why are all the alphas going nuts over it? I mean... it must do something,” tattoo grumbled.

“If rumors are to be believed, it could possibly raise the dead or give the owner endless power. Maybe even both,” one-eye said gruffly.

“What!?” tattoo objected.

“Yeah. I heard our alpha wants it to resurrect our dead luna. The love of his life,” one-eye suggested.

“No s**t!” tattoo-face said, his eyes glowing greedily as he licked his lips.

“Whether it is real or not, does it matter? With this many people after it, all these big shots, we’ll be dead before we get our hands on it,” one-eye said.

“Yeah, for real. We’re not going to find it here. What do you want to do?”

One-eye smirked and held his sack up. “We just made a fortune off this loot. Let’s get the hell out of here and enjoy it.”

Tattoo-face agreed with a Cheshire grin and the two of them hurried off into the burned woods.

I frowned as they disappeared. Could they be any more disgusting?

When I glanced at Mila, I saw her face was covered with tears.

She sniffled and wiped them away.

Suddenly, like she forgot she left the stove on, she ran back into the mansion.

I groaned and ran after her. I followed her into the basement of the mansion. She pushed open a secret door at the back of the basement and disappeared inside.

How had she known that was there?

I followed her into the hidden chamber.

Mila was already kneeling on the dirty floor. In front of her was a small bundle of fabric on the floor. The bundle groaned and a little girl emerged. Her clothes were burned but her skin wasn't. She looked weak, barely alive.

It was the same girl we'd been swinging with her father in the garden. Only this time, her hair wasn't golden and curly, it was the same reddish-brown color as Mila's hair.

Mila sniffled and I knelt down beside her. I touched her shoulder and she pulled away.

"M-my m-mother... she t-tricked them with spells... m-made them believe I-I was burned to d-death and h-hid me here... sh-she disguised m-me so..."

She sobbed into her hands.

I wrapped an arm around her, my heart aching in my chest. This time, she didn't pull away and I hugged her tightly.

"This is all in the past," I murmured. "It isn't real."

I stroked her hair and hugged her close.

The little bundle wiggled and the child pushed the charred blankets away. She yawned and looked around, confused.

Shrugging, the child got up and went to a basement window. She pulled herself up and climbed out.

"Wait!" Mila called after her. She reached out and grabbed air.

The girl didn't react.

"Come on," I said. I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. Together, we followed after the little girl.

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The little girl walked through the front yard and down the front path, completely unafraid of the dead bodies and hungry crows.

Mila and I followed closely.

I could see the little girl's eyes glazed over, walking down the path like a little zombie. She was zoned out, probably entirely unaware of her surroundings.

We followed young Mila into the town at the base of the hill. To our right, the forest still burned, but the blaze was farther away, like it had been burning for days and had charred everything close to the town.

Young Mila continued to walk right through the streets.

Bodies covered the sidewalks, draped over porches and stairs, houses were all burned and broken down.

The only sound was of creaking wood and cawing crows that feasted on the bodies.

From the smell, I knew they'd been dead for several days. I noticed many of them had been moved around and suspected that they'd been robbed and searched, just like the bodies at the mansion.

Had it been one eye and tattoo face that did this? It was a lot of mayhem for just two shifters.

Unless... they'd only come after the destruction to search for the artifact. Someone else had done the hard work for them. But if it wasn't for the artifact, why had this pack been destroyed?

From their conversation, they revealed that their alpha had Mila's mother and was torturing her, so they must have been involved in the attack.

For days, they'd searched this dead, destroyed village while Mila's mother was tortured.

Young Mila had been in the basement that whole time.

She still moved through the streets like she was only aware of her own feet. I didn't think she looked around once at any of the bodies.

I couldn't blame her, after what she'd been through and what she'd seen. But Mila was a survivor, even as a child, and she wouldn't curl in a ball in the basement and give up.

Her hair had changed. It no longer bounced around in carefree curls. A magical disguise her mother had used to help hide her. I wondered if Jessica had meant for Mila to be left alone like this...

Beside me, Mila's hands clenched into fists and she snarled under her breath.

I glanced over and saw the hatred and anger oozing from her eyes. They were so bright, filled with fire, and I worried she'd light the town on fire again with one look.

Numbly, young Mila walked to the center of town. She didn't appear afraid or concerned that the monsters would come back and hurt her. If anything, she seemed to be on a mission. Like she was looking for something.

Young Mila paused and sniffed.

I caught the scent of bread and beside me, Mila sniffed the air, too.

Young Mila ran into the closest, burnt out house. Quickly, we followed after her.

There was a rickety table in the center of what used to be a kitchen. Young Mila hopped up on a wobbly chair and grabbed the loaf of bread. Ravenous, she devoured it in several large bites.

My stomach clenched.

Alone in a basement for days, the poor child must have been starving!

Young Mila hopped off the chair and found a broken glass pitcher with water in it. She grabbed the pitcher and drank deeply, the broken glass cutting her mouth. Blood stained the water but she didn't seem to care.

Suddenly, she paused and turned around slowly.

I heard a small shuffling in the corner of the room.

Young Mila must have heard it too. She set the pitcher down and dove under the rickety table, hiding herself in the shadows.

From the corner of the kitchen, another young girl appeared. She was similar in age to Mila, perhaps a year or two older.

Her face was streaked with tears and she dragged something behind her.

My eyes widened when I saw she was holding an arm. The arm belonged to a young boy behind her, around ten or so. He was passed out, possibly dead.

The other young girl sobbed, trembling. She threw herself at young Mila's feet and grabbed her hand.

"Please, p-please, help..." she begged, despite being slightly older.

Young Mila looked around the girl and seemed to notice the older boy for the first time. A crease formed on her brow.

I glanced at adult Mila. She had her hand over her mouth, small gasps coming from her lips.

"Please... h-help my b-brother," the other girls said, pointing to the unconscious boy. She sobbed again and pressed her forehead to young Mila's hand.

Young Mila shook her head. "I... I can't..."

The other girl wailed and shook her head.

"You have to! You ate our food, drank our water. You... you have to help us! I have more food, more water. It is all yours if you save my brother... please!" she begged.

Tears streamed down her face and she curled up in a ball, hugging herself and rocking herself.

I frowned. This seemed familiar to me. Had I seen those children before? No, I didn't think I had. But something about this was like a story I'd heard once, or something someone told me...

Young Mila's eyes shifted to the counter where there was another loaf of bread and a canteen filled with water. Her eyes drifted to the boy and girl in the corner.

I could see in her eyes that she wanted to help, and not just because of the food.

Young Mila positioned herself on her knees and pressed her palms together in the prayer position.

“Goddess above, please hear my prayer. Your light shall guide us and your mercy shall be praised...”

She spoke incredibly well for a child so young. Her mother’s lessons had paid off!

On her knees, Mila crawled closer to the boy. She closed her eyes and held her arms over him.

“Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat,” she chanted the same four words again and again, her hands hovering over the boy.

The other young girl had her head bowed over her brother, crying and clinging to him. It was hard to tell whether or not she knew what young Mila was doing or saying, but in her grief, I doubted it.

“Oof...”

The boy groaned and winced. A shudder ran through him and he opened his eyes. Slowly, his hand went to the back of his sister’s head.

The girl looked up and gasped. She threw herself into her brother’s arms and hugged him fiercely.

I stared at the boy’s eyes. They were all too familiar and now I knew why this felt like a story I’d heard. It was a story I’d heard! But not from Mila.

Young Mila took advantage of the other children’s distraction. She grabbed the bread and the canteen and ran from the house.

“Wait,” adult Mila gasped. She ran after her younger self.

I took one final look at the brother and sister and I chased after Mila.

Young Mila was running toward the woods and the fire. Adult Mila stopped at the edge of the road, frowning. Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t even look at me when I came to her side.

Without a word, Mila ran toward the blazing fire after young Mila. The little girl was gone, like she’d been swallowed up by the flames and smoke.

The closer we got to the blaze, the warmer it felt. Sweat broke out on my brow and I realized that this fire could hurt us. If we got too close, it would pull us into Mila’s memories and we’d be lost forever.

“Where are you!?” Mila cried. “Come back!”

She ran closer to the flames.

Frantically, she looked around every burnt tree and charred bush.

“Come back. Please, come back!” she begged wildly.

She turned to the fire and took a deep breath. I could see she was ready to plunge headlong into the deadly flames.

“Mila!” I grabbed her around the waist, hugging her from behind.

She struggled against me. “Let me go! I have to find her! I have to know!” she wailed.

I tightened my arms around her, hugging her more securely and trying to calm her down.

“Shh,” I murmured in her ear. “Mila, look at me.”

Gruffly, I turned her around to face me.

Her eyes were still wild and I knew she’d bolt at any second, desperate to catch up with her younger self.

I felt like the fire was a barrier. We couldn’t go any deeper into this memory without getting lost. And as long as we didn’t go into the fire, we’d wake up soon. We’d come to the end of this memory.

“Look at me!” I insisted. I put my hands on her face and forced her to meet my eyes. “You’re still here! You can’t go into that fire or you’ll get trapped there! Stay here with me. Come back with me.”

Mila’s eyes filled with anguish and she let out a sob. Trembling, she collapsed against me, burying her face in my chest. Tears soaked through my shirt, warming my skin.

My heart melted and I looped an arm around her, holding her against me. With my other hand, I slipped my fingers through her hair, gently massaging her scalp and whispering softly. I couldn’t remember a time I’d wanted to comfort someone so badly.

Clearly, I was acting far outside the parameters of our deal. I couldn’t help it. Even as an adult, she felt like that lost little girl, alone, desperate to survive, kind-hearted enough to save others even when she had nothing.

I wanted to protect that innocent part of her, the part that never should have seen so much death and violence at that age.

More than that, I wanted to see that joyful, playful light return to her eyes, the same happiness and carefree spirit that filled the eyes of the little blonde girl.

I had no answer as to why I wanted that for her.

Several minutes passed and finally, her sobs began to taper off. She still shook in my arms. Sniffing a few times, Mila pulled back slightly and I could see the anger and fire in her eyes had cooled.

The fire in the forest around us had cooled too. We were safe from getting trapped in her memories. Hopefully, that meant we’d be waking up soon.

I cupped Mila’s wet, tear stained face.

“You still have a lot to do. Don’t let the past trap you, okay? Let’s go back and deal with this,” I said gently.

Mila closed her eyes. She took a shaking, shuddering breath and collapsed against my chest again. Fresh tears fell silently on my shirt, mixing with her tears from before.

Slowly, she nodded.

I hugged her tightly and sighed, closing my eyes as I comforted her.

As we waited to wake up, I thought back to that boy she'd saved. I couldn't tell her yet, not when she was this upset and emotional.

Those eyes... I knew them very well. They were Payne's eyes, which meant the young girl was Ashley. Mila had been the one to save Payne.

He'd never been able to fill in all the gaps...

So, Payne and Ashley were from the same pack as Mila?