

## **Kings Breeder 711**

### [Chapter 711](#)

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Every time I confronted Soren about helping me, he was always reluctant, even distant. I always saw him as this cold, cautious, loner that didn't want to get involved in anything, least of all my trouble.

He tried everything he could to stay out of pack affairs and be left alone.

Right from the start, he'd told me he didn't want his own pack. Soren might have said differently recently, but asking if I was ready to settle down in a pack with him was much different than actually saying he wanted a pack!

Soren wasn't like anyone I'd met before. It was like he didn't want to be part of the world. He just wanted to watch and observe, but not get involved.

He'd been helping me, but it wasn't because he wanted to. It was like he happened to see a child fall on the ground and went over to help them up. I was just a wounded child to him and he was picking me up off the ground.

When he encountered me, he just happened to be in the right mood and what he'd done for me already was barely an effort for him.

But now... spreading rumors of a "universal" artifact that put him right in the middle of everything... That was completely different. He wasn't sitting on the sidelines anymore, he was putting himself right in the line of fire, in the center of the chaos.

I knew that every pack, Alpha, and bounty hunter would be after him now. He would be a magnet for trouble and danger.

I couldn't believe he'd chosen to do that! Sure, it helped give us time to find the artifact, but putting himself in danger... especially after what Helen said to me!

The ends didn't justify the means in this case.

I glared at him and pulled away. There was no rational argument he could make that would make me agree with his decision.

Shaking my head, I turned away from him, taking a deep breath to calm myself.

It wasn't my place to get mad at Soren. If he wanted to put himself in danger, who was I to argue?

Wasn't I just another woman to him? I was less than that, a f\*\*k buddy...

Just because he acted polite to me didn't mean I meant anything to him at all. We weren't in a relationship, just a business arrangement. He'd made that clear. I had no right to interfere with his plans.

He could put himself in whatever trouble he wanted.

The warning Helen had given me was about my mate, wasn't it? And Soren wasn't my mate...

I kept my back to Soren. Even if I wasn't going to interfere with his plan, I could still let him know that I wasn't pleased with what he'd done.

When the moon rose, Soren put his hand on my shoulder.

I glared at him.

"Are you ready? The map says that moonlight will guide us to the artifact piece," Soren asked.

I just nodded sharply and headed out of the cave.

"Following the moonlight" was very vague. Soren was looking to me for direction.

I studied the forest around us and saw moonlight beaming down through the trees. There was a clear pathway through the forest marked by the moonlight. When I saw it, I headed in that direction.

Soren followed me without a word. He didn't seem to be upset about the fact that I wasn't talking to him.

I knew Payne and Ashley were there too. Payne had attacked me when I was in wolf form, but I didn't see them until we got to the end of the path.

It made sense that Payne was there. He was Soren's right hand man.

When we got to the end of the path, Ashley and Payne came out of the shadows. Payne's eyes followed me strangely.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, trying to focus on where to go now that the moonlight path was gone.

Payne's intense eyes stayed on me, making it hard to focus. It was strange. He'd never looked at me like that before but I got the sense that he was excited or expecting something from me.

My cheeks warmed and I kept scanning the area for anything that would tell us where to go next.

"Over there." Soren motioned.

A moonbeam struck the entrance of a cave at the center of Mount Lournet. The cave was hidden behind leaves and I wouldn't have seen it without the moon light.

We got closer to the cave entrance and Soren picked up a rock. He tossed it into the cave. It rattled around inside but there was no other response. There was no evidence of traps or anything, either.

"It seems safe. I doubt it is a complicated cave system," Soren murmured. "Wait outside." He motioned to Payne and Ashley.

They nodded and took up defensive positions.

“If we’re not out in half an hour, come in and find us,” Soren ordered.

I went ahead of Soren to the cave entrance. It wasn’t very big. I had to crouch down to look inside. The ceiling was low and I knew it would be hard to walk in.

We headed inside and very quickly, the ceiling lowered and the walls narrowed. I had to crouch down even more.

“Mila,” Soren purred my name.

I glanced over my shoulder at him.

Soren stared at me, smirking. He pulled his shirt off.

My cheeks warmed and I looked around, realizing just how alone we were. What did he think was going to happen?

“What are you doing?” I asked, startled.

Soren continued to smirk and he walked closer to me. I couldn’t back away into the narrowness of the cave. He reached for my shirt and popped open the top button. Quickly, he kissed my lips.

I stood there, stunned, my skin hot and tight.

“What do you think I’m doing?” he asked, grinning mischievously.

“You... you... stop it!” I gasped, pulling away as much as I could. My cheeks were so hot.

Soren chuckled close to my ear. “Why? I’m just thinking we should shift. It would be easier than crawling on our hands and knees. But we should also save our clothes.”

I groaned and dropped my head into my hand. He was teasing me, and doing a damn good job at it! My cheeks were beet red.

“You... you... you’re such a jerk! You can’t do that!” I snapped, pushing at him. I was more embarrassed about the fact that my mind immediately went to a dirty place.

Laughing, Soren started to unbutton his pants. “Do what? Finally get you to talk to me?”

I turned away from him and started to undress. I could hear Soren undressing behind me.

Quickly, I shifted and waited to hear him shift before I turned around and faced him. He picked up our clothes gently in his wolf mouth.

He paused and looked at me, his wolf’s deep eyes scanning me appreciatively. I could tell that he liked the way I looked in wolf form.

I felt naked suddenly, bare and exposed before it. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before...

My heart skipped a beat and I panted slightly before brushing past him and going deeper into the cave.

My nose perked up and I smelled something delicious, mouthwatering. I opened my mouth and my tongue hung out to the side as I kept smelling that sweet, unique scent. It was familiar... Soren's scent.

Somehow, in wolf form, it was so much more powerful than what I normally smelled. At first, I thought it was a nearby plant or flower, but it was him...

Did he always smell that good?

The cave opened up into a clearing surrounded by rocks and mountain peaks. I stopped dead when I realized the floor was covered in poisonous nettle plants with needles.

There was one small corner that was cleared of plants and a very, very narrow pathway leading to it.

Behind me, I heard Soren shift back. I waited to hear the sound of his pants zipper before looking at him.

"Do you think that's it?" he asked, pointing to the corner not covered in poisonous plants.

I nodded.

Soren leaned against the wall and made his way through the narrow path. I shifted back and put my clothes on quickly.

Suddenly, Soren stopped and held his hand up.

"It's like there is an invisible barrier here," he said.

"Just push through it, you're strong," I told him.

He scoffed but he leaned into the barrier.

Click!

Something quick and silvery flashed from the opposite wall.

"Soren watch out!" I cried.

Growling, Soren jumped out of the way. He grunted and I saw blood spatter from his arm. He clutched his arm and shook the pain off.

"What was that?" I asked.

He narrowed his eyes and looked at the wall behind him.

I could see what was stuck into the rock now. Small, sharp blades, like large needles. They were imbedded in the rock like bullets.

From their position, if Soren hadn't reacted, he would have been struck through the heart and the throat.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Soren nodded, removing his hand from the cut. "Just a scratch," he said.

"Your leg," I said, pointing to his pants where a dark, bloody stain pooled.

Soren frowned and looked down. "It must be from the nettles..."

I hurried over to him and grabbed his arm as he wavered slightly.

"You've been poisoned. We need to go back," I said.

"I'll be fine, Mila. Get what we came here for," he urged.

Sighing, I stepped around him and made it to the cleared corner. There were no other traps or barriers. I dropped to my knees and dug through the dirt.

In seconds, I found a beautiful, crescent-shaped gemstone that resembled the moon.

"A Moonstone?" Soren asked with a scoff.

I shrugged. "The Moonlit Crystal?"

"Maybe..."

Soren's voice sounded weak.

"We should get out of here," I said.

We shifted back. Soren carried our clothes in his mouth and I carried the stone. Before exiting the cave, we shifted again and put our clothes back on.

Payne and Ashley were waiting for us in the woods. They looked anxious. Had we really been gone that long?

"Did you get it?" Payne asked.

"We did," Soren nodded. He sighed and stumbled forward.

Payne jumped at Soren and caught him, supporting his weight over his shoulders so he didn't fall on the ground.

"He was stung by some nettles," I said.

"He'll be fine," Payne assured, looking at me. His eyes fell on the stone in my hands and he froze, blinking and staring.

I noticed his eyes glistening, like he was going to cry.

What was with him?

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Payne's expression flickered several times until he finally composed himself and bowed his head to me.

Then, he gave me a kind of salute I wasn't familiar with.

Shaking my head, I motioned to Soren.

"We need to treat his wounds. Those nettles were poisonous," I reminded him.

“Really, there’s no need to worry,” Soren argued, shaking his head. “It is just a minor wound. Nettles are noxious but they aren’t deadly.”

“We don’t know what kind of nettles those were or how serious the poison is,” I said. I pocketed the stone and crossed my arms firmly.

Soren wasn’t going to get out of this that easily.

My eyes trailed to the wound on his leg. His pants were soaked through with blood and I could tell that it was still bleeding heavily.

“We made a camp near the cave where we found you,” Payne said.

He supported Soren as we went through the woods back down the mountain.

They had two tents set up and a small fire pit between them. It was a very rough campsite but I figured they hadn’t planned to stay there long. Just a place to sleep.

I followed Payne into one of the tents. He got Soren onto the cot and I was surprised when Soren didn’t argue or struggle as Payne put a blanket over him.

“Where is Doctor Lee? How fast could he get here?” I asked.

Payne shook his head. “Dr. Lee has been away on a personal matter. He won’t be around for some time and we can’t get in touch with him.”

Soren muttered something and groaned. His eyes were closed and he looked pale. His skin glistened in the lamp light.

I moved around Payne and put my hand on Soren’s forehead. “He has a fever,” I said.

“Soren, how do you feel?” Payne asked.

“Tired,” Soren muttered.

I sat on the edge of his cot and grabbed a nearby cloth, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“Soren, you should rest,” I urged.

“Maybe... that’s a good idea...” he gasped. He looked at me one last time and then closed his eyes.

I listened as his breathing evened out and he drifted off to sleep. Sighing, I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

Was this the danger Helen had warned me about? I didn’t think so. But it was bad.

While Soren slept, I pulled his pant leg up and looked at the wound. Payne got me some bandages and wipes and I started cleaning the wound. It kept sprouting fresh blood and it wasn’t clotting.

The poison was probably doing that.

Leaves outside the tent rustled and I turned my head to the tent door.

Payne held a hand up to keep me quiet. He narrowed his eyes as he listened.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“Nothing dangerous,” he asserted, nodding.

Ashley poked her head into the tent. “Guys, you’ll never guess what I found,” she said, grinning.

“What is it?” Payne asked, sighing and relaxing.

Ashley stepped aside and a young man entered the tent. He had to have been in his early twenties and was rather handsome with his sandy blond hair and blue eyes. He was a little on the pale side but he was tall and fit. Not overly muscled and I could tell he hadn’t grown into himself yet.

He smiled warmly, the kind of easy smile that made us relax.

But I could sense that Payne was still on edge. He frowned when the boy appeared and shot a glare at Ashley. I could practically hear the question in his mind, wondering why his sister thought it was a good idea to bring a stranger into their camp.

“This is Eros,” Ashley said, still beaming a big smile. “He got lost in the woods...”

Payne’s frown deepened. He moved to push the young man out of the tent but Ashley stopped him.

“Look, Payne, he was in the woods collecting herbs. Medicinal herbs. He’s a healer and I bet he can help,” Ashley said quickly.

“Actually, I’m a healer in training. I’m still learning, but I could probably help, based on what Ashley told me,” Eros said in a smooth, charming voice.

Payne sighed and nodded, his frown relaxing.

My heart relaxed and I looked at Soren, hopeful that this Eros guy could actually help. As it was, we didn’t know what kind of nettle had stung him or the poison in his veins.

“You may come in,” Payne said, stepping aside.

Eros nodded and came up to the cot with Soren. I eyed him carefully, trying to figure out what a healer in training was doing in the woods at night, collecting medicinal herbs. Payne definitely had a good reason to be wary.

I didn’t want to cause a fuss. Not when he might be able to help.

“Hmm.” Eros looked over the wound and poked at Soren’s leg.

“He was stung by some kind of nettle plant,” I said.

Eros nodded. “I’m familiar with the poisonous plants that grow on Mount Lournet. This wound seems pretty fresh.”

“He got it less than an hour ago,” I confirmed.

“Good. The sooner he gets treatment, the better. If you wait too long, it is a lot harder to get the poison out. I should be able to treat it,” Eros explained.

“Thank you,” I muttered.

"I need help gathering herbs. Could you two come with me and help gather herbs?" Eros asked, pointing to Payne and Ashley.

"Ashley can go with you. She is capable and her help should be sufficient," Payne insisted.

"Very well," Eros agreed. He motioned to Ashley and the two of them left the tent.

When I couldn't hear their voices or footsteps anymore, I turned to Payne. "You don't trust him?"

Payne glanced at me and shrugged. "Better safe than sorry."

"You think Ashley will be okay on her own? Aren't you worried Eros might hurt her or something?" I asked.

Payne arched an eyebrow and chuckled. He shook his head.

"Ashley will be fine. She grew up in the rogue zone, remember? She might act like a child sometimes, but she is perfectly capable of protecting herself," he assured.

"Well, I guess that's true," I said, nodding.

"I'm surprised you're worried. But if anything goes wrong, Ashley and I still have a mindlink. She'll keep me informed," he said, tapping the side of his head.

"Still..."

"Besides, if Eros has other motivations, I doubt Ashley is his target," he said quickly.

He eyed me again and I knew exactly what he meant. There were plenty of bounty hunters after me and there were packs coming after Soren too, because of the rumors he'd spread.

If Eros was really after me, Soren, or the artifact, he wouldn't hurt Ashley until he got what he wanted.

Nodding, I turned back to Soren. He was still sleeping but he winced now and then. His skin was flushed with his fever.

"You should rest, Mila. I can keep watch over Soren and the campsite," Payne suggested.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I won't be able to sleep until I know Soren is okay. I'll be okay, I don't need a lot of sleep."

"In that case, I will just be outside. If you need anything, I won't be far," Payne assured. He looked at me for a long time, like he was waiting for a response.

"Okay," I finally replied.

Payne nodded and left the tent. I could see his shadow on the outside of the fabric. He was still close but I felt like I had a little privacy with Soren.

I watched over Soren. Each breath was smooth but I could tell he was in some kind of pain. The bandage was already soaked through with blood. I wished Eros and Ashley would hurry back so we could heal him.

The wound was a bunch of tiny needle pricks clustered together. It looked like a lot more blood was coming out than it was but I knew prolonged bleeding, in any amount, wasn't good.

I wiped his brow again and he settled down. When it looked like he was sound asleep, I pulled the gemstone out of my pocket.

It looked like a moonstone but it wasn't exactly like a moonstone. I could feel something inside of it. A gentle hum or thrum of power. It was like it was speaking to me, calling out to me, and waiting for me to awaken it.

I held the gem up to the light. It shimmered in all kinds of interesting ways, like a prism or rainbow.

There was no doubt in my mind that this stone was mystical in some way.

I thought of the map and the other locations where artifact pieces were hidden. The pieces weren't described, but this was the easiest one to get to and locate. I figured that meant it was the smallest and most harmless of all the pieces.

On its own, the moonlit crystal probably couldn't do as much damage or harm as the other artifact pieces.

I imagined my mom hadn't put as much time or effort into hiding this stone as she would the other pieces. And yet, we still hadn't found it unscathed.

The other pieces would be hidden better and probably have more traps and protections around them. We'd have to be much more careful going forward. I didn't want Soren to get hurt every time we found a new artifact piece... or worse..,

There were two other parts for the Blade of Souls. Soren and I would have to take more precautions and be more aware of the dangers that awaited us.

Soren broke into my thoughts, murmuring slightly.

"What was that?" I asked taking his hand.

His eyes fluttered slightly. "W-water..." he croaked.

"I'll get you some," I promised.

I rushed outside to Payne and he was standing there with a water bottle. I smirked and arched an eyebrow at him. He must have been listening in.

"He's asking for water," I said.

Payne nodded and we headed back into the tent. I took the water bottle from him and sat on the edge of the cot.

If I hadn't taken it, I was certain that Payne would have bottle-fed Soren himself.

I pressed the bottle to Soren's lips and lifted his head slightly, allowing him to drink. I was careful not to pour it all down his throat at once.

"Soren is lucky to have you," I said.

“What do you mean?” Payne asked, creasing his brow.

“Well, you’re not his Beta, but you do everything a Beta would for him. I mean... you’re the perfect Beta and any Alpha would love that.”

Payne’s brow creased more and he pursed his lips slightly. I couldn’t read the expression in his eyes. He stared at me for a while.

He stared so long that I started to get uncomfortable. I giggled nervously and set the empty water bottle aside, easing Soren’s head onto the pillow.

“I’m not Soren’s Beta,” Payne said firmly. “But if you allowed it, I could be yours.”

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“What?” I gasped, my hands slipping on the water bottle.

Payne reacted quickly, coming to my side. He grabbed the water bottle and clasped my hands around it.

My mind raced in a million directions as I tried to figure out if I’d heard him correctly. Payne was offering to be my Beta? Why?

“Has Soren gotten his water?” he asked. “We should focus on him first.”

“I... yes, I gave him water,” I said, glancing at Soren.

He was resting soundly and easily. His breathing steady and his skin wasn’t as flushed. Hopefully, that meant his fever was coming down.

“Perhaps we should let him rest. Care to talk outside?” Payne asked. He took the water bottle from my hands.

“Um... sure...”

In a slight daze, I followed Payne out of the tent, glancing back once more to make sure that Soren was resting easily.

Payne was already outside. He still held the water bottle, his eyes fixed on the stars.

I made sure to leave the tent flap open so I could look inside and see Soren. If he needed anything, I’d be able to get to him quickly.

Payne had been acting strange around me for a while. He’d been giving me these looks and keeping Ashley from saying “too much” around me. He’d been testing my reactions and responses to things. I’d known it was happening but I never knew why.

But asking to be my Beta was the weirdest thing he’d done by far.

“Do you have something you want to tell me?” I asked when he didn’t look at me or speak to me for a while.

Payne chuckled lightly. “Yes, I did.”

“You did... what about now?” I asked.

“So much has happened. I’m not really sure where to start...”

“Try starting from the beginning,” I suggested.

Payne gave me a sideways look and he smirked. His smirk wasn’t sarcastic or mocking like Soren’s. Payne’s smirk was kind and humorous.

He turned to me and bowed slightly. He put his hand on his chest and then swept his arm out toward me. It was a similar gesture to the salute he’d given me earlier but it was more pronounced now that he wasn’t supporting Soren’s weight.

“Miss Hathaway,” he said.

I gasped and took a half-step back. How did he know my last name? I’d only just found it out myself!

“What was that gesture?” I asked motioning to the arm he still had angled toward me.

Payne smiled but then there was a flicker of dark agony in his eyes. He winced, swallowed hard and finally managed to compose himself. So many emotions had run through him at once. It was hard to tell what he was thinking or feeling.

“My father... he used to be the Beta of Pomeni pack. His Alpha and best friend was Kaleb Hathaway,” Payne explained.

I stared at him, frozen in place. I couldn’t blink, I couldn’t speak. My mind was completely numb and blank.

What was Payne saying? Did we know each other?

“My father was Alpha Kaleb’s most trusted subordinate and friend. He... treated us like family, especially since our mother died when we were very young,” he continued.

“You and Ashley,” I muttered to myself, shaking my head. I still felt like this information didn’t quite fit in my brain.

Payne nodded. “Luna Jessica... She was like a second mother to us. Always so kind, so beautiful, and caring. Sometimes, it felt like she saw us as her own children.”

My stomach fluttered with joy at knowing the kind of woman my mother was and sadness too, feeling how I would never know her kindness.

“When our pack grew bigger and stronger, the Luna and Alpha had you,” he told me.

“I don’t understand... we knew each other...?” I asked, shaking my head.

Payne chuckled. “Probably not well. The pack got really busy and my dad often took Ashley and me on patrols and business trips with him because we didn’t have a mother to watch us in the pack. Even if you did see me... well, you were so young, you wouldn’t remember.”

Sighing, Payne looked away from me, his eyes angled to the ground.

I took a moment to process what he said. Payne and I were from the same pack? Why hadn't he said anything sooner!?"

Slowly, Payne looked at me again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" I asked quickly.

"For not recognizing you at first. In my memory, you always had shiny, blond hair like your mother. I never knew... You were just a little girl back then and looked quite different than you are now," he explained.

I shook my head. "This is... I've only just started learning about my past. I never thought I'd meet anyone that I knew back then."

"Ashley and I didn't think we'd meet anyone from our pack again. We thought they were all... But they aren't. You're here and as the son of the Beta and you being the daughter of the Alpha and Luna... I should be your Beta," he concluded, tying the conversation back into what we were talking about before.

"Payne I... Thank you. But... I'm not sure I'm worthy of your loyalty..." I shrugged, unsure what else to say.

I'd only just learned that I was the daughter of an Alpha and a powerful witch Luna. The idea that Payne wanted to pledge his loyalty to me...

I saw the look in his eyes. He cast his head down, a look of disappointment crossing his face.

"Listen, Payne, you work for Soren because he is a trustworthy leader. He's proven himself. Me... I'm nobody. Just because my parents were Alpha and Luna, that doesn't mean I'm a good leader," I told him, shrugging and sighing.

Payne smiled lightly. "I work for Soren because he saved me and Ashley."

"I know..."

"He never expected us to pay that back, in fact, he has always expected that Ashley and I would take the first opportunity we could to avenge our pack. And that is an opportunity we both keep looking for. Soren never held it against us and he won't ever forbid us from taking that opportunity when it comes," he said.

I licked my lips and nodded. Everything Payne was saying resonated with what I felt. I wanted revenge for my parents and my pack. It turned out, we wanted revenge on the same people for the same thing.

If he was willing to follow me, then perhaps the three of us working together made more sense than involving Soren. At least, the three of us would understand each other's needs and desires on this matter.

"Now that we've found you," Payne continued, pulling me from my thoughts. "We actually have hope that we never had before. Hope has replaced the desire for revenge."

“Hope? What do you mean?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

“It would be my honor to serve you as Beta, like my father served your father. And it would be both my honor and Ashley’s to stand beside you, Miss Hathaway, the only heir to our Pomeni pack. You are our hope to restore the pack,” he said.

“M-me?” I squeaked in a hoarse, raspy voice.

Panic thudded in my chest and I glanced from side to side. What was the fastest way to get out of there?

Payne spoke with such reverence, loyalty, and pure-heartedness. It was overwhelming. What had I done to deserve that kind of loyalty and honor?

When I looked at him, I saw the gloss over his eyes. He looked like he could cry at any moment. And they were tears of happiness, joy, and hope. He was completely sincere and genuine.

Never in my life had anyone treated me like that. No one had ever shown me such respect, confidence, and sincerity. He wasn’t just treating me like a friend, he was treating me like a superior.

My shoulders sagged suddenly with the weight of the responsibility he had laid on me. It wasn’t a bad weight or a crushing weight. It was just the reminder of my birthright, beyond personal revenge. There was more to my bloodline than pain and death.

Was it really my responsibility to rebuild the pack and restore hope?

Did I want that responsibility?

My heart grew heavy and I couldn’t decide. It was so much to carry around with me when all I wanted was my freedom and a peaceful, quiet life.

“Payne, I appreciate the gesture...” I said with a heavy sigh. “But I’m not Soren. I’m grateful that I have friends like you and Ashley but you don’t owe me anything. There is no need for you to do any of this. I’m just Mila, okay? Please call me Mila like before...”

Payne bowed his head respectfully. “It is true that Soren saved my life, and Ashley’s. However, you did so too, once upon a time. We have owed you our lives longer than Soren.”

“What? No... I never-”

“You don’t remember, of course not,” Payne said, cutting me off. “When you were young, after our pack was destroyed, you ran into a girl and an injured boy... in a burned-out house.”

My mind shifted back to the dream April had put me in. I could so clearly see the injured boy and girl. But I didn’t know them... Did I?

“You used your power to save that boy. It allowed him to bring his sister to safety, to protect her and feed her and keep her alive. Thanks to you, that boy is here today, standing before you now, talking to you... thanking you.”

My jaw dropped and my eyes widened. “Y-you... y-you’re that b-boy?” I asked.

Those two children had been so lost and alone. The girl was too young to be left alone and I knew what Payne had said was true. If I hadn't healed him, Ashley wouldn't have survived. She probably wouldn't have left that burnt-out house and starved or been killed by raiders.

Soren had been with me in that dream. He must have known that it was Payne and Ashley.

Was it a coincidence or fate that brought us all together now?

Payne smiled widely. "Goddess bless that we were able to find you again!"

He bowed, lower this time, and used the special gesture he had from before. It must have been a traditional greeting from our pack.

"Whatever you decide, I will support you and protect you. Ashley will stand by you too. I believe that the three of us can rebuild our pack someday, but you don't need to worry about that right now," he offered.

I sighed and nodded, a little grateful that he wasn't going to push me for an answer.

Laughter echoed through the woods and I whipped around. I'd practically forgotten that we weren't alone out here. Our conversation had been so intense!

Ashley and Eros came out from the bushes. Eros leaned in and whispered something to her. Immediately, Ashley started to laugh, her face reddening.

Payne's eyes narrowed.

"Did you get the herbs to treat Soren?" I asked before Payne could say anything.

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Ashley cleared her throat as soon as she saw Payne glaring at her.

"Yes, we got the healing herbs," she said, holding up a foraging bag. "Eros just needs to whip up a... a...?" she giggled again and looked at Eros.

"A poultice," Eros explained, taking the bag from her.

"Right, that thing," Ashley said, still laughing.

"It won't take long. I can have it ready shortly," Eros told us. He grinned at Payne.

I wondered if he could sense Payne's hostility and was ignoring it or if he was oblivious. Payne continued to glare at him and I could see the tense cords of the muscles in his neck.

"I should treat the wound right away," Eros said. He walked back to the tent.

I raced on his heels, sticking close to him. Even if he was there to help, I wasn't going to let him out of my sight or put anything on Soren that I didn't see him prepare.

Humming under his breath, Eros immediately started dicing up the herbs.

As the tent flap closed, I caught a quick snippet of Ashley and Payne arguing.

“You’re being too friendly,” Payne whispered in a harsh, low voice. “You’re letting your guard down.”

“Why are you being so hostile toward Eros? It’s rude. You’re the one who said we needed his help,” Ashley hissed back.

“We need him, we don’t trust him,” Payne pointed out.

“You’re overly cautious and stuck up,” Ashley accused.

I heard the two growling at each other and then their voices trailed off. I wasn’t sure if they moved further away or just stopped arguing.

I’d never heard Ashley fight with her brother like that over a stranger. It surprised me that she was so quick to trust Eros. She was usually far more cautious, like she was with me when we first met.

I glanced at Eros to see if he’d heard the argument. He was still humming and cutting up the herbs. It didn’t look like he’d heard anything. Besides, why would he care? We were strangers to him too.

But he gave off this confident air, like he didn’t care what other people thought of him. Maybe he was used to not being trusted.

Eros put the herbs in a mortar and pestle and he ground them into a paste. He set that aside and pulled the bandages from Soren’s wound. After quickly cleaning the dried blood away, he applied the sticky herb poultice to Soren’s leg.

I watched closely, making sure he didn’t do anything or slip anything else into the wound. I noticed just how cool and professional he was being. He worked quickly and efficiently, applying the poultice and putting a new bandage on.

His hands were practiced in what he was doing.

Clearly, he was a healer in training and it looked like he had a lot of natural skill with it. Regardless of his motivations, he was doing what needed to be done for Soren.

“The bleeding should stop quickly. This poultice will draw the poison out, allowing the blood to clot,” he explained.

“That’s excellent, thank you,” I said, trying to hide my excited smile.

Eros grinned. “So, what are you four doing out here?”

My senses pricked up and I stiffened. Was he trying to get information out of me? I had to be careful here. I didn’t want to give anything away but I also didn’t want to blow him off. That might make him more suspicious.

“We heard that Mount Lournet was beautiful this time of year and had spectacular views. It seemed like a good time for a camping trip and to check out the rumors. We’re just here as tourists, hiking enthusiasts,” I said, shrugging.

“Yes, Mount Lournet is a lovely place,” Eros agreed with a nod.

“What about you? Why are you here?” I asked back, a little less casually than he’d asked me.

"I already told you guys that I came here to gather herbs," he said. He smirked mischievously.  
"Obviously, you don't believe me."

I arched an eyebrow at him, surprised by his response. It was hard to tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"I'm sorry, Eros, but I hope you understand that it is necessary to be cautious toward people we don't know. There's been a lot of talk of bounty hunters, rogues, and raiders," I said, playing it off.

Eros shrugged, completely unaffected by what I said. "I've heard that there have been sightings of unusual people around. I too am cautious toward strangers, so I understand. But what about toward someone as handsome as me? Come on!"

He grinned and bounced his eyebrows at me.

I giggled and shook my head.

From the moment I met him, I knew he had charm. It was like he could put everyone at ease or lighten the atmosphere around him. That was probably why Ashley had been giggling and having a good time on their way back to camp.

Eros looked at Soren and nodded.

"He's waking up. I'll just..."

I looked at Soren and saw his eyelids fluttering. My heart fluttered in time with his eyes and my breath hitched.

Eros leaned over Soren and poked at the bandage gently. He smiled and nodded at me before heading to the tent door.

"Is the poultice working?" I asked.

"Don't worry, the poison in your mate's blood is neutralized. He'll be fine," Eros assured.

I stared at Eros, then flicked my eyes to Soren while he was still waking up.

"Eros..." I hurried to explain that Soren wasn't my mate.

Soren's hand closed around mine and his eyes opened. "Hey..."

I looked at Eros and he nodded at me. He gave me a knowing smile and quickly ducked out of the tent. I glanced back at Soren.

His eyes studied me closely and my cheeks immediately flared with heat. I looked away and tried to pull away but Soren's hand held mine tightly. I wasn't sure how much he'd heard of Eros's conversation about us being mates.

I knew it wasn't true and Soren knew it wasn't true. But why did Eros think that was a thing?

"You're awake... how do you feel?" I asked, hoping to change the subject before Soren latched onto anything Eros said.

"Umm... I'm feeling a little better," he admitted, nodding.

“Can I get you anything? Food? Water?” I asked.

Soren arched an eyebrow at me, his eyes traveling up and down my body. “Uhh... water would be good.” He smirked.

I pulled away from him quickly and turned around where Payne had stocked a few more water bottles. When I turned back, I sat on the bed and helped Soren sit up.

“Here,” I said, handing him the water.

Soren grunted and greedily drank the water like he’d been asleep for days. He took my hand again and refused to let it go. His lips were curved lightly in a smile.

My heart pounded in my chest and I let him hold my hand. Everything he’d been through must have been hard on him.

But for some reason, he seemed like he was in a really, really good mood. I was so grateful that he was okay but it was strange that he was in a really, really good mood, too.

Part of me wanted to pull away and let him get back to sleep. But he seemed so happy and comforted to have me there. Since he did get poisoned trying to help me, I couldn’t be mad at him anymore. I couldn’t deny him anything he needed to feel better.

When Soren finished his water, I took the bottle and let him lay back down again. He still held my hand, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb.

I tossed the empty water bottle away.

“Do you need anything else?” I asked.

Soren sighed and shook his head. He was being so quiet, just focusing on my hand and touching me.

I chewed my lower lip and shifted my weight from one foot to the other. I was starting to get embarrassed without him saying anything.

“So... that was Eros. The guy that made your poultice. He got lost in the woods gathering herbs and Ashley ran into him,” I explained.

Soren nodded, but he didn’t seem all that interested.

“You’re lucky that we ran into him. He’s a healer and he really knows his stuff, seeing as you’re getting better,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, okay,” Soren said, shrugging again.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Aren’t you worried about him?”

Soren pursed his lips.

My cheeks reddened again. “Forget it. I’ve never seen you worry about anything.”

“That’s not true,” Soren said, fixing his eyes on me.

“Really?” I asked. “When were you worried?”

Soren arched an eyebrow and continued to look at me with a soft, tender gaze. My blush ran down my neck and across my breast.

Was he implying that he worried about me? It wasn't like him to openly admit that he worried about me. I couldn't be sure that he was talking about me and I didn't ask him to confirm.

I looked away from Soren. "Well, it is late. I should go and let you rest more to recover your strength."

"Yes, of course," Soren agreed, smiling.

I pulled away from Soren and started walking toward the tent entrance. Just as his fingers started to slip from my wrist, Soren's fingers tightened around my arm again and he pulled me back.

"Ack!"

I lurched backward, my feet slipping out from under me. I fell onto his bed and landed heavily on Soren's cot, wrapped tight in his embrace.

"Soren, what are you doing?" I asked. I pushed against his chest and tried to stand up.

He groaned and tightened his arms around me, keeping me pressed against him.

"You're going to split your wounds open," I argued.

"Ahh!" Soren hissed and frowned slightly, like he was in pain.

"What?" I asked, wiggling again. I tried to look down at his leg, trying to determine if he was bleeding again.

"Don't move," Soren whispered in my ear. "My wounds will split open again."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Yeah, right... that's..." I trailed off and rolled my eyes again.

Soren was used to dealing with wounds. He was used to fighting through the pain and standing strong, no matter what. I doubted that my movements had even hurt him or threatened his wound.

He had said those things on purpose to keep me from moving and keep me from trying to escape. He was just doing it to get what he wanted from me, and somehow, I'd fallen for it.

Still, I wasn't going to argue with him this time. I'd already decided that I'd do what he needed in order to feel better after getting poisoned for me.

"Alright, I'll stop," I grumbled, resting my head on Soren's chest.

He gave a satisfied chuckle and grabbed a blanket, pulling it over us. He worked his fingers into my hair and gently massaged my scalp.

"There, now I can sleep and recover. Good night, my Blackfire flower," he said.

I just lay there, stunned, wondering how Soren, who was always so composed and dangerous, suddenly seemed so immature, young, and playful. It was all a plot to get me to stay with him for the night... I was such a sucker.

Soren's breathing evened out and his fingers went lax in my hair. He fell asleep quickly.

I knew I should have been mad at him, but I couldn't be. He was being kind of cute and funny. My heart softened for him and I felt more affection for him.

My eyelids grew heavy and I drifted off to sleep.

### [Chapter 715](#)

\*Soren\*

I lounged on the cot, propping my head up with my arm. Mila peeled my bandage off and I watched her movements as she unwrapped the bandage.

A small frown forced her lips down as she looked over the leg.

"Soren, it has been three days. Your wounds aren't healing. Why is that?" Mila asked.

Eros had given me that putrid smelling poultice three days ago and the bleeding had stopped. The wounds hadn't scabbed over or begun to heal. Mila was checking every day and whenever that little frown touched her lips, I knew what was on her mind.

Sighing, I shrugged and nudged her with my leg. "Maybe I'm just getting old."

Mila rolled her eyes. "Stop making it sound like nothing. This isn't nothing... aren't you concerned at all?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging again.

Mila narrowed her eyes at me. "Why do I not believe you?"

"Mila, my concern is about you running away again, especially while I'm sick," I said, sighing.

I was surprised she'd stuck around as long as she had. Why hadn't she run off yet? The question lingered in my mind. She'd always taken any moment when my guard was down to run off.

Instead, she stayed here with me and looked after me like a nursemaid.

"You... You're not gonna take this seriously, are you?" she asked, shaking her head and glaring at me.

I chuckled and winked at her. She sounded almost concerned and I wanted to keep hearing that tone in her voice. The only way to do that was to keep teasing her.

"Would you prefer it if I cried about my wounds? There isn't a whole lot else I can do," I pointed out.

Mila stared at me blankly. She shook her head and scoffed.

I nudged her again with my leg, trying to get her to smile. It was fun teasing her and seeing how she would react. Sometimes, it seemed like she wasn't prepared for my teasing, even though she should have been. I had done it enough by this point.

She seemed determined to stick with me until she was certain I was fully healed. I wouldn't deny that I liked her playing nurse for me and I was happy to have a reason for her not to run off on her own again.

Whenever her eyes flickered with worry and a little frown touched her lips, my heart jumped.

I knew it wasn't the most productive thought to have, but I hoped that it would take a while for my wounds to heal so that she'd keep looking after me. Perhaps, she might develop enough softness to stop running from me.

If nothing else, I could enjoy her "special treatment" a bit longer.

"You're a piece of work," she muttered, rolling her eyes. She put a fresh bandage on my leg, even though it wasn't bleeding anymore.

Since the wounds were still open, it made sense to keep them covered so bacteria couldn't get inside.

"You need more rest. Stop teasing and playing and focus on getting better," she chastised.

Mila tossed her hair over her shoulder and left the tent.

Frowning, I watched her go.

Perhaps, I'd over done the teasing a little. I couldn't always gauge how she was going to react and that was part of what inspired me to tease her. I liked her unpredictability.

The tent flap opened and Mila came back in. She didn't look at me but she brought a bottle of water to the collapsible camping table in my tent. She slammed the bottle down, water sloshing over the side and splashing the table.

I arched an eyebrow. "Mila...?"

She glared at me over her shoulder, gripping the edge of the table, her back to me. Sighing, she bowed her head and opened her backpack. She pulled something out that I couldn't see and held it close to her chest.

Slowly, Mila turned around and came to the edge of my cot. Without a word, she dropped the item into my lap.

"What's this?" I asked, picking up the leather bound journal.

"This book was left behind by my mother or my aunt Helen. I'm not sure which. But it is a spell book that might have information about the plant that poisoned you," she said, tapping the cover.

"Okay..."

"It is in a language I can't read but I know you can. Can you take a look and see if there is anything about that plant?" she asked, giving me a stern look.

I bounced my eyebrows and grinned. "Do you trust me?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, creasing her brow.

"You're not worried I might snatch this and run away or sell it to someone else?" I asked, sticking my tongue out between my teeth.

"Did that poison get to your brain, or did you fall out of the cot and hit your head?" she asked, crossing her arms.

“You know I haven’t fallen out of my cot because you’ve been in it with me every night,” I reminded her. Mila’s cheeks reddened and she turned away quickly.

I smirked triumphantly. Whenever she blushed, it was so sweet and innocent, a pure expression of her emotions. I loved seeing it and it made me feel like some conquering hero.

“Honestly, I don’t care about that. Your life is more important than what you might want to do with the book,” she told me.

She turned back and absently started fluffing my blankets.

I stared at her, frozen in place from her admission. I’d never expected her to open up like that. It was subtle, but she’d let her guard down and shown me a real glimpse of her vulnerability.

The only time I’d seen that before was when I had her writhing beneath me in bed.

Quickly, I shook those thoughts away.

Mila had never trusted anyone in her whole life. She’d rather lick her own wounds than accept help from anyone else. I knew that was how she protected herself. No matter how much I’d done for her, she was always trying to “repay” me or thinking she owed me a favor.

Not this time...

Giving me the book could have been seen as repayment for taking poison for her. But saying that she cared about me more than the fate of the book... That was genuine and real. It was the first real thing I think she ever said to me.

Could she have real feelings for me?

I wasn’t sure I wanted her to. For more than a decade, I’d tried to let go of my past. No matter how many times I told myself, Payne, and Thomas that I was over it, I wasn’t sure I would ever be.

There was a hidden part of me that didn’t know whether I would ever be loved again or that I’d ever be worthy of love again. Was I worthy enough for Mila to love me?

Then there was the matter of what happened in the cave when I smelled her wolf for the first time, and how I’d sensed her when I was trying to find her on Mount Lournet.

Had that been the mate bond? I didn’t think I had a mate and I’d seen nothing to make me think that Mila was my mate...

Until recently...

Was it real or was it just false hope that the Moon Goddess cooked up for me as my punishment? Was this just to remind me of the mistakes I’d made years ago?

I stared at the leather-bound book in my lap. Thoughts of Mila and her trusting gesture raced through my mind.

If she wasn’t my mate and I pressured her too much or clung too much, would that scare her away?

I lifted my eyes to her and saw the dark shadow of disappointment lingering. It was like she regretted what she said because I'd taken too long to respond.

Quickly, she pointed to the book. "Look through it. There are all kinds of plants in there and the stinging nettle could be one of them. It might give more information about the poison, or a better antidote to get your wound to heal."

I squashed all the thoughts running through my head and I flipped the book open.

Mila sat on the edge of the cot, her eyes never leaving my face as I read through the first few pages.

It was a different dialect than I was used to but I could make out the words.

The book was split into sections. The first section was a plant directory that had drawn images of plants, their names, properties, uses, and adverse effects. It was very detailed.

I ran my thumb over an image of a nettle plant that was similar to the one that stung me but the poisonous effects didn't match my symptoms.

The second section of the book was herbal recipes. A lot of them were healing salves, potions, teas, and the like. But there were several others that were more sinister. Poisons and potions that could do horrible things like blind people or worse...

A lot of the herbs and plants listed in those recipes were common household plants. But when combined in the right way, they'd become deadly.

I narrowed my eyes at the pages. This book was far too powerful to fall into the wrong hands.

The final section of the book was made up of handwritten spells that could only be used by blood witches. Someone like Mila.

I didn't read it all but I flipped through enough to get a good understanding of it.

Slowly, I closed the book and pushed it toward Mila.

"Well, did you find anything?" she asked.

"Mila, this book needs to be put away and kept hidden, for safety. It can't ever fall into the wrong hands," I told her.

Mila frowned and looked at the book. She picked it up and handed it back to me.

"You take it," she insisted.

I shook my head. "It is something left to you by your family. I'm not going to take it. It belongs to you."

"Soren, I am the wrong hands. Me having this book is like a three-year-old carrying a sword... I'd be more likely to injure myself wielding it than my enemies," she said.

It was a compelling argument but Mila was the only person that would be able to use the book. Anyone else that could use it would be people we didn't want to meet, or didn't want to know about the book.

I chuckled and chucked her chin. "Most bad guys are cowards, Mila. They are more afraid of you than you think."

"That's not true, Soren, and you know it," she argued, shaking her head.

"Of course, it is. I've dealt with a lot of these bad guys. As long as they know you have a powerful weapon, they will be intimidated enough to weigh their options and choose the safer route," I insisted.

"Really?" Mila asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Really," I said, chuckling. "The last thing they want is to try and provoke a fight with a powerful opponent and risk getting beaten up or killed."

"Is that how you intimidate others?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

I smirked. "What do you think?"

Mila giggled and shook her head. "No," she answered her own question. "I was wrong. There is no need for you to intimidate anyone because you're powerful enough to do whatever you want."

Sighing, I laid back on the pillows.

"No one can do whatever they want... Not even the Moon Goddess," I said.

"You never answered my question," Mila said, changing the subject.

"What question?" I asked, furrowing my brow.

"I asked if you found anything in the book," she reminded me.

"I did answer that," I said, grinning.

"Ugh, no you didn't!" she said, exasperated. "I asked if you found out anything about the plant."

"No, you asked if I found anything. And I did, I found that the book was dangerous. If you had something more specific in mind, you should have said so," I teased.

"Then let me be clear. Did you find anything in the book about the plant that stung you?" she clarified.

I shrugged.

"Well, maybe you only flipped through the pages too quickly. Maybe you should read the whole book carefully from the beginning," she suggested.

"That's not necessary. I'm certain the plant is just a common grass that doesn't have any magical properties, so it isn't included in the book," I said.

Mila sighed and gave me a soft, pleading look. "Please... can you just... try?"

I stared at her, trying to keep myself hardened to that sweet look. I couldn't! The hard shell around my heart cracked a little and her warmth and caring flowed into my body.

"Mila, I've already sent word to Lee. He'll be here soon and he can help," I assured, nodding.

Mila smiled and I could practically see the relief as an invisible weight lifted off her shoulders.

Smirking, I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer. I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger and pressed my lips to hers.

### [Chapter 716](#)

Mila's lips were soft and plush, like a feather pillow. Her warm mouth pressed against mine, sending tingles through my face, my lips stinging pleasantly. I slipped my tongue between her lips, opening her up.

My tongue rolled over hers, tasting her sweet, freshness, like a splash of water in the desert or the sweet nectar from a honeysuckle.

Mila moaned lightly and started to kiss me back. She leaned closer and I slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her against me.

Her body formed to mine; her lips moved hungrily against my mouth. I felt the quickness of her breathing as her breasts rose and fell against me.

The few times we'd been intimate, one or both of us had been mildly intoxicated. There was some kind of mind-altering substance involved... even if it was heavy emotions making us feel a strong need for comfort.

This time... there was nothing but the pure desire to be closer to her.

I put my other arm around her, encouraged by her positive, eager response to my kiss. She was so soft and pliable in my arms and she looped her arms around my neck, sliding against me. I hooked my hands under the hem of her shirt and started pulling it up, my fingertips brushing against her back.

Mila trembled and gasped.

My ears perked up as I heard heavy footsteps approaching. They were getting closer to the tent. I knew I should have pulled away from Mila but I wasn't ready to. My body ached pleasantly with the need to feel her against me.

Everyone else could wait. All I cared about right now was feeling her body against mine and tasting her sweet, delicious lips.

I ran my hands up and down her sides, causing her to shiver and cling to me tighter. A small gasp escaped her lips and my pants tightened pleasantly.

"Eh-hem,"

Mila squeaked and pulled away from me. I grinned at her bright red cheeks as she stood from the cot.

Lee stood at the doorway of the tent. I nodded to him and he just stood there, frozen.

"I'll umm... be outside," Mila said. She giggled nervously and scurried out of the tent.

Lee's eyes trailed after Mila and then snapped back to me. "Did you call me here just to watch you make out?"

I smirked and chuckled.

Lee rolled his eyes. "Be honest with me, Soren, did you get wounded because of her?"

I studied Lee for a moment. It hadn't made sense to me why he had been wary of her when I first met her. Now, I knew that he'd recognized her from the start, and it was her pack's past that worried him.

"You're wary of her because she was Kaleb and Jessica Hathaway's daughter?" I asked.

Lee grunted and stared at me.

"You know who she is now... then you should understand how dangerous it is to be with Mila," he told me.

"I'm not sure I'd call it dangerous," I said, sighing.

"Seriously? Previously, people were coming after her secretly, more covertly. They didn't want others to know and to draw attention to themselves. Now, everyone knows about her and they are openly looking for her! They are all waiting for her to get the artifact to snatch her and the power," he explained.

"I'm aware of that, so what?"

"That girl is surrounded by chaos! It is only going to get worse from here on out. You've spent years building our base and we were finally able to settle down. Getting involved with this girl could ruin that... Why would you want that?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"Um... Lee-"

He held a hand up. "Let me finish. What's even crazier is that some crazy ass bastard is claiming to have an artifact that will control all other artifacts. That f\*\*\*\*\*g liar is going to set the entire world on fire, just like fourteen years ago!"

I pinched the bridge of my nose and shook my head. "Lee, Lee, that f\*\*\*\*\*g liar is me."

Lee stared at me, jaw dropped open.

"Are you f\*\*\*\*\*g losing your mind!?" he shouted.

I gave him a look and he quickly covered his mouth. For a moment, we sat in silence and I let the truth of what I said wash over Lee.

"I'm the one that spread the news of the artifact. I wanted to muddy the waters," I told him.

"Why?" Lee asked. "Because of her?"

"Because the world is at risk of bursting into flames again and I want to keep the waters as muddy as possible so the flames can't burn through. The more packs I've got running in circles, the less likely they are to implode," I explained.

"Ahh..." Lee shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"You should know by now that I always have a plan, despite how crazy it seems," I said.

Lee nodded. "It's not my place, Boss, but I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do," I assured with a nod. "I did this out of necessity. That's all you need to know."

Lee fumed for a few more minutes. He raised his arms and let them instantly drop to his sides. For a while, he looked around the tent, like he couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, he grabbed his medical bag.

"So... are you here to treat me or scold me?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. "Can you tell me what's happening to my wounds?"

Lee moved to my leg. He pulled the fresh bandage that Mila had wrapped off and studied the wounds. His lips turned down in the same frown that Mila wore every time she checked it.

"Someone treated this?" he asked.

"Yes. I was given an herbal poultice that stopped the bleeding," I confirmed.

"What were your other symptoms?" he asked, snapping open his medical kit. He put gloves on and poked at the wound.

The skin wasn't tender anymore but the cuts were still sensitive.

"It made me weak, feverish, and lethargic. Initially, the wound wouldn't stop bleeding. The poultice sucked the poison out and the bleeding stopped but that was where the good news stopped," I explained quickly.

"It is a good thing you received treatment when you did. Otherwise, it would have taken more than the nine lives of a cat to save you," Lee said. His tone was joking but I could tell he was serious.

"You're exaggerating. It can't be that bad," I said.

"Hmph. I'm not," he assured, shaking his head.

"Lee, how are things going with you?" I asked, feeling the need to check in with him while he checked over my wound.

Lee sighed and shook his head. He wouldn't look me in the face, just focused on his work.

"When I got there, it was too late. I missed him again..."

"Next time," I said.

"Hmm..."

Lee wasn't listening to me. Something in his tone worried me.

"What?" I asked.

"These cuts are... interesting. Who treated your injuries?"

The tent flap opened as if on queue, and Ashley, Payne, Mila, and Eros walked in. Suddenly, it became very crowded and tight in the tent. The temperature rose with all the body heat and I felt like I was being suffocated suddenly.

"I treated the wound, why?" Eros asked, grinning warmly.

I was still trying to figure that guy out. He seemed warm and friendly, but Mila was right, I needed to be cautious of him.

Lee looked at Eros and then back at me. I nodded in confirmation that Eros was the one who treated me.

Lee scoffed and crossed his arms. "I don't know what you used to treat him, but it wasn't the right remedy." His voice was matter of fact and firm, like he was offering a lesson of wisdom.

"But it stopped the bleeding," Eros said, his smile fading slightly.

"It did stop the bleeding but it counteracted his natural healing process. The wounds haven't been able to heal," Lee pointed out.

Eros gave a sheepish smile. "Well, I am just a healer in training. It is a good thing you arrived so you could show me the error in my ways. I'm sorry that I made a mistake..."

He looked around apologetically. Eros's lips twitched and I wasn't sure if he was trying to smile or trying not to smile.

"I'm sorry Soren," he added.

I looked him over and determined that he wasn't showing signs of nervousness. He didn't appear to be worried, like he'd been caught in a nefarious plan. Either, he really was sorry and feeling guilty or he was a very, very good actor.

For the time being, I swallowed my suspicions.

"Lee, thank you. What can you do for me?" I asked.

"I've got an ointment that can kickstart your natural healing abilities. It will be slower than normal but it will heal just fine," Lee explained.

He started digging around in his bag for the ointment.

"Mila, where do we go from here? Where is our next stop?" I asked her.

She glanced at Eros and gave me a strange look. I held her gaze. There was a reason I asked the question in front of Eros. I wanted to watch his every reaction.

Mila frowned at me and didn't answer right away.

I nodded subtly to her, encouraging her to answer honestly.

"Carno pack," she said, as vaguely and non-descript as possible.

I looked back at Eros. He didn't seem to care what Mila was saying, and I wasn't even sure he was listening.

Lee slathered the ointment on my leg and rebandaged my wounds.

I hissed at the sting of the ointment. It cooled quickly and I could feel it sinking into the wounds. All the tiny needle pricks felt instant relief from the pain and discomfort I didn't even realize I was feeling.

“Thank you again, Lee,” I said.

“You still have some healing to do,” Lee warned me.

“And I will rest today and tonight. Tomorrow, we should see some improvement and we can continue on our journey,” I suggested.

“Sounds good,” Ashley agreed. She headed out of the tent. Eros and Payne left shortly after.

I lay back on the pillows and sighed, settling down for another nap. Having an injury was a good excuse to catch up on sleep.

Opening one eye, I saw Lee and Mila still standing by the tent door.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Lee asked as he packed up his medical bag.

She waited until he headed out of the tent and she followed him closely. I strained my ears to listen to them.

“Dr. Lee, do you have a minute?” she asked him.

## [Chapter 717](#)

\*Mila\*

Lee gave me a sharp and unfriendly look.

I knew he didn't like talking to people much, especially about anything more personal than medical issues. He'd made it obvious from the start that he didn't like me all that much.

I didn't know why and I never asked. His personal feelings toward me didn't matter but I knew Lee had the information I needed.

He was a doctor and he was the only one that could give me answers about the Blackfire poison. At this point, I just wanted it out of me!

Soren kept jumping in to rescue me and I was too weak and too inhibited to do things on my own. I wanted to take care of myself and be able to protect Soren... not that he'd need it...

Soren was strong and powerful and I wanted to be more like him. I wanted to be useful to him, especially since he'd helped me so much and kept getting injured for it.

Lee had told me when he first started treating me that the Blackfire poison would dull my senses and my strength. Along with that, it would keep me from feeling my wolf and shifting, which meant that I wouldn't be able to sense my mate.

Now that I was able to shift again and I was feeling drawn toward Soren, I needed to confirm if he was my mate...

Quickly, I shifted my thoughts, worried Lee would be able to read my mind or see what I was thinking on my face.

I couldn't help it. When he kissed me just now... I felt so warm and happy. The way he tasted... how his lips felt... his arms around me. Everything felt so good and real. It was like he really wanted to touch me and hold me. It didn't feel like a business proposition.

That kiss had been powerful and indulgent. No matter how much I tried not to think about it, I couldn't stop wondering if Soren was my mate.

"Was there something you wanted?" Dr. Lee asked, arching an eyebrow.

I flushed, realizing I'd been keeping him waiting.

"Yes... will Soren really be able to travel tomorrow?" I asked.

"Soren is a strong shifter. His self-healing is a lot faster than most. Now that I've given him the right ointment to kickstart the healing process, he should be doing a lot better tomorrow," he confirmed.

"Will it be safe for him to move? I mean... just because he is capable doesn't mean it won't be premature," I pressed.

"He should be fine. It won't be a problem. Now, if you don't have anything else, I'll—"

He turned to walk away.

"Doctor!" I cried urgently.

Lee looked at me and frowned. "Yes?" His voice was slow and annoyed.

I sighed and bowed my head. "I wanted to know if you could tell when the Blackfire poison will leave my system. I'd like to be cured as soon as possible," I said.

"You're taking the antidote, aren't you?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes..."

"Then you will be healed when the course of the antidote is complete," he informed me.

"That's not... I want to be stronger and faster. I want my senses to be acute and sensitive again. Soren is always protecting me but I don't want to rely on that. Could you please help me?" I asked.

Lee's eyes widened and he held my pleading gaze. I could tell he was surprised by my request. He sighed and held his hand out.

"Let me take a look at your blood," he said.

Smiling, I held my arm out. He grabbed my wrist and pulled out a knife.

Panic blossomed in my chest and I tried to pull my hand away.

Lee smirked and shook his head. "Easy now. Do you want me to cause harm? Because that is not my intent. But if you insist on pulling away, I can't control what happens."

I suppressed an eye roll and held my hand steady. Lee jabbed the tip of the knife into my finger. It stung like a bee sting and I gasped.

Blood pooled on my finger.

Lee grabbed a glass slide out of his medical bag and put my blood on it. He haphazardly handed me a bandaid and turned away as he set up a microscope on a nearby rock.

I bandaged my finger and hovered nearby, watching as Lee put the slide of the blood on his microscope. He glanced at me and furrowed his brow before he looked into the microscope.

Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I waited for his reply.

“Amazing,” Lee gasped.

“What’s amazing?” I asked, jumping on his word.

“You’ve only taken a few doses of the antidote and already the majority of the poison has faded,” he explained.

“Oh, is that unusual?” I wondered aloud.

“Yes. The poison usually lingers much longer and more stubbornly. At this rate, just two or three more doses of the antidote, the Blackfire shouldn’t bother you anymore,” he told me.

Lee slowly pulled away from the microscope and gave me a confirming nod. Before I could say anything, he started packing up the slides and microscope.

“So... I’ll get my strength and senses back?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lee confirmed.

“And my speed? I’ll be fast again?”

“Yes.”

“What about... my mate?” I asked. “I mean... my wolf just woke up again and I wasn’t sure how long the poison would dull that part of my senses.”

Lee arched an eyebrow at me. He appeared surprised again by my question. He nodded, confirming that my mate bond sense would come back.

Hope warmed my chest like a little sun. At the same time, fear prickled the back of my neck. What if... what if after falling for Soren, I found out he wasn’t my mate?

Then again, what if he was my mate...?

Which would be better? With Helen’s warning about my loved ones being in danger, would that only apply to Soren if he was my mate, or was the warning based on who I cared about? If he wasn’t my mate would that mean he’d be safe?

I tried to run away from him after Helen gave me that warning so I could spare him the dangers she warned me of. I still didn’t want to see him get hurt.

If he was my mate... I’d never forgive myself if Soren was killed because of me or because of the requests I’d made for his help.

The thought stopped me in my tracks and I quickly shoved it away, shaking my head. I was getting ahead of myself. For now, Soren was safe and on the mend.

“Miss Hathaway,” Lee said, breaking through my thoughts.

He knew my name? Had Soren told him already? It was strange to hear him refer to my true identity when I hardly had any interaction with him.

“Yes?” I asked.

“The poison is fading fast because your witch power is awakening,” he explained. “With that power, you may one day have the ability to see through the past and the future.”

“I do not know what my powers will be, though I did meet a seer once and she said she didn’t have the same powers I would as a witch,” I said, shrugging.

“A fair warning. Sometimes, it is better to leave something behind, especially the unknown.”

“Uhh...”

Before I could say more, Lee added, “If you don’t need anything else, please excuse me.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your help and your advice.”

Lee nodded curtly. He collected his medical supplies and left me standing outside Soren’s tent.

It was almost dark by the time our conversation was over and I had a lot of thoughts on my mind. There was no way I’d be able to sleep. For a moment, I thought about going into Soren’s tent and lying down with him again but my mind was too restless.

I wandered out of the campsite to the peak of one of the cliffs. The trees cleared and I could see the moon and stars. With a deep breath, I sat on the edge of the cliff, my legs dangling down, looking at the moon.

My thoughts wandered back to Soren being my mate. It was possible that he was. I felt like I was starting to sense things about him but it was still unclear. It could have just been my own feelings of affection toward him.

Could that be tricking me into thinking that he was my mate? I had no idea what a mate bond was supposed to feel like and the Blackfire poison wasn’t helping!

The poison would be gone soon, according to Lee.

What had he meant with his warning? Leaving things behind, especially the unknown... I had no idea what that meant, either.

I wasn’t sure if his warning was genuine or if there was something else he wanted to accomplish. I knew he didn’t like me but would he try to go against Soren by putting things in my head?

Lee didn’t seem like the type.

I made a note of asking Soren what Lee could have meant by that. He knew Lee a lot better than I did.

Lee seemed to think my witch blood was helping with the poison. But my powers weren't totally awakened yet. I wondered what it would feel like when my powers were at their fullest.

What spells would I be able to cast? Would I remember the spells my mother taught me? Would I be able to cast magic at will or would I have to go back to studying?

It was a long list of more questions and unknowns. I curled my knees to my chest and hugged myself, thinking about how lonely and isolated I felt.

No matter how much progress I thought I was making, I was just left with more questions and worries.

"What are you doing out here?" Soren's deep, smooth voice came to me through the darkness.

A delicious shiver ran down my spine.

Sighing, I glanced at him. "I just needed some fresh air. Aren't you supposed to be resting? You shouldn't be here."

"I shouldn't?" Soren asked, arching an eyebrow. "What if I said I wanted fresh air, too?"

"Does it have to be here?" I muttered.

Soren's face softened. "Bad mood?"

"How do you know?" I snarked.

Soren winked. He slowly wandered closer and sat down with me.

"I can sense it," he said softly.

I rolled my eyes, thinking he was teasing me. I giggled and nudged him with my shoulder. "Yeah... right. You make it sound like we're mates..."

Immediately as the words left my mouth, I regretted it. I slapped my palm to my forehead and bit my lower lip.

"Sorry," I blurted. "I know, it isn't funny. I'm sorry."

I glanced at Soren and he was still staring at me.

"Mila... can you feel it?" he asked in that same soft, serious tone.

My heart pounded in my chest. What was he asking? What was he implying? I thought my heart would jump right out of my chest. It was beating so fast. I couldn't think...

"Feel what?" I asked in a whisper.

Soren smiled gently. He put his hand on my cheek and looked deeply into my eyes. I needed him to say something and confirm what he was asking. He opened his mouth.

Just before words came out, Payne and Ashley appeared, rustling in the bushes.

"Eros is gone," Payne announced.

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My eyes flicked to Soren and he subtly shook his head.

My heart sank. If Eros had run off, it was a lot more likely that he was just fishing for information to figure out where we were going or what we were after.

I shook my head. So, he was after the Blade of Souls all along. We really couldn't trust anyone.

"I know what you're thinking and it's not true," Ashley said before I could open my mouth. "Eros is a good guy, a nice guy. He was just... upset."

"Upset about what?" I asked suspiciously, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, you know, he's a doctor in training and he didn't do it right... he was feeling so guilty about it that he started thinking he wasn't good at medicine," she continued.

"That's not a good excuse. He stopped my bleeding and saved my life," Soren pointed out, crossing his arms.

"It was still a mistake. And he was pretty hard on himself, saying that he should have known how to heal you completely, not just stop the bleeding. He thought that because he made a mistake it put you in more danger," Ashley said.

I sighed and shook my head. It sounded like Ashley was making a lot of excuses and I didn't understand it because she had only just met him. She didn't know anything about him.

"Soren, I hope you won't hold this against Eros... you know, for not healing you completely," she said, giving Soren a sheepish look.

I wanted to tell Ashley that Eros might not be as innocent as he appeared or as she wanted. It wasn't like I had any proof, just a feeling.

Biting my tongue, I held back my comment. Without proof, I didn't want to upset Ashley or give her a reason to be mad at us. She had a good heart and was a good ally. There was no reason not to trust her, even if I didn't trust Eros.

Ashley sighed and bowed her head. She looked so crestfallen and I knew it was because of Eros's departure. I'd never seen her so happy than when she was laughing with him and now she looked so... sad.

I felt sorry for her.

My spine tingled and I glanced sideways at Soren. He was watching me carefully. I bit my lip and looked away quickly. My cheeks warmed.

I'd asked him some serious questions. When I asked them, I had felt confident and secure. Now, I didn't think I wanted to hear the answers and I was grateful for Payne and Ashley's interruption.

As much as I would love for Soren to be my mate, I was afraid to find out. It meant he'd be in a lot of danger and we'd have this connection that I didn't know if I could commit to.

I pushed those thoughts aside and looped my arm through Ashley's.

“Come with me. We’ve got to pack up the camp and get moving. Seeing as Soren can walk again,” I said, flashing him a teasing look.

I half dragged her back to camp and we started packing things up.

\*\*\*

As soon as the sun rose, we were off on the next leg of our journey. Soren and I led the way while Payne and Ashley followed behind us.

“Where did Doctor Lee go?” I asked timidly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to start a conversation with him because I didn’t want Soren to bring up the things from last night.

Still, the silence was awkward, especially since we were walking together in a quiet forest.

“He gave me the medication I needed to heal and took off this morning. You know him... he doesn’t like to stray far from the rogue zone unless it is absolutely necessary,” Soren explained, smirking.

“What about the personal time he took?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, he does like personal time sometimes, too,” Soren chuckled.

I got the feeling Soren wasn’t telling me everything about Lee and his personal time but it wasn’t really my business. I wasn’t part of their group and from what I could tell, Lee didn’t like me at all.

“What about Eros? What will you do about him?” I asked.

“Payne called in a favor. Some of our men are tracking him and will report back on his movements and see what he is up to,” Soren explained.

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said, nodding.

“Perhaps. I’m not sure if they will be able to catch up to him or track him down without being discovered. Eros is not as easy to handle as he appears,” he replied, confirming what I thought.

“Mila! Mila!” Ashley called to me before I could respond to Soren.

“Yes, what is it?” I asked as she ran up to me.

“Are we going the right way?” she asked, pointing down the path.

“Yes, we are heading the right way,” Soren interjected. “Mila and I confirmed our trajectory this morning.”

“But we’re going to Carno pack. Isn’t that south of where we camped? Why are we heading east?” Ashley pointed out.

“Carno?” Soren asked, smirking. “You must have heard wrong, Ashley. Mila, didn’t you say Marno pack?”

“I did,” I confirmed with a nod.

I bit my lip to hide my smile. I wasn't laughing at Ashley's confusion. Soren and I had come up with the plan to feed Eros Carno pack when we were going to Marno. They sounded so similar, it could be an honest mistake if it turned out that he wasn't working against us.

But the two packs were far enough apart and in different directions that if he was after the artifact, we'd have the piece and be back in the rogue zone before Eros figured out we tricked him.

Of course, Ashley accidentally heard our planted information.

"I know I didn't hear wrong. I was standing right there. I'm positive I heard Carno. Payne, what did you hear?" Ashley asked, turning to her brother.

Payne shrugged. "Marno."

We hadn't told Payne of our plan to plant information but I knew that Payne would back Soren up. He'd probably picked up on our subtle looks in the tent when I told Eros where we were going next.

Ashley sighed and shook her head. She glanced at all three of us and then shook her head. She looked so disappointed.

For a moment, I thought the worst. Had Ashley been expecting to see Eros at Carno pack? Had he told her that he would follow us? If so, did that mean she betrayed us because she hadn't told the rest of us? Would she be able to contact Eros and tell him about our change in plans?

Payne was solemn. He looked down the path like he was anxious to keep moving. On the other hand, Soren was relaxed and didn't seem too worried about us stopping to talk.

"Ashley, is it a problem that we're going to Marno?" I asked tentatively.

Ashley grinned. "No, no. Of course, it isn't! I just love the snacks in Carno pack. They have this delicious snack, a deep-fried cookie drizzled with chocolate and melted marshmallow. Doesn't that just sound delicious?"

She smiled brightly, her bad mood gone. She seemed to bounce back from her disappointment pretty quickly. Then she brightened even more and grabbed my arm.

"Mila! Oh, I just remembered. Marno pack has something else even more fun to do!" she gushed, squeezing my arm.

I smiled and let out a sigh of relief. It was clear to me that Ashley hadn't betrayed us. She was loyal, as always.

"Oh, we are going to have so much fun! Now I can't wait. There's this thing and..." she trailed off, laughing and bouncing excitedly on the balls of her feet. "Let's go, let's go!"

Ashley headed quickly down the path in front of us. We all had to hurry to catch up to her.

"Okay, Ashley, what is this thing that you're so excited about?" I asked, trailing behind her.

Ashley winked at me. "That's a secret."

Payne cleared his throat. "Ashley, we aren't on a road trip. This isn't a fun vacation or a time to joke and play silly games."

Ashley glanced at Payne, looking a little hurt. "I know that... but it's not like you guys told me anything. I don't know the specifics of this trip, like what we are doing or where we are going."

"We left in kind of a hurry," Soren said, chuckling.

"I'm not upset. I'm used to you guys keeping your secrets. So, it isn't a big deal. But that's why it's hard for me to treat this seriously. Which means I'm going to treat it like a fun adventure, unless you give me a reason not to," she added.

I chuckled and shook my head. There was a quick glance between Soren and Payne but I didn't know what it meant.

"Besides, you're here, Boss. How much danger could we be in, right Mila?" Ashley asked, glancing at me and smirking.

"I suppose that is true. We have a lot of protection," I said, nodding to Soren.

"Yeah, well as long as we don't lose our objective while the two of you are having fun," Payne grumbled. I could tell that he wasn't actually mad.

When I looked at Soren, I noticed that he didn't seem upset or suspicious at all. He'd be the first to question Ashley if he thought she was a threat. He didn't seem at all bothered by our conversation the night before, either.

Damn, how could he bury his emotions so easily?

But last night, I could have sworn that I sensed his emotions or could tell what he was thinking. It was probably just my imagination...

When we reached the border of Marno pack, where the forest met desert, the sun had almost set completely.

We were in a very remote area and it didn't seem like a lot of visitors came this way.

"Where to now?" Payne asked.

"This place is bigger than I expected," I muttered, shaking my head.

"It's alright, we know what the sheath looks like. We should be able to locate it quickly," Soren said.

I looked at him and shrugged. "I'm not so optimistic. You saw the map. My mom didn't mark where she hid it or give any clues."

"That means no traps," Soren pointed out.

"But we also have no way of knowing where to start looking. It'll be like looking for a needle in a pine forest," I said, throwing my arms up.

"Should I take that to mean we are camping here for the night?" Payne asked.

“Yes,” Soren said firmly.

I helped Ashley set up the tents while Soren made a campfire. Payne headed off into the woods. Just as the fire got going, he came back with several rabbits and started skinning them.

Soren set up the spits and then stepped back as Payne prepared to put rabbits on each of them.

“Wait, are you cooking?” Ashley asked, crossing her arms.

“Yeah...”

Ashley stomped her foot and whined. “Boss, can’t you do it?”

“Ashely, he’s just recovered-”

“I can do it,” Soren said. He knelt down by the fire and finished putting the rabbits on spits.

Payne frowned. “You don’t need to do that. I’m perfectly capable—”

“Please, Payne, let him cook! Can’t you spare me? I had to eat your cooking for five days and just... ugh!” Ashley groaned. She hugged herself and made a face like she was gagging.

I smiled.

“My cooking isn’t that bad,” Payne argued, glaring at his sister.

“I just can’t do it anymore! Five days straight and I swear I’m going to either be poisoned by your food or starve from avoiding it. Besides, Mila hasn’t tried Soren’s cooking before, right? I swear, Soren’s barbeque is so much better than Carno snacks!” she continued ranting.

“I can cook, it’s fine,” Soren assured. He smoked and put the spits over the fire.

I watched how carefully he seasoned the rabbits with some spices from his backpack. He turned them over the fire, evenly heating them and checking them periodically for tenderness.

He always seemed so prepared for everything. Who walked around with spices in their backpack?

“Are you always this prepared for everything?” I voiced my thoughts.

Soren smirked and nodded. “After years of traveling and exploring, I’ve learned how to treat myself in the wild. And it isn’t like a starving, mangy stray.”

That made sense, but it brought all kinds of other questions to the surface. He talked about being a mangy stray like it was a bad thing but he was also a rogue. They didn’t go that well together.

Where was he from? Why did he travel so much? And why didn’t he want a pack? He was clearly a strong male and a good Alpha. What else could he be waiting for? I wondered where he wanted to go with his life and what his goals were.

He never talked about his past. Did he have family? Loved ones? Did he want a family and what were his goals and aspirations?

I really didn't know much about him at all. Whenever I thought I was figuring things out, I learned something new, like he was a really great cook that wandered around with spices in his backpack for wilderness cooking.

The food was almost done. I turned my eyes to the sky and watched the starry night sky. I could smell the delicious scent of slow-roasting rabbit meat.

Soren was only a few feet away from me. He was so intent on his work that I didn't want to bother him with more questions.

Payne and Ashley were sparring, probably to pass the time. I could hear Payne's gentle, encouraging instruction as he worked on teaching her to be a better fighter.

Despite the strange quest we were on and the dangers looming from all sides, the night felt peaceful in that little campsite with the crackling fire and the smell of cooking meat.

For the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged somewhere... and it was right there in that campsite with those people. Maybe I wasn't alone anymore.

When Soren had asked me if I would stay with him if he established a pack, I had shied away from his request. He hadn't indicated that he wanted a pack since then, but it seemed almost like he was willing to start a pack just for my security and safety, and for my own sense of belonging.

At the time, I said I couldn't. But now... I thought it was possible. I could reconsider his offer.

Soren thrust a paper plate in my face with that deliciously seasoned, mouthwatering rabbit cut up. I grabbed the plate, practically drooling as all thoughts but the rabbit faded from my mind.

"Hooray! Dinner is ready!" Ashley cheered.

I gave Soren a grateful smile and immediately chomped on a bite of the tender, juicy, flavorful meat. A shiver ran down my spine and I closed my eyes, moaning as the meat melted in my mouth and landed satisfyingly in my stomach.

This was the best meal I'd had in so, so long! Even with all the restaurants and meals with Scarlett. It was absolutely delectable.

## [Chapter 719](#)

Ashley cleaned up dinner and Payne went off for a quick patrol.

I stared off down the border, looking at the miles of desert sand against green forest. This seemed like an impossible task.

I sighed heavily and dropped my head into my hands.

Soren sat down beside me.

Slowly, I lifted my eyes and looked into his face.

"Soren, I don't know what to do here," I said, motioning to the border.

"Are you asking me for help?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Yeah. I am. You saw the map more than I did. What do you think my mother was trying to tell us?”

Soren sighed and ran a hand down his face. He looked at me seriously. “Mila, I think your mother had a plan for us, starting here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, creasing my brow.

“I think she wanted us to settle down here,” he said, nodding slowly.

“Settle down? Here? Together?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes. So we can spend the rest of our lives digging for the sheath,” Soren said. He smirked and looked at me with wide eyes.

Groaning, I rolled my eyes. Soren laughed and I couldn’t hold my own laugh in. Giggling, I covered my mouth and then I just laughed, leaning back and shaking my head.

It always surprised me when he made a joke. I was so used to him being serious and stern that when he made a joke, I was never expecting it.

Maybe I was getting to know him better. Or maybe he was showing me a side of him that he didn’t show to anyone else.

Deep down, he was pretty funny and made good jokes.

I wondered who else got to see this side of him. Did he ever let anyone see him like this?

I stole a look at him. Under the bright moon, his blue-gray eyes watched me carefully. But they were peaceful like the ocean. His dark hair rippled around his face. His features were deep, gentle, and soothing. I thought I could stare into his gorgeous orbs forever.

Suddenly, Helen’s words popped into my head about someone that I loved being in great danger. I looked away quickly and swallowed my joyful laugh.

“Seriously, what do we do next?” I asked.

“I can’t answer that for you. We have the same information on this matter,” he said with a deep sigh. “Your mother might be able to answer, though... She left clues.”

“She did?” I asked, creasing my brow.

“Yes, she did. We just need to find them,” he said.

“Like the dream? Last time, April brought us there. I’m not sure I could do that myself,” I admitted, shrugging.

“There are other things she left you. Things that you can touch and hold. Maybe you should check the things your mother left with you,” he suggested.

“Oh,” I said, smiling. “You mean, like the spellbook?”

“I think you’ll find that she left you more than that,” he said, arching a challenging eyebrow.

I sifted through the other things that my mom had left for me in the box. The spellbook was the only one that had survived. The feather melted, the map was burned.

Absently, I played with the new necklace chain on my neck. Smiling, I held the necklace up.

"The Moonlit Crystal?" I asked.

Soren shrugged. "It's just a thought."

I nodded and unclasped the necklace. In order to keep the crystal safe, Soren had fashioned a necklace with a little pendant on it that could open and close. It would hold the crystal safe and close.

I popped the necklace open and pulled the crystal out. Turning it in my hands, I wondered what this crystal could do to help in our quest. I glanced at Soren again and shrugged.

"Don't look at me. It is just a guess," Soren said, chuckling.

I sighed again and deflated a little. My shoulders sagging. I kept turning the crystal in my hands, watching how it reflected the light.

"Mila, you're thinking too much. Come with me," Soren said. He stood up and held a hand out to me.

"Where are we going?" I asked as I slowly took his hand.

"You've been upset and tense for a few days. I can see it in your eyes. You know what the best thing to do is when you're upset?" he asked, bouncing his eyebrows at me.

"What?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him suspiciously.

"Taking a run with your wolf, of course. What did you think I meant?" He winked at me.

I chuckled and shook my head, following along with him as he led me to one of the tents.

"I guarantee you'll feel better afterward. Besides, aren't you full after eating the rabbit? Time to work some of that off," he teased.

We stood together in the tent and it reminded me of how close together we were in the cave when we shifted. My cheeks heated and I looked down. If we were going to shift, I wasn't going to do it here with him in the tent.

"Just... wait outside for a minute. Let me shift," I said, shooing him away.

Soren shook his head and pulled his shirt off.

My cheeks burned even more and I turned around as I slid my dress off my shoulders. All I had underneath it was underwear.

There was a part of me that reminded myself that Soren had seen it all before, multiple times. On the other hand... I couldn't help wondering what impact my body had on him. Especially when he was sober.

I leaned over slightly to test my theory and suddenly, I felt his eyes on me. His eyes were so bright and burning as he looked at me. I didn't even need to look at him in order to feel his deep desire for me.

Soren's arms came around me and I gasped. He pinned me down on the cot.

“What are you-”

His lips were at my ear and I felt them curl into a smirk. He held me tightly, pinned to his bare chest. The muscles in his legs tensed around my legs.

“Maybe you’re not hungry still, but I am still very hungry,” he whispered in my ear. His mouth dropped to my neck and Soren kissed me deeply.

I shuddered and swallowed a moan as I felt his tongue press against my neck. My core tightened and I ached for him.

Well damn! I didn’t know how he felt about me but I did know what impact my body had on him. I also knew the impact that his touch had on me.

“D-didn’t you say... th-that you wanted to go for a run?” I asked.

Soren chuckled and kissed my neck again. “I can think of a more favorable kind of exercise,” he teased, nibbling my earlobe.

Another moan rose to my lips and I swallowed it again. The inside of my thighs dampened.

Ashley and Payne were just outside in the campsite. They weren’t that far away and I knew I’d been too embarrassed to have s\*x with Soren right now in the tent.

I shook my head and pushed away from Soren. As soon as his grip loosened on me, I shifted and ran out of the tent.

As I ran by, Ashley pointed to me. “Look, Payne, she’s absolutely gorgeous.”

Payne bowed his head to me as I ran by.

I knew that Soren would come after me in seconds and I heard his pounding paws behind me. A thrill ran through me and I didn’t want the chase to end so soon.

When I moved, Soren moved too. It was almost like our minds were connected and he could anticipate my movements.

I could feel how much stronger I was now that I’d taken more of the antidote. I’d be able to stay in wolf-form a lot longer this time. Doctor Lee had been right about that and I was excited to test my wolf’s strength.

I felt so much lighter and faster than I had before. My mind opened up and I felt free. My paws pounded into the ground and it was like I was flying through the forest and into the desert.

The sand was warm and soft on the pads of my feet and the wind rippled through my fur. It was the most alive I’d felt in ages!

Soren was right. Running in wolf form lifted my mood and made me feel so much better!

The bright moon shone on the sand, making the desert look like a sea of silver water. The forest was just to my left, and the moonbeams shone through the trees so beautifully.

I had a sudden thought. Turning, I headed back to the forest and hid in the leaves and grass. I found a place that was mossy where the ground was soft and pleasant.

Picking up my speed, I raced to that spot and I felt Soren pick up his speed behind me. He caught me quickly and jumped at me. His wolf collided with me and he pinned me down with his paws.

I licked my lips and shifted back into human form.

The majestic, large wolf that pinned me down gazed at me with Soren's deep eyes. I was naked under him and his silky fur tickled my skin. I reached up and slipped my fingers through his soft fur.

At my touch, he shifted back, my hand right on his chest.

He didn't say anything. Soren leaned down and kissed me hard and passionately on the mouth.

Moaning, I arched my back and pressed more of my skin to his. He was so soft and smooth, his muscles tense and warm against me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me.

The warmth and wetness between my legs intensified and my p\*\*\*y ached for Soren.

He ran his hands up and down my sides, caressing my skin gently until I shivered.

I moaned into his mouth and bent my legs, cradling Soren's hips between my thighs. I rolled my hips, grinding against Soren's thick, engorged c\*\*k.

He grunted and pulled his lips from mine. Smirking, he lowered his head and kissed my neck. He ran his tongue from the base of my throat to my jawline. I trembled in his embrace.

Slowly, Soren trailed kisses back down my throat.

My legs shook around him and I rolled my hips again, begging him with my body to take me.

Soren's hands moved to the back of my legs. He squeezed hard, forcing my legs open. I tightened my arms around his neck as his velvety, pulsing c\*\*k slipped between my legs. He pressed his tip to my slick, wet entrance and ran it up and down, teasing me.

Moaning, I twisted in his grasp. Fire spread across my skin and I thought I'd explode if he didn't touch me. Whimpering, I begged him silently not to keep teasing me. My clit pulsed and my insides thrummed with need and desire.

Soren pushed his hips forward, his erection opening me up and moving inside of me. His shaft stroked my inner walls, spreading them apart in a delicious way.

I gripped Soren's back, my fingers turning to claws, my nails biting into his skin. Arching my back, I rolled my hips, sucking him in deeper.

He groaned, his hands tightening on my legs as he thrust into me.

My insides pulsed and quivered around him and pleasure coursed through my body. My legs shook and I felt blissfully weak with ecstasy as Soren kept thrusting into me.

I clenched my insides around him, tightening my channel of muscles. His c\*\*k twitched and he groaned, kissing and nibbling on my earlobe.

I couldn't think straight. I was going completely insane from the way he touched me and moved inside of me. My nails dug deeper into his skin and I felt blood on my fingertips.

Soren's hands moved to my butt and he squeezed, massaging gently as he pulled me against him, sinking deeper inside of me.

I bit my lip, stifling a moan. My head lolled from side to side as pure, raw pleasure took me over. My entire body trembled and I cried out. My legs shook and my insides clenched as a pleasurable orgasm ran through me.

I wrapped my arms around Soren's neck, kissing the side of his face repeatedly. He panted in my ear, his fingers tightening around my buttocks. His c\*\*k quivered and Soren groaned as he reached his own climax.

He groaned, breathing raggedly, tightening his arms around me as he jerked with pleasure.

Sighing, Soren rested his forehead in the crook of my neck. I cradled my arms around his head. My chest rose and fell heavily.

My entire body hummed pleasantly with our shared afterglow. It was the first time we'd had s\*x completely sober.

## [Chapter 720](#)

Soren curled around me and then shifted into his wolf form. He stayed curled up next to me, keeping me warm through the night.

I couldn't believe I'd done that! Sure, I had wanted to know what Soren felt for me but seducing him wasn't the right thing to do for that. He'd been the one to suggest we go for a run in wolf form but I was the one playing with him.

I closed my eyes and curled up into the soft fur of his wolf. Leaning into his warmth, I felt better but I still couldn't believe what I'd done! Taking a deep breath, I started to feel tired.

Soren's deep breaths made it sound like he was asleep but I didn't think he was. I clung to his fur and nuzzled against him, trying to relax enough to sleep.

The necklace that held the Moonlit Crystal felt heavy around my neck suddenly. I grabbed it and the pendant warmed my skin. Quickly, I opened the box and dropped the crystal in my palm. It hummed heavily and got warmer.

It glowed strangely in my hand and I held it up to the moonlight. The weird glowing light didn't change. It was like the glow was coming from inside, not reflecting off the outside.

"Soren," I said, shaking him slightly.

His wolf snorted and lifted his head. I held the crystal out so he could see.

"Look at this. The crystal is glowing. It keeps flickering and... well, I think it is trying to show me something," I said.

The majestic, dark wolf snorted again.

“Think about it. You’re the one that said my mom left clues for me. What if part of finding the artifact requires locating the pieces in a specific order? The Moonlit Crystal could have been the hardest one to get, with the traps, because it leads us to the next pieces,” I guessed.

The wolf nodded in agreement.

“I bet this will lead us to the next piece,” I said.

I stood up and held the crystal in my palm like it was a compass. I moved my hand around. When it flickered, I made the same motion again and the stone flickered the exact same way.

“Come on, we have to go this way,” I said, pointing down the border between the two territories.

Soren stood up and shook off. He made a small growling sound and nodded to his back.

“Right.”

I climbed onto his back and grabbed the fur at his neck.

“I’m good, let’s go,” I said. “I’ll tell you where.”

Soren huffed and started jogging. His gait was lumbering but I held on with my knees and with one hand. The crystal stayed in my palm and I watched for little flickers.

“Left, go left,” I said, pointing.

Soren started to turn and I yelped, grabbing his fur.

“No, right! I mean right,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Soren growled but corrected his trajectory. Whenever he turned off the necessary trail, the stone got cooler and the glowing flickers died down.

“Okay, can you go a little more to the right?” I asked when the crystal started to cool again.

It was very subtle but I could feel the changes enough to direct Soren almost with every step he took.

“Now we’ve got to go to the left. We need to go deeper in Marno territory,” I instructed, pointing.

Soren slowed down slightly, probably tired of all my quick instructions and his knee-jerk reactions.

“It feels like the closer we get, the warmer the stone is getting. Right now, it is almost too hot to touch, I think we’re getting close,” I told Soren.

He grunted in response. He slowed to a walk and I slid off his back, my bare feet landing in the sand. It was cold now in the night air but the Moonlit Crystal stayed warm in my hand.

“It’s starting to vibrate,” I told Soren. I walked in the direction that made the stone vibrate more.

Soren, in wolf form, followed closely.

Suddenly, the stone started vibrating so much that it nearly jumped out of my hand.

“Here, right here,” I said, pointing with my foot.

It didn't look at all special. The area was just like any other part of the border. Miles and miles of border, and the Moonlit Crystal led us to the right spot.

The glows and flickers got even brighter now that we were at the right spot. There was a tree growing right across the border between the desert and the forest. It was a normal tree and didn't look any different than the other trees growing nearby.

The only difference was that several of its roots were digging into the desert sand. Somehow, I just knew that was where the artifact piece would be.

I was grateful that we had the Moonlit Crystal. It saved us a ton of time searching the border for miles.

"Soren, the tree. Look under the tree roots," I said, pointing.

Soren immediately started digging, scooping out huge chunks of sand in a pile. It didn't take long before half his body was down the hole.

He growled and stopped digging. A few seconds ticked by and Soren pulled himself from the hole. There was something in his mouth. Something I couldn't see until he came over to me and dropped it on the ground.

It was a dagger sheath. It didn't look very special.

Kneeling down, I picked it up and examined it.

"Wow, this looks like just a plain leather sheath," I said, shaking my head.

I shrugged and held it tightly in my hand as I put the stone back in the necklace. It was a good thing I'd figured out what the Moonlit Crystal was doing. Otherwise, we could have spent our whole lives searching.

Even if there were no booby traps, it could still take forever to locate it based on the size of the border.

It was so plain and dingy we might have thought it was just a scrap of junk and not related it back to the artifact we were searching for. That might have been another defense mechanism built in.

Anyone that happened across it would think it was lame garbage.

But I knew it was part of the Blade of Souls. Between the size and the message from the Moonlit Crystal, I knew this was part of the artifact. The next piece would probably be a dagger itself.

I sat down in the sand and patted the space beside me. Soren sat down and curled up with me. His body was warm in the cold air and I needed to take a quick break before heading back to the camp.

It was almost dawn when I was ready to go back. I climbed onto Soren's back again and he jogged back to camp. I laid down on him and rested against him, still pretty tired. I hadn't even slept, despite how tired I felt.

Just on the outskirts of camp, I realized something.

"Hey, wait," I said, stopping Soren. "Before we get back to camp..."

I slid off his back again and motioned to my naked body. Soren's eyes lit up and he licked his lips.

“Quit it with that! I just don’t want Ashley and Payne to see me naked,” I said. I shifted and picked the sheath up in my mouth.

We hadn’t brought any clothes with us and hadn’t anticipated needing them to go back to camp. It wasn’t like I wasn’t used to running around nude or seeing others nude. That was part of being a shifter and life in a pack.

Still, I didn’t know Ashley and Payne that well! I wasn’t ready to show them my entire body. Soren had seen it more than once so that was... okay. But for the others, I wanted to keep it private.

Ashley was asleep in her tent when we got back but Payne was waiting up for us. He stood up when he saw us.

“Boss, Miss Mila... you were out all night. Is everything alright?” he asked.

Soren nodded and we slipped into his tent. I set the sheath aside and quickly, we shifted and put our clothes back on.

Payne waited for us outside the tent.

“We found the second part of the artifact,” I told him.

“That’s good. Although, I was expecting the search to be more... intense,” he admitted, glancing at the expanse of the border.

“So were we, but we got lucky,” Soren said, smirking.

I felt his eyes on me but I ignored them. I didn’t want to look at him because I knew I would blush and feel all giddy.

“If we got what we came for, where are we going next?” Payne asked.

Something like a foghorn went off, making me jump.

Ashley emerged from her tent. She yawned and stretched. “What’s going on?”

“We found what we came for. It is time to pack up and move on,” Soren explained.

“Wait, what? We’re leaving already?” Ashley asked, pouting. “But this time of year... the Marno pack has the biggest Fall Festival in Egoren! We’re already here. I don’t want to miss it! Please, please, please, can we go?”

She looked at Soren and batted her eyelashes. Then Ashley looked at me.

“Besides, even if you, Boss, are energetic, Mila looks a little tired. You guys were gone all night! We should go into town, get some rest, and replenish our supplies. Right?”

Ashley gave Soren another pleading look. She looked at Payne, pouting.

Payne looked at me.

Ashley looked at Soren again and Soren glanced at me.

Then Ashley turned and looked at me too.

I looked at each of them. They all just stared at me.

“Why are you all looking at me?” I asked. I looped my arms around myself self-consciously.

“Mila, it is up to you to decide. This is your mission,” Soren said.

Ashley smiled at me hopefully. She bit her lower lip and held my gaze. Excitedly, she bounced on the balls of her feet. I thought if she didn’t get to go to the festival, she might explode.

I looked over at Soren. He was almost completely healed but he had gone through a lot. I wasn’t sure if he was back up to his full strength yet. Besides, the cuts on his leg weren’t fully healed yet and he was probably still tired.

He could use some real rest in a real bed with real food.

Not to mention, Ashley’s mention of the Harvest Festival intrigued me. In Saboreef, they’d had some festivals but I’d never been allowed to go. My foster mother forbade it. I always got to see the other children playing together, and with toys, and eating fun snacks.

I’d never experienced that and I wanted to have the chance to experience it while I was still young.

We had two pieces of the artifact. Even if someone else got ahead of us and found the other piece, it would be useless to them. It wouldn’t do what they wanted it to do without me and without the other pieces.

I had no intention of using the Blade of Souls, I was just keeping it from people that wanted to use it.

There was no longer a huge rush to find the final piece. We were finally ahead of the game.

Not to mention, once we found the last piece of the artifact, what would happen to my trip with Soren? It would come to an end really quickly. I didn’t want the trip to be over yet. We’d gotten closer and there were still things about him and what he thought about me that I wanted to figure out.

Besides, I was really having a good time with him.

If he wasn’t my mate, once this trip was over, we’d probably be going our separate ways. I was really enjoying his company and I wanted as many enjoyable memories as possible with him.

I looked back at everyone. They were still staring at me, waiting for me to sift through my thoughts and make a final decision.

It was strange to have them all looking at me and blinking at me.

“Ashley is right. We should take a break, rest, and replenish the supplies. Once we recuperate we can get a fresh start and look at this with new eyes,” I suggested. “Plus, we can check out the festival.

Ashley jumped up. “Hooray!”