

Kings Breeder 721

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It wasn't hard to find the festival. Before we even got into the main city, I could hear the sounds of music and happy chatter.

"Come on, come on. We need to hurry," Ashley said, hurrying forward. "We're going to miss all the good stuff."

We rounded the corner to the main street and I stopped, my jaw dropping open.

The street was filled with vendors selling snacks and all kinds of things from exotic clothes to pottery and ceramics, and jewelry.

There were people playing music in the streets and dancing. String lights with paper lanterns on them were hung across the streets.

It was so vibrant, colorful, and full of life. I looked this way and that. Everywhere I looked, I saw more shiny, colorful things that caught my eye.

Ashley was already trying on a fancy scarf from one of the vendors.

This was a harvest festival? I thought there would be more associations with harvests but everyone just seemed to be celebrating and having a good time.

"What do you think of this scarf?" Ashley asked me, striking a dramatic pose.

I giggled and Ashley immediately paid the vendor and kept the scarf for herself. She went on to the next vendor, looking at jewelry.

"Payne, can you carry this for me?" Ashley asked, tossing Payne her new scarf while she held a necklace up to her neck and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

Payne sighed and took the necklace that Ashley handed him. He rolled his eyes but I could tell that despite his frustrated look, he was happy to be helping his sister.

Soren seemed off in his own world. He was looking around but he didn't seem all that interested in shopping. I think he was watching some of the street performers but it was hard to tell.

I stayed close to Ashley and when she was done looking at jewelry, she looped her arm through mine and dragged me to the next vendor.

"Awe, look how adorable this ceramic wolf is," Ashley said, holding up the small figurine.

"It is really cute but do you need it?" I asked, smiling nervously. I ran my finger along the edge of a nice ceramic pot.

Part of me wanted to find a present for Soren but I didn't know what to get for him in a place like this. I didn't have the money to spend on a lot of nice things and I figured anything Soren would like would be too expensive.

“Okay, I don’t need the dog. Come here, check out these pieces,” she said, dragging me to the next jewelry vendor.

I picked up a few pendants and rings, looking them over. Then I caught a price tag and immediately put it down. Yeah, those were definitely outside my budget!

Still, I had fun looking at all the unique vendors. Ashley’s enthusiasm was contagious. She wanted to look at everything and touch everything. She even grabbed several snacks and let me try them.

All the festival food was delicious!

“Hey! Hey!” someone shouted in the street up ahead.

The crowd closed in around the raised voices. I tried to look ahead to see what caused that commotion.

Clatter!

It sounded like something heavy fell in the streets but I couldn’t see what it was. Ashley grabbed my arm and tried to pull me back.

“What’s going on over there?” I asked.

Soren and Payne came over to us.

“We should get out of here,” Soren said firmly.

“Shouldn’t we see...”

Suddenly, security guards ran through the crowd, pushing people aside as they moved into the area where the commotion had occurred.

“Has anything like this happened before?” someone in the crowd asked.

“Never. He pushed his master... he dared!”

“That slave is dead for sure...”

“The whole batch of slaves will be punished... I bet...”

“Yeah, along with that foul creature.”

I looked at Soren, gasping. Slaves?

Ashley frowned and looked at us. “How is slave trading still legal in a city like this?”

“Marno pack makes an exception during the Harvest Festival,” Payne explained. “There are strict restrictions.”

“Restrictions on slave trading?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Yes. Only criminals and rogues can be traded as slaves. As a result, their masters aren’t that nice to them and don’t treat them well,” he continued.

“I didn’t think slavery was legal anywhere,” Ashley muttered.

Sighing, I bowed my head. If only Ashley knew...

"It's a complicated matter. If these rogues and criminals dare to raise a hand to their slave master, they can be sentenced to death or whatever punishment their master decides. Seeing as they are criminals, no one cares," Payne told us somberly.

"Well, if they are criminals, I suppose that makes me feel a little better," Ashley said, shrugging.

I grimaced and looped an arm around myself. Criminals or not, I didn't like anyone being treated like slaves.

"Let us go!" A deep, male baritone bellowed through the crowd. "You bastards! How many times do we have to say it? We're not slaves!"

"Yeah, yeah. That's what all slaves say, didn't you know that?" one of the security guards asked.

Another man yelled through the crowd. "Let me go! You have no right to me! I'm not a criminal, a rogue, or a slave! I don't belong to anyone!"

I bit my lower lip and looked at Soren. He'd been watching me, clearly picking up on my mood. These men were being treated wrong, slaves, criminals, or whoever they were.

Not that long ago, I was being sold to Norwind. It wasn't my choice and I couldn't stop it. My whole life, I'd been nothing but a slave to my foster mother. She'd used me to kill witches and all I was to her was another payday.

But she never treated me with love or respect. She barely fed me or clothed me. If I ever raised my voice, I'd get beaten. And I was warned that if I disobeyed Norwind once I was there, they'd kill me.

That was why I fought for my life.

"No," I whispered.

I broke away from Soren and the others and slipped through the crowd.

"Mila!" Soren called after me.

I ignored him and pushed through the onlookers. There were three men in the center of a circle of guards. They slowly circled around the men like they were vultures. Two of the men were pinned down by guards, the third was sitting on the ground.

All three of them were bleeding.

"f*****g assholes," the sitting man cursed. He spit out blood and glared at the security guards. Growling, he stood up and pointed at the two subdued men. "Get rid of them."

He must have been the slave trader who the slaves had struck. They'd hit him pretty hard to knock him down like that.

The slave trader was absolutely furious. He was huffing and puffing, spitting and cursing. He ran over to the two subdued shifters and kicked them each hard in the stomach.

I cringed as the men groaned and shuddered. The slave trader kept kicking and hitting them.

“You son of a b***h! You dare to hit me! I’m your f*****g master, your god! You can’t raise a fist to me, bastard. f*****g criminal. You’re nothing but a horrid, rotten douche and you deserve to die and get eaten by maggots!”

The slave trader kept cursing and striking them.

“I AM NOT A SLAVE!” one of the men cried. He struggled against the security guard that held him.

The guard slammed him into the street and he groaned again, a cut forming on his chin. The slave trader kicked him right in the stomach again.

My fists clenched at my sides. I couldn’t take this, just sitting here while those slaves were beaten and brutalized. There was no reason for such violence or public humiliation. I had been treated similarly in Saboreef and I’d seen horrible treatment of criminals and slaves in other packs, too.

Whatever it was, I couldn’t handle this.

A heavy hand came down on my back and I whipped around. Soren stood behind me with a somber face. He rubbed my back lightly.

“You want to help them?” he asked with knowing eyes.

It was too obvious to him that this upset me. I couldn’t lie and I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing.

I nodded. “Can you help them?”

Soren arched an eyebrow at me. I couldn’t tell if he was going to help or not.

“Please?” I added.

Soren smirked and nodded. He walked through the rest of the crowd and grabbed the slave trader’s arm. He spun around and glared at the person who dared interfere with his beating. Soren just leaned in and whispered something in the man’s ear.

The slave trader’s eyes lit up. He sneered at the two slaves, even though one was now unconscious, the other seriously injured. He spit on the unconscious one.

“You two should thank the Goddess for being merciful to you today, thank her that someone is willing to pay for your asses... otherwise, you’d be beaten to death by my boot,” he said, pointing to his bloody boot.

With a huff, the slave trader left.

Payne dismissed the security and started pushing the crowd away. They murmured some in disappointment but slowly, they dispersed.

“Here, let me help,” I said. I leaned down to help the conscious man up.

He sneered and pulled away from me, going to check on his friend.

“Leave us alone! We’re not slaves! You can’t buy us!” he snarled.

Soren came over and stood next to me. The man and his recently revived friend looked nervously at Soren as he crossed his arms.

"Of course, you aren't. We understand that. Don't worry, you're free to go now," he said.

He looked at us suspiciously, forgetting to check on his groggy friend. "...Thank you... but, who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who we are," I said quickly. "You kept saying that you're not slaves. So, who are you?"

He bent down and helped his friend up. The groggy one groaned and shook his head like he was trying to snap out of a daze.

"I'm Frederic. The groggy one is Murray," the man we'd been talking to said. "We are from a small pack called Lethe."

"Lethe?" I asked, perking up. I knew the name. It was where the third artifact piece was being kept.

"Unfortunately, our pack land was attacked recently. Most of the pack members were... killed... the rest enslaved," Frederic explained.

I gasped and covered my mouth. How would we get the rest of the Blade of Souls?

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"Is that how you two ended up being slaves?" I asked, creasing my brow.

"No. Actually, it might not look like it, but we're the lucky ones," Frederic said scoffing.

I handed him some tissues and he dabbed at the worst cuts on Murray's face. Murray was still a little groggy. He must have taken a hit to the head.

Soren helped him sit down and he motioned to Payne.

"Can you find us some medical supplies? Just the basics so we can patch them up?" he asked.

"Yes, Boss," Payne agreed with a nod. He grabbed Ashley and the two headed off.

"Can you tell us what happened?" I asked Frederic.

He growled and made a fist, punching the air. "The whole thing could have been avoided!"

"Calm down," Soren snapped, moving in front of me to protect me in case Frederic lost control.

I didn't think he would but I knew how protective Soren could get.

"Long story short, Murray and I were on a border patrol and we spotted a group of suspicious shifters crossing our border through one of the more remote forests in our pack territory," Frederic explained, his voice riddled with growls as he told us the story.

"We had to investigate. It was our duty," Murray muttered, scoffing.

"We tracked them down and were about to give our warning when we saw someone we recognized. Murray and I hid to confirm we were looking at... our beta," Frederic said.

"Don't call him that!" Murray snarled.

Frederic shook his head. "We weren't sure what we should do. At first, we thought our beta was there to send them away but... after we watched them for a while, we could tell he was working with them and they were looking for something."

Looking for something? I swallowed and glanced at Soren. There was only one thing of value I could think of in Lethe.

"We followed them to a spot where they started digging. We heard our beta demanding payment first, then he'd let them dig," Frederic added.

"Stop calling him that, Frederic! He's a traitorous bastard," Murray insisted.

Frederic rolled his eyes. "The others in the party argued about paying him. They told him he was too greedy and taunted him, asking 'What would your Alpha say if he heard about this?'"

"So, your Alpha didn't know about it?" I asked, feeling a moment of relief.

From the sounds of it, the Lethe beta was acting alone, just for a payday. Their Alpha might not have even known what he had on his land.

"We realized pretty quickly that our beta was doing something shady. He was not acting with our Alpha's blessing. Murray and I tried to retreat so we could report to our Alpha, but we were caught..." Frederic said. He shook his head and scoffed at his own blunder.

"We didn't make it easy for them," Murray interjected.

Frederic chuckled. "No, we didn't. We fought but we were outnumbered. We did try calling for reinforcements through the mindlink but Beta Arnold blocked the mindlink. Some of our pack members heard our call before he shut it down. They came to our rescue before Beta Arnold could kill us."

"Small favors," Murray muttered sarcastically.

Payne returned with the medical supplies. He and Ashley started treating the worst of their wounds. Murray seemed to be recovering some.

"For all the good it did. He told the pack that we were the ones to lead the strangers in and there was no proof to convince them otherwise. He sentenced us to be exiled from the pack for betrayal and we were instantly knocked out. When we woke up again, we were here, being sold as slaves!"

Frederic and Murray both snarled at the end of the story.

I glanced at Soren and he nodded slowly. There was worry in his eyes and I knew mine mirrored it.

"Soren..."

"We don't know what they were looking for," Soren said flatly.

If what they said was true, then there could be a whole group of people in Lethe territory already, looking for the last piece of the Blade of Souls. We might lose our chance to get the artifact.

Frederic leaned down and helped Murray up once they were patched up. They gave each other a quick hug. I realized just how close they were.

“Thank you. Without the two of you, we’d be slaves right now, sold like common cattle,” Frederic grumbled.

“We need to get back to our pack,” Murray insisted. “We need to help them if there are any left to help.”

Murray tried to walk off but he stumbled and Frederic caught him.

“You aren’t in any condition to travel,” I said. I went up to Murray and helped steady him.

“Neither of you is in good enough shape,” Soren insisted. “You need rest, and you need backup.”

“We don’t have time to rest,” Murray insisted.

Soren sighed. “Very well. I know what urgency you feel. However, we are heading toward Lethe as well. Will you at least let us escort you and mend you along the way?”

Frederic and Murray exchanged a quick look.

“We would be honored for your accompaniment,” Murray said, nodding.

Ashley and Payne packed everything we had up. Murray and Frederic didn’t have anything but the clothes on their back so it didn’t take long until we were ready to go.

Lethe pack’s territory started at the end of the main street through Marno pack. It wasn’t a long walk but with Frederic and Murray, it was much slower.

We had to stop and give them water several times and let them rest.

I was quick to come to their aid, always with a fresh bottle of water. I even got them some snacks to help build up their strength again. They were very grateful for our assistance.

We made it to the end of the road before sundown.

“Lethe is just across the intersection here,” Murray pointed to the crossroads. “We can’t promise anything but... here we are.”

“Thank you for coming to make sure we got home safely,” Frederic said, saluting us.

“Wait, are you guys leaving?” I asked.

“We need to get back and see what we can do for our pack. You’ve given us our strength back,” Murray said, grinning.

“Should we come with you?” I asked, biting my lower lip.

“No. This is pack business. We don’t want to get our saviors involved if it is dangerous to them. Besides, the two of you have your own business here,” Murray pointed out.

“Alright. Keep us posted on what happens with your pack,” Soren said. He shook both their hands and waved as Murray and Frederic took off into the pack territory.

“I’m not sure we should let them go off on their own. If there’s trouble in the pack, they aren’t strong enough to fight,” I said, pointing after them.

“Mila, we have our own mission to worry about. Besides, it could be seen as an insult if we barge in and help a pack without being invited,” Soren told me.

“Oh, right... I forget that you know more about pack life than you let on,” I teased him, sticking my tongue out.

Soren smirked. “Any ideas on where to find the last piece of the Blade of Souls?” he asked, changing the subject.

It was a legitimate question but I knew it was also his way of deflecting so he didn’t have to address what I said. I didn’t point it out at the moment.

“Well, the Moonlit Crystal helped before,” I said. I took the crystal out of the necklace and held it in my hand like I did before.

Just like before, the crystal warmed up when I pointed in certain directions.

“This way.” I pointed, motioning to Soren, Payne, and Ashley.

“Soren, are you sure we should be going into another pack’s territory?” Payne asked. “Especially if the pack is in turmoil?”

“We’ve made it through all the other territories easily enough,” Soren said, shrugging.

“Besides, if there is a conflict elsewhere, no one will notice us,” I suggested.

Soren chuckled. “Very true. But, if it makes you feel better, Payne and Ashley, you keep a lookout while we go after the artifact.”

“Yes, Boss,” Payne and Ashley said in unison.

They fell back and formed a perimeter around us as Soren and I looked for the artifact.

“Based on what Frederic said, we will be sticking to the forest anyway. The sun is setting and I think we can hide in the shadows,” I assured as we angled toward a denser part of the forest.

“Your mother did like games. Hiding the artifact pieces so close to pack land borders. If any of them were found, there would be a huge fight over who it really belonged to. It would lessen the chance that they’d discover their importance,” Soren told me.

“You say she liked games. I just think she was smart,” I said, shrugging.

Soren smiled and nodded. “Something the two of you have in common.”

“Oh no,” I sighed when the crystal got warmer in my hand.

“What is it?” Soren asked.

“Up ahead... the ground has all been dug up,” I said, despairing. I clasped the crystal to my chest and bowed my head.

“That doesn’t mean it is gone, Mila. They might not have found it. We’ve got the crystal, remember?” Soren said, putting a hand on my back.

I nodded and we got closer to where the ground was dug up.

“Hang on,” Soren said. He stripped down.

My cheeks burned and I averted my eyes. I didn’t know why he kept doing that!

Soren shifted and he started sniffing around the area. I held the stone out, hoping to find a more direct position of the artifact piece. The stone was completely cold.

Sighing, I shook my head.

“It’s no use, Soren. The artifact is gone. The Moonlit Crystal told me,” I said.

Soren huffed. He shifted back and pulled his clothes on quickly.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Yeah. The crystal is completely cold. It led us here because it knew this was where it was hidden but it’s like the crystal can’t sense it anymore,” I said, shrugging. I tucked the crystal back into the necklace for safekeeping.

“Mila, who else knew about the artifact pieces and where they were hidden?” Soren asked.

“Uh... the men that dug this place up,” I said, motioning to the giant hole in the ground.

“I don’t think so. They must have been sent here by someone. You knew about it and I knew about it... anyone else?” he pressed.

I racked my brain. “Well, we made sure to burn the map so no one would be able to steal it or catch a peek at it.”

“So, other than us and other than your mother, no one knew where it was,” he said. “That’s... someone else had to know.”

“Did you show anyone the letter? I didn’t” I said, shaking my head. I chewed the inside of my cheek nervously.

Who else would know? Jessica had died years ago and she took the secret to her grave. She’d left the box for me...

“Oh. My Aunt Helen knew about the map!” I cried.

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I shook my head and looked around at the hole. “Helen wouldn’t do this...”

“Mila, listen to me,” Soren said. He took my hands and pulled them away from my face.

“This is... all wrong. We weren’t supposed to be late,” I muttered. My mind reeled.

This wasn’t how I saw this playing out. We’d finally gotten ahead and we were making progress. How had we fallen so far behind suddenly?

“Please, Mila, look at this from the positive side. This might not be as bad as you think,” he implored.

I creased my brow. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it. Whoever took it only has one part of the artifact. It won't be that powerful and they won't be able to use it anyway," he said.

"The Moonlit Crystal has power on its own. The blade could, too," I said.

"The Moonlit Crystal works for you because of your bloodline. Anyone that takes the blade won't be able to use it because they don't have the blood," he reminded me.

"You think... Maybe Helen told someone?" I asked, biting my lower lip.

Soren sighed. "Perhaps. Although, I hate to say it, but it is more likely that it was tortured out of her..."

"That doesn't exactly make me feel better," I groaned.

"I know, I'm sorry. Either way, it means Helen doesn't have the final piece, so whoever does, can't use it," he continued.

"You're right... the power isn't complete and that means the pieces are useless," I concurred.

"It is true that you can't use the artifact but the people that got this piece can't use it either," he said.

"That is a bright side," I agreed, nodding. I frowned slightly and shrugged.

"You don't sound like you think it is a bright side," Soren said, arching an eyebrow. "Are you after the power of the artifact?"

"No... not right now," I said, shaking my head.

"Not right now? Does that mean you have a use for it sometime in the future?" he pressed.

I smiled lightly and shook my head again. "No, I don't even know what it does..."

"Then we don't have to rush, do we?" Soren asked.

"I guess not..."

"Then it doesn't seem like a good use of our time chasing after the missing piece right now, does it? We can wait and see. An artifact like that won't stay hidden for long, now that it has been dug up, I'm guessing it won't be long before we hear something," he added.

He held a hand out to me. Slowly, I took it and he started to lead me away from the dug up dirt.

"Whoever stole it is going to be more anxious than us. They won't know what it does, how to use it, or how to find the other pieces. They might not even know there are other pieces. We'll let them sweat for now."

Soren smiled and squeezed my fingers.

"Fine, fine," I said with a sigh.

I let Soren lead me away but my mind was still on the missing piece of the artifact. The reason I had wanted to find it so badly was because of the warning that Helen had given me.

“When your loved one is in danger, you will need the artifact.”

Wasn't that what she said? Or something like that... Whatever it was, I knew I'd need the artifact to save the one I loved, to save Soren.

Every few steps, I glanced sideways at him. He was going to be in danger soon and there was nothing I could do about it. No matter how strong and invincible he seemed, despite the fact that he always had everything under control, he'd be in danger.

I worried about him because of Helen's warning. Without the third artifact piece, I wouldn't be able to save him when I needed to. Despite Soren's logic, there was the knowledge I had that he didn't... which was that he was in danger and the only way to save him was the artifact.

There was a rush to get it.

I caught Soren looking back at me and I smiled, looking away quickly.

At least, with the piece missing, we'd be spending more time together. I hadn't wanted our time to come to an end and now Soren and I would be sticking together until we found the final piece.

Groaning inwardly, I looked away from Soren. That was not a thought I needed to focus on right now. It was a selfish thought when we had real dangers and real problems closing in around us.

Just because I wanted to spend more time with him didn't mean I should delay finding the Blade of Souls. Helen's warning could still be true and if it was... the Blade of Souls was the only thing that could save him. I didn't even know what it did but I knew I was the only one that could use it. I was the only one that could save him!

Sighing, I bowed my head. I couldn't tell Soren that. He wouldn't like the idea of me wanting to protect him and I knew he would dismiss my concerns.

“Are you still worried?” Soren asked.

“The Blade of Souls is one of the few things my parents left for me. Who knows when I'll get it back and... I don't feel great about it being unaccounted for,” I admitted.

Soren slid his eyes sideways at me and smirked. “Mila, you are in control of this situation, not your parents and not the people that stole the artifact piece.”

“How am I in control?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“One thing you should learn about greedy people is that they are the easy ones to control because they are always wanting more,” Soren explained.

“And you want to give them more?” I asked.

“Or feed them information to make them salivate. Now tell me, when would you like the artifact back?” he said grinning. “When do you think you'll be ready to face your enemies?”

I scoffed and crossed my arms. What was Soren asking? He couldn't be serious about this. He really thought that we could get the artifact back by feeding information to the greedy people?

“Humor me, Mila. Just give me a timeline,” Soren said.

“A month,” I answered, nodding.

Ashley, Payne, Soren, and I went back to Marno pack, just a small village on the outside of the big city. We didn’t want to strain Lethe out even more by asking for resources.

It took a few days for us to load up on supplies for the journey back to the rogue zone.

While restocking, we grabbed some lunch at one of the restaurants.

My ears perked up when I heard some whispering.

“... Blade of Souls...”

“Soren,” I whispered. I nodded in the direction I’d heard the murmur.

He put his finger to his lips and nodded subtly. By silent consent, we agreed to listen to the conversation.

“Have you heard, the Blade of Souls has reappeared...”

“What is that?”

“A powerful artifact. The most powerful artifact.”

“It isn’t the most powerful, you dunce!”

“Yeah, they just discovered a new artifact. Something that is a universal artifact.”

“Universal?”

“That’s right. It can control all other artifacts and doesn’t even need an Alpha bloodline to work.”

“I heard that too! Both the Blade of Souls and the universal artifact have been found.”

“I heard they said both of them would show up in one month...”

I arched an eyebrow at Soren and he nodded, smirking. So, he was the one spreading the rumors. He had orchestrated all of this and that smug look was satisfaction at seeing his plan working.

We left for the rogue zone after our lunch, meeting Ashley and Payne on the edge of the village. Ashley and Payne continued to take point and keep a lookout for any potential threats.

Soren walked beside me and I couldn’t shake my worry. After what I heard in the restaurant, I couldn’t help but feel like Soren was attracting more trouble to himself. Trouble that could be the danger Helen warned me about.

Without the Blade of Souls, it was too big of a risk. No matter how strong and competent Soren was. No matter how prepared he thought he was.

“You’re worried again?” Soren asked, nudging my arm.

“Soren... this could get dangerous,” I said.

“Don’t worry, Mila. Thomas has started training more warriors for me. Most of my men were already exceptional fighters. We’re growing our numbers and they will all be exceptional,” Soren told me with a firm nod.

I licked my lips and nodded. We were getting closer to the desert of the rogue zone and my mouth was feeling dryer, my lips cracking slightly.

Soren was building his ranks and training more warriors. It sounded a lot like he was putting a pack together.

“Soren, are you planning to build your own pack?” I asked tentatively.

Soren stopped walking and I turned to look at him. He put his hands on my cheeks and brushed his thumbs over my face.

“Yes, I am,” he said smoothly.

“Why?” I asked, creasing my brow.

Soren shrugged. “Many reasons. One of which I already told you about.”

My breath caught in my throat and I swallowed hard. Was he referring to the time he asked me to stay with him?

“You know that my offer still stands. You’re welcome to stay with me in my pack,” he said.

“I...”

What was I supposed to do? He’d already done so much for me and I hadn’t repaid him in the slightest. Would it be repayment to stay with him and his pack?

I didn’t know what to do. He hadn’t invited me again, not explicitly, but he had made it clear it was an open invitation.

“But... you’re not making a pack just for me?” I asked, giggling nervously.

“No... but it is as good as any reason,” Soren purred.

“You know things aren’t settled down. Until they are, I can’t commit to anything...”

“I know where you stand on the matter,” Soren assured, releasing my face.

“But I’m not saying no or that I won’t decide to settle down when this is all over,” I clarified.

“I’m aware.”

I looked around at the road we were on and realized suddenly that we weren’t on our way back to the rogue zone.

“Soren... this isn’t the way to your base. If you’re going to build your own pack, we should get back to your base and prepare for the enemy to close in around us,” I said, pointing in another vague direction. I thought that was where the rogue zone was.

"We will get there soon enough," Soren said. He took my hand and tugged me along the road I hadn't seen before. "First, I want to take you to an important place."

"Where?" I asked, smiling and falling into step with Soren.

"Just come with me," Soren insisted, smirking like he always did.

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"Are you going to tell me where we are going?" I asked as Soren hurried me along.

Payne and Ashley had gone on ahead to the rogue zone, leaving Soren and me alone. He seemed determined to get me where he wanted to take me and at the same time, he was doing everything he could to hide our destination from me.

"Does anything seem familiar?" he asked, instead of answering my question.

Shrugging, I looked around and shook my head.

"No. I've never been here, Soren. What should I be looking for?" I asked.

Soren shrugged. "You'll know it when you see it."

We headed off the main road into a forest. I slowed down as we got onto a forest path. Soren was still holding my hand and when I slowed down, it forced him to slow down, too.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I feel like I know this place," I muttered, glancing around at the trees.

So many of them were young and still growing but I could see the charred remains of older trees overgrown with moss, grass, and vines.

"This forest... I've been here or seen it..." I said, my breath getting shallow.

"Where?" Soren prompted.

"This is the forest where April took us in that dream. The forest on the outskirts of Pomeli pack, Hathaway packland," I said, recognizing where I knew the forest from.

"That's right," Soren said.

I went to the closest burned trunk and ran my hand along the charred bark and remains.

"The fire did a lot of damage. I'm surprised that the forest has grown back so much. It looks like it is recovering. But the pack..."

"The pack hasn't recovered," Soren agreed with a somber nod. "Come with me. The forest opens up just ahead."

We went to the end of the forest path and it opened up into a big, clear space. I could see the remnants of roads from my pack but all the destroyed buildings had been taken back into the earth.

“No one has been here for a long time,” I said absently, looking at the strange hill-like shapes of grass and weeds around the buildings that used to be standing there.

“This whole place is deserted but the entire village isn’t gone. Not entirely,” Soren told me.

He grabbed my hand again and pulled me toward the hill where the pack mansion, my original home, used to stand. The mansion was gone completely. It had probably been burned to the ground and overgrown like the rest of the buildings.

I could still remember what the mansion looked like in that dream. My heart ached, wishing I could see it again in person and recover more memories from my childhood.

Soren led me into the center of the deserted village and I slowed again, chewing the inside of my cheek. I started dragging my feet.

My memories of this place were practically non-existent. The dream was all I had and it wasn’t real. The real Hathaway had been burned to the ground and was now overgrown.

There were no memories for me here.

“Is something wrong?” Soren asked.

“No. It’s hard to remember anything when it looks so different from the dream,” I said.

“Mila, this is unclaimed land right now. You are the heir to this territory and can claim it for your own,” he said.

“Hang on...”

I noticed the familiar looking edge of the forest. Pulling away from Soren, I ran along the edge of the forest. Something nagged at the back of my mind. I wasn’t sure if it was some hidden memory or my own instinct, but I couldn’t ignore it.

“Mila, where are you going?” Soren asked, running behind me.

“I don’t know! I just feel like this is the right way to go...” I kept running ahead.

I followed the edge of the forest all the way to the base of the hill. The forest veered off in another direction but there was one building left standing.

Emotion washed over me and I dropped to my knees in front of the little cabin. It was tucked back in the forest, just hidden well enough that it wouldn’t be seen from the mansion. It had probably escaped being burned or destroyed because no one knew it was there.

The cabin was small. Just big enough for two bedrooms. There were the remnants of an old garden in front of the cabin and a broken swing set in the back.

Even though it was old and rotting in some places, I could vividly imagine that cabin when it was pristine and well cared for.

In my imagination, the cabin door opened and a loving father came out with a little girl. She had golden hair and bouncing curls. The man picked her up and hugged her. She laughed.

“Stop Daddy, I want to walk,” she said, struggling in his arms.

The father put the girl down and she grabbed his hand, pulling him around to the swing set. He picked her up and held her as she swung on the monkey bars. There was no way she could have held herself up with how small she was but the big smile on her face showed how proud she was of herself.

The memory faded. At least, I thought it was a memory. It could have just been my imagination.

I got to my feet and pushed the door of the cabin open. Inside, it smelled musty and stale. There were cobwebs filling the corners and some moss and lichen had crept in around the windows, growing on the walls.

The inside was ruined, despite the outside looking sound.

Soren came in behind me.

I went to the kitchen and touched the granite countertop. It was a very nice counter for a cabin, but my parents had been really well off.

“Do you remember this place?” Soren asked.

I looked around more, hoping to jog my memory. First, I shook my head, then I nodded. I scrunched my face up.

“I think so...” I whispered.

There was a thick layer of dust covering the counter and the tabletop.

“I think this was my vacation home as a child. Rather, my parents’ little getaway close to home,” I said.

“You remember being here?” he pressed.

I shrugged and walked around more. “Maybe they are memories. Maybe they are wishful thinking.”

“Do you want this place, Mila? To fix up and call your own?”

I stared at Soren silently.

What was I supposed to say to that? My mind wandered back to everything I’d learned recently. About who my parents were, my real family, my true identity, and the artifact they’d left me. I thought of my aunt Helen, who I still hadn’t found, and the witch blood running in my veins.

Growing up, I always thought that I was abandoned by my parents. I never wanted to meet them or know them because I hated to think of what kind of people would abandon me to the life I lived.

I’d gone through so much suffering at the hands of my foster mother and Saboreef pack. It had been easier to hate my parents as villains rather than think of what I might have lost. I wondered if that was why I blocked out all the memories of my early childhood.

I had agreed to take the Blackfire poison because, after everything I went through, I’d decided it would be better to die of the poison than go through more pain and suffering. I had thought my existence was no longer needed in the world.

Now that I knew who my parents were, I was glad I survived.

I was glad that I'd survived long enough to learn what had happened to them because I had the chance to avenge them and get revenge for them! My parents were killed because of the selfish desires of others. They were the ones that robbed me of my family, my childhood, and all my happy memories.

My heart filled with anger and I clenched my fists. This wasn't over! I would make them all pay for destroying my family and my pack.

Sighing, I bowed my head. The anger passed quickly and was replaced by grief. Maybe my anger was just a cover-up for the sadness I really felt.

"Mila, what do you think?" Soren asked, reminding me he'd asked a question.

"I was thinking about my parents," I admitted softly.

What would my life have been like if my parents hadn't died? Would I have had all the love and happiness I'd been denied for so long?

Tears pricked my eyes and I hugged myself. All the "what ifs" of life with my parents rushed through my mind. A tear welled up in my right eye and dropped down my cheek. I sniffled and quickly wiped the tear away.

"Hey..."

Soren put a hand on my shoulder and I looked at him. I couldn't muster the strength to smile.

"There are no 'what ifs,' Mila. Not in real life. You can only look forward, grow, and keep moving. Or, you can be trapped in the past, stuck, and stunted," he said.

I gasped and looked away from him. How had he known exactly what I was thinking?

Soren was too good at anticipating my thoughts and feelings. He was also too good at saying exactly what I needed to hear to feel comforted.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Could he read my mind?

"Is that advice you intend to follow, as well?" I asked, biting my lower lip.

I knew that Soren had an amazing ability to observe and analyze. He'd been doing that since we first met, pointing out things about myself that I wanted to hide. What I couldn't figure out is how he could seemingly read my mind.

It crossed my mind that he could know what to say because he recognized feelings in me that he had felt himself. His past must have been full of longing, regret, and loss. Otherwise, he'd never know what I was feeling.

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

Soren chuckled and brushed some of the cobwebs out of the nearest door frame.

"If you wanted it, I would give you a wooden cabin just like this. I would give you this very one, if that is what you want," he told me. He gripped the door frame and squeezed, almost like he was testing the strength.

My heart swelled. I couldn't even be mad that he was avoiding my questions. I went to Soren and wrapped my arms around his waist, hugging him tightly.

He arched an eyebrow and looked down at me. I lifted myself on tiptoes and kissed Soren on the lips.

"Thank you," I murmured, pulling away. "It is nice to have you with me..."

Soren growled low in his throat. He hugged me back, running his nose through my hair. He sucked in a sharp breath, smelling me.

"How I wish you could feel..."

The words were so soft and distant I wasn't sure if I heard them correctly, or at all. Soren rarely whispered like that and the words made no sense to me.

He cradled the back of my head in his palm and inhaled again.

"Excuse me, did you say something?" I asked, tipping my head up to him.

Soren sighed and shook his head. "Nothing."

[Chapter 725](#)

Soren

How I wish you could feel the mate bond.

That's what I wanted to say to Mila but I couldn't finish and I couldn't say it loud enough for her to hear. The words stuck in my throat and I pulled away from her when she asked for clarification.

I hadn't understood why I'd been drawn to Mila from the beginning. There had been no mate feeling when we first met but it had been more than curiosity that drew me to her. The more time went by, that pull got stronger.

Just a whiff of her scent had me practically drooling.

And I was starting to sense more things about her. Her moods, sometimes even her thoughts. I'd always felt like I could interpret her better than others but I didn't know it was from the mate bond.

I still only had theories about why I was only feeling it now and why it just kept getting stronger. I suspected it was the Blackfire poison that still stifled her feelings and kept the bond from being fully formed between us.

Then there was the matter of her grief.

She was so consumed by sadness and her past that if I said anything about the mate bond it would just confuse her more. She'd probably just get upset.

"Let's get out of here," I said motioning toward the door.

Mila nodded and exited the cabin. I followed close behind her.

“What do you say about visiting your old home?” I asked, motioning to the nearby hill where the packhouse used to sit.

“It isn’t even there anymore,” she protested, shaking her head.

“You never know what memories it’ll stir up,” I suggested. I held a hand out to her.

Mila eyed my offered hand suspiciously for a moment. Then she took it.

“I suppose it is worth checking out,” she admitted.

We hiked to the top of the hill. From there, I could see all the destroyed homes and buildings from the village and the outline of streets that still remained. From a higher vantage point, it was clear to see how much damage had been done.

“I think this is supposed to be the mansion,” Mila said, drawing my attention back to a patch of thick weeds.

“I can see the outline of the foundation,” I confirmed, pointing it out to her. It had been overgrown with grass and weeds but there was still a firm line for the foundation.

“There’s really nothing left,” Mila muttered to herself.

She didn’t seem angry or as sad as she was when we were in the cabin. I had a feeling it was harder for her to see something that remained from her childhood rather than seeing something that had been damaged.

I could sense she was upset, though, and disappointed.

Mila had no memories from her early childhood, no memory of her parents, her pack, or her home. Everything she had was destroyed.

I couldn’t imagine being in her shoes and trying to put the pieces together. There were no words of comfort that could ease what she was feeling or make up for what she lost.

I reached for her and pulled her against me.

“It’s alright, Mila, you can let it all out,” I soothed, rubbing her back.

She sniffled a little and shook her head. “I’m okay.”

I knew that wasn’t entirely true. Giving her another little squeeze, I kept rubbing her back. How could I show her that I was there for her?

“You don’t have to hide your feelings in front of me,” I said, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead.

Mila shook her head and looked up at me, meeting my gaze. “I thought that if I came here, there would be something I could hold onto. Something from my past or my childhood. But there isn’t...”

“I’m sorry,” I said, cupping her cheek.

Smiling bitterly, Mila scoffed. "Don't be. I'm grateful that you brought me here. At least, I can see what happened with my own eyes. It makes me want to avenge my parents and the pack even more."

"That is admirable. Is there anywhere else you want to go before we leave?" I asked. I wanted to get her away from the sadder parts of the village.

Mila shrugged and pointed off in a random direction. "Let's see what is over here."

"You know, Payne told me that Pomeni pack was a major exporter of crops and other resources. Everything we see in the village is just a fraction of the land here," I told her.

We walked in the direction that Mila pointed and it was a road that led off in the opposite direction of the forest.

The entire road was overgrown and it looked very desolate.

"What else did he tell you?" Mila asked.

"That the Pomeni packland was severely damaged in the attack that wiped out the pack. After that, it was unable to sustain the same level of resources," I explained.

"What does that mean?" Mila asked.

"Nothing could grow here. I guess that's why another pack didn't move in and take over this territory," I said.

Payne had told me that he checked in on Pomeni pack territory from time to time. Other packs had tried to move in and cultivate the land but it was never productive and no pack could ever live there again.

There were rumors of curses after the pack was exterminated. The packland was useless.

I wondered if Jessica had something to do about that. She had been a very powerful witch.

The road took us out to the edge of the pack where the agricultural land was. It was a completely barren wasteland. It looked like once green fields had been turned into dusty deserts.

Wind blew by and tossed the dry, loose soil around. There was nothing healthy or alive about the once wealthy Hathaway territory.

"This place used to be green," Mila said.

"It can be again. You're a witch, maybe you can break the curse here," I told her, smirking.

Mila chuckled and shook her head. "It doesn't seem possible."

We came to a crossroads and Mila stopped walking.

"Is there anything else you want to see?" I asked, nodding back toward the center of the packland.

Mila shook her head and looked down. It was obvious that she wasn't in the mood to explore her broken hometown.

I'd brought her here in an attempt to ease her mind. I was concerned that she hadn't gotten any closure and might be even sadder now.

“This isn’t the Pomeni packland that I knew as a child. Now that I know it isn’t the land I knew, I don’t need to see anymore,” she said.

We headed back toward the forest.

“Mila... have you given any thought to rebuilding your pack?” I asked her.

It was a thought on my mind for a while, especially since I’d been toying with the idea of building my own pack. I still wasn’t quite sure where she stood on wanting a pack or wanting something with me.

Mila smiled wryly. “You know, Payne asked me the same question.”

“I’m not surprised. He and Ashley had dreamt about having their pack back for a long time,” I said.

“Yes, he told me I’d given them new hope,” she admitted.

“So, what do you think?” I asked, arching an eyebrow at her.

“That’s... it is a complicated question, isn’t it. I can’t rebuild the pack unless I am sure I could protect them... and right now... well, I can barely protect myself,” she explained.

“Is that why you want the artifact?” I asked, c*****g my head at her.

“I don’t see the artifact as a source of power,” she said, shaking her head. “My parents were powerful and respected without the artifact. But even they couldn’t keep the pack safe. They couldn’t keep me safe.”

“But that isn’t a hard ‘no,’” I pointed out. “Part of you still wants your pack back, right?”

Mila smiled lightly and giggled. She sighed and gave me a look.

“Who wouldn’t want a place they can always feel like they belong? Even your men in the rogue zone consider the base as their home, don’t they?” she asked.

I turned my eyes to the sky and thought about what she said. It was true that we’d fought hard for a stationary base for my men to call home. Mila had never had that, and I could understand her longing for it.

“You’re right. There are times when I want that kind of home and belonging. There are times when I feel the need to settle down... perhaps I’ve had my fill of traveling the world now,” I mused.

We shared a look and I felt like we’d reached a new understanding with each other.

“Whatever you decide is right for you, I’ll support your decision,” I told her, nodding.

Mila put her hand to her heart and smiled at me. Her cheeks reddened and she looked down.

“Why are you so nice to me?” she asked, her cheeks becoming a darker shade of red.

I took a half step back. I hadn’t expected her to ask me a direct question like that. Normally, I was good at evading her questions but this one caught me off guard. I took a moment to think over the possible answers I should give her.

When Mila had first wandered into my life, I'd felt drawn to her because of her similarities to Rosalie. Now, I understood there was the growing mate bond mixed in too.

But I didn't know that at the time.

And after I had taken Mila's first time while we were both intoxicated, I'd felt bad. I didn't want her to hate me or think I'd taken advantage of her. I had felt like I needed to make up for that, even if she didn't know what had happened.

By the time I was done helping her in those first few days, I felt like I couldn't resist her. I was drawn to her like a magnet. Whenever she ran, something pulled me right back to her.

It was the mate bond. But I didn't know it at the time...

But Mila couldn't feel the mate bond. I had no idea how she felt toward me. She was far more comfortable with me than she was when we first met.

Mila was the one who insisted on making our relationship a business transaction and I no longer knew if everything was still just a transaction or a trade for her.

We had a great physical connection. I smirked thinking about it and gave her a coy look.

There was no denying that we had a strong, enjoyable physical connection. But emotionally... Did she like me? I didn't know for sure and I'd been keeping her at a distance while I tried to figure that out.

I'd asked her to stay with me a few times, testing her answers. She hadn't said yes but she hadn't said no either.

All in all, it was the one answer I couldn't get through the mate bond.

Mila's eyes watched me as all the thoughts raced through my mind. Her eyes fell slightly and I noticed her shoulders sagged.

"Sorry. That was just me being silly," she said, laughing and waving me off. "You're nice to me because you feel obligated to help. Of course, we had an agreement. I know that."

"No, you misunderstand," I said, holding a hand up to her. "Mila, believe it or not, everything I've done is simply because I want to. Not because I'm obligated."

Mila's eyes widened for a moment. After a moment, her eyes narrowed and she avoided my gaze.

"What's wrong...?"

"Soren!?" Ashley's voice called.

"Ashley?" I asked. Hadn't she gone back to the rogue zone?

Payne and Ashley came down the road toward us and they weren't alone. I squinted, recognizing the third person. I never thought I'd see them again!

[Chapter 726](#)

Eros followed close behind Ashley and Payne. I could see that Ashley was pleased with his presence, but Payne appeared wary.

"Eros... fancy meeting you here," I said, keeping things casual. I suspected that he went to Carno pack and discovered that we misled him.

Now he was back looking for more information. I didn't want to make him suspicious by acting suspicious. He was working hard to make it seem like a complete coincidence, so I needed to play along with that.

"Eros came to this area looking for some really rare herbs," Ashley explained quickly. "As a healer, he's always gathering rare herbs. There are some that grow here that don't grow anywhere else."

"Yeah, I ran into them as they were heading out," Eros confirmed with a nod.

"We just happened to run into him," Ashley said, giggling.

I smiled and nodded. "Well, what a coincidence that is, then."

"Yeah, pretty lucky on my part," Eros said, laughing. "Anyway, how's your leg?"

I glanced down. The cuts from the nettles had healed days ago. Slowly, I gripped my pant leg and lifted it up. There weren't even any scars left from the nettle sting.

"Fully healed," I confirmed.

"Awesome!" Eros cheered a little. He seemed very easygoing and casual, like he did just happen to run into us.

I couldn't deny that he was friendly and pleasant to be around. Though, that could be because he was trying to gain our trust.

"I apologize again for using the wrong herbs for a poultice. There's still a lot I have to learn." Eros said, grinning.

"Don't worry about it. If it weren't for your help, the poison could have done a lot more damage or killed me," I said, nodding.

In truth, he had probably saved my life, even if he hadn't done the job completely. It gave us time to get Lee there to heal me properly.

"It only took a few more days for me to heal completely. It was nothing," I assured.

I looked at Payne and our eyes met. Slowly, I gave him a single nod, signaling that he should play along with Eros. If we were going to learn what his purpose was, we needed to make him think we didn't suspect him.

Payne returned my subtle nod.

"From what Eros said, he's heading west, just like us. Perhaps he should join us," Payne suggested.

"Well, Eros, if you are agreeable, we'd be more than happy to have you join the group so you don't have to travel alone," I suggested.

Ashley's eyes lit up and she grabbed Eros's wrist.

"Oh, you should really come with us. This will be a lot of fun," Ashley insisted.

I glanced at Mila and saw her eyes narrow slightly. She suspected Eros, too. Good. I wanted her to be suspicious because she might see something I didn't.

Payne and I led the way out of Pomeni territory. Mila walked behind us and Eros and Ashley were even further behind. It didn't take us long to get back on the open road.

I could hear Ashley and Eros in the back. They were whispering to each other, chattering and laughing. I was concerned about how attached Ashley was getting to Eros. If he was an enemy, which was still a big "if," she'd never see it if she got too attached.

They were far enough back and too engrossed in each other to listen to anything I had to say.

"Did you stop by your childhood home?" I asked Payne.

Payne gave a dry laugh. "If you mean that pile of rubble overgrown with weeds, then yes, I did revisit it."

Reaching out, I clapped a hand on Payne's shoulder. He didn't seem upset or saddened by what he saw.

"You don't seem... perturbed," I pointed out.

Payne scoffed. "It is hard to imagine that place being where I grew up and where I lost... everything. I guess I don't associate this place with the emotional loss."

"Well... that was a personal admission," I said, chuckling.

Payne shrugged. "Why have you allowed Eros to travel with us?"

Discreetly, I glanced over my shoulder at Eros and Ashley. Her cheeks were flushed and I could tell she hadn't stopped smiling for several minutes. I liked seeing her that happy, I just wasn't sure about the source of her happiness.

"I need to know who is backing him and directing him," I explained, turning back to Payne. "He's not an ordinary healer."

"How do you know?" Payne asked, arching an eyebrow. "He mostly seems... incompetent."

"Or he is overly-competent," I said.

Payne creased his brow. "I don't follow you there, Boss."

"Eros made a poultice from a complex mixture of herbs as an antidote for the stinging nettle poison. It was supposed to be a healing poultice but all it did was remove the poison. In fact, it prevented me from healing. Even though my wound wasn't getting worse, I was still weakened," I explained.

Payne nodded. "You think he purposely meant to weaken you and play it off like a medical mistake by a rookie healer."

"Exactly."

“Then you think he was sent by someone more powerful to mess with us and get information out of us,” Payne surmised.

“That’s the idea,” I confirmed with a nod.

Ashley’s laughter rippled up to us.

I glanced at Payne and noticed the worry in his eyes.

“She’ll understand,” I said in a quieter voice. “Once we figure out his true intentions, she’ll understand.”

Mila

We stopped for a quick lunch on the road.

I munched on a sandwich while Eros kept us entertained.

“So, there I am hanging halfway off this cliff and trying to cut some leaves from a rare plant that only grows on a southern facing cliff edge at that altitude,” he said.

I watched Eros carefully as he told his story.

Ashley was draped over him, laughing so hard.

Payne was content to eat and stare into space. I could tell he was listening because his eyes darted toward Eros now and then.

“And all of a sudden, this hawk flies up. I must have been too close to its nest. She starts screeching at me and clawing at me. I tried to swat her away but I was dangling...” Eros sighed and leaned back.

Ashley was laughing so hard, she wiped a tear from her eye.

I noticed a slight smirk on Soren’s lips as well. If nothing else, at least he was entertaining.

“How did you get out of that mess?” I asked.

“Oh, well, that was the best part. The rock I was holding onto came loose and I fell. I thought I was done for but before I could even work up a good scream, I landed on the outcropping with the herb,” Eros said. He shook his head. “I clipped some herbs and climbed right back up... I didn’t even need to hang off that damn cliff.”

Ashley just kept laughing.

“We need to get moving again,” Soren said.

We cleaned up our lunch and got back on the road. By mid-afternoon, a large mountain range came up on our right.

“Hey, this is Hillsburg pack territory. You can tell by the mountains,” Eros said, pointing.

“What’s significant about that?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You don’t know? Tonight, there is supposed to be this awesome meteor shower that is visible from the Hillsburg mountains,” he said.

“A meteor shower?” Ashley asked.

“What do you guys think about hanging around here and watching it? I’ve heard it is supposed to be one of the most beautiful things ever,” Eros insisted.

“That sounds really romantic,” Ashley gushed, biting her bottom lip.

The idea of seeing a meteor shower was exciting. It was something I’d never seen before. Watching the sky light up with shooting stars just sounded... gorgeous.

I couldn’t help but wonder what Eros was trying to do. Why would he recommend us sticking around for another night and watching a meteor shower? We were strangers to him.

He could be trying to get us isolated in the mountains. It could have been a trap for us. Eros could just putting us at ease to lure us into something unexpected.

“You know what, that sounds like a good idea,” Soren said, catching me off guard.

“Umm...”

I walked up to Soren and leaned in close to him.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked, glancing at Ashley and Eros to make sure they weren’t paying attention to me.

They were too busy laughing and whispering to each other.

“Don’t worry too much, Mila. The meteor shower should be beautiful. You want to see it, so just do it. Nothing will happen, not while I’m here,” he assured.

“But...”

“Mila, have you seen a meteor shower before?” Soren asked.

“No.”

“Then this is worth seeing. I want you to have this experience because everyone should. Whatever you are worried about, just put it behind you because I will make sure that nothing goes wrong. I’m looking out for you,” Soren said. He touched my cheek lightly.

I smiled at him, my cheeks getting hot. Somehow, his words made me feel so spoiled and cherished. He knew how to be sweet and romantic, whether that was his intention or not. He also knew how to reassure me and make me feel safe and secure.

Part of me was grateful because I did really want to see the meteor shower.

Was it possible that he liked me for more than just my body? Did he have real feelings for me, enough to make me feel special and doted on? Was there a chance that he wanted to be more than just f**k buddies?

I mean, I knew he liked my body but did he also like me for me?

Just thinking about it made my heart grow ten times larger in my chest. Maybe he wanted me around for companionship too... not just the physical stuff.

Even if I was imagining it all, I wasn't going to let that feeling go right now. We were still out in the wilderness and we were about to have a romantic night under a meteor shower. I was going to indulge myself for once.

It was just one night under the stars, right?

I sighed to myself and nodded to Soren, agreeing with him.

It was a pleasant fantasy to indulge in this idea that Soren could have real feelings for me. But I couldn't help wondering if that would make the beautiful dream I was creating for myself even harder to wake up from.

Waking up would break my heart. But it was worth this moment.

[Chapter 727](#)

"I know the perfect place to watch the meteor shower," Eros said. "It isn't too much of a hike into the mountains."

He led the way and Ashley eagerly followed along with him.

Payne seemed to have a perpetual frown on his lips as he stared after his sister and the stranger.

"Lighten up, Payne," Soren said, clapping him on the shoulder. "If he steps out of line, at least, we'll be on a cliff and can throw him off."

Payne scoffed and went ahead. Though, I caught the slight glimmer of amusement in Payne's eyes.

I stepped up beside Soren. "You wouldn't really throw Eros off a cliff, would you?"

Soren shrugged. "It depends on what he does. If he went after you or Ashley, I wouldn't have a choice."

"I suppose that's logical," I said, nodding.

"Mila, we don't know anything about him yet. I'll be on guard until I can determine he isn't a threat," he promised me.

I smiled and nodded. His words made me feel much safer about following Eros into the mountains.

We hiked up into the mountains. It wasn't very far and we arrived as the sun started to set. Eros brought us to a clearing in the mountains. The path flattened out and we were nestled in an area large enough for a campsite.

"This is beautiful," I said, walking around the site. We had a perfect view of the sky without the mountains or any trees obstructing our view.

The evening air was starting to cool off and I rubbed my arms, shivering. It wasn't too cold, though. It felt nice after the rigorous hike into the mountains, refreshing.

“We’ll be able to see the whole sky from up here,” Ashley gushed.

“It seems like there is just enough time to get the camp set up,” Eros suggested. “I’m still hungry from lunch, so I’ll throw together some snacks.”

Payne and Soren shrugged and then immediately got to work on setting up the tents. Ashley hovered around Eros for a bit while he pulled all our food rations out. Eventually, she took off mumbling something about collecting firewood.

I took a seat near Eros and helped prepare snacks.

“Veggies and dip, I think that’s the best idea,” Eros said, handing me some cucumbers, carrots, and a green pepper. “If you slice, I’ll stir.”

“Sure,” I said, shaking my head.

Since we’d just restocked before leaving Marno territory, we still had fresh foods that didn’t usually last long on a trip. It was better to eat them now before they went bad. We had plenty of non-perishable snacks for the next few days.

I focused on cutting up the veggies and arranged them on a plate. Eros provided the dip.

Payne and Soren finished with the tents. They immediately dug into the veggie platter.

Ashley returned with an armful of firewood.

“Should we make a fire tonight?” she asked, holding her arms up.

“Firelight will interfere with our view of the sky and the meteor shower,” Eros commented, shaking his head.

He went to Ashley and took the armful of wood from her. With a shrug, he tossed them in a heap on the ground.

“Besides, Mila and I prepared a meal that doesn’t require cooking,” he pointed out. He guided Ashley over to us and handed her the platter.

She took a sliced cucumber and dipped it.

“Hey, we were eating that over here,” Soren protested.

Eros grinned and returned the platter to Soren.

“That’s okay, there’s something I want to show Ashley, anyway,” he told him.

“Me?” Ashley gasped.

“Close your eyes,” Eros instructed.

Ashley immediately complied. Eros took her hand and started leading her away.

“No peeking, now,” he warned.

Soren and Payne exchanged a look and Payne was frowning again.

“We should follow them,” Soren agreed with a nod. He held a hand out to me.

“Yeah, okay,” I nodded. I took his hand and we followed the path Eros led Ashley down.

The path took us around a rock on a narrow edge. On the other side, it opened up again but we were standing very close to the edge of a cliff. The cliff was a sheer drop down so it was like we were floating over the landscape below.

A river carved its way through the flatlands. It looked like a black, slithering snake under the darkening sky.

I could look out over the horizon and see the exact spot where the sky met the horizon. We’d have the perfect view of the meteor shower from here. My skin hummed with anticipation.

Eros was standing behind Ashley. He leaned in and whispered to her.

“Okay, you can open your eyes. But shhh... be quiet,” he whispered huskily.

I glanced at Payne and saw him grimace. He was watching their every little interaction.

Ashley gasped and clasped her hands over her mouth.

“This is so beautiful!” she whispered.

Little blips of light started flickering off the cliff. Fireflies, millions of them, lighting up like low-hanging stars. It was like we were swimming in a sea of stars as the real stars started blinking into view in the sky above.

“I knew you’d like it here. It’s breathtaking, isn’t it? And when the meteors start, you’ll feel like you’re in the sky, riding their light streams,” Eros said.

“I think we’ve got extra blankets in the tents. If we lay them out here, this is where we can watch the meteor shower,” Soren suggested.

I smiled at him. “That sounds almost... romantic.”

He bounced his eyebrows at me.

“Thank you, Eros!” Ashley gasped. She turned around and hugged him tightly.

Eros stiffened for a moment. He cast a nervous look at Payne and Soren. Slowly, awkwardly, he hugged her back with one arm.

“You’re welcome,” he said stiffly.

I saw Ashley’s cheeks turn bright red. I could tell, even in the dark. She pulled away quickly and looked down.

It was obvious to me that Ashley was falling in love with Eros. He was charming and attractive but I still had my reservations. Ashley didn’t seem to care and I hoped it wouldn’t lead to her getting her heart broken.

Payne's face fell and I could tell he was thinking something similar to what I was thinking of. He grabbed Ashley's arm and pulled her away from Eros and the cliff edge.

"Ashley, be careful. You're standing on the edge of a cliff," he warned gruffly.

"Ugh! Stop being so bossy," Ashley whined, pulling away from Payne.

"You're being irresponsible," Payne muttered, shaking his head.

I got the sense he was referring to Eros, not the cliff.

Ashley pouted. "I'm not a baby, Payne. I can take care of myself. You don't need to be so boring all the time and always scolding me for no reason!"

Payne glared and hurried to reply.

"Actually, the cliff probably isn't the best place to stand until we have the blankets out to watch the meteor shower," Eros interjected, quickly ending the fight between the siblings.

"I'll get the blankets," Soren offered.

He disappeared back to the tents.

"Come on, Ashley, I have something else I want to show you. And it will be far from the cliff edge, perfectly safe," Eros said, holding his hand out to Ashley.

Ashley giggled and quickly took his hand. "Yeah, I want to see."

"Payne, do you want to come and make sure I'm not putting Ashley into any dangerous situations?" he asked, arching an eyebrow at Payne.

"You don't need to ask him. He's just a big cranky pants and has been for days. He certainly won't appreciate seeing what you want to show me," Ashley insisted, giving Eros a coy smile.

"It is a glow-in-the-dark flower. Ever seen one, Payne?" Eros continued.

Soren returned with the blankets just in time. He started spreading them out on the ground.

"I'll go with you," Payne assured.

"Ashley, don't go far," Soren chimed in as the three of them headed down another path.

Even as they walked away I could still hear Ashley giggling. Eros seemed to have said something else to make her laugh. He was good at that.

"I kind of hope that Eros is harmless as he seems. That way, at least Ashley would get to be happy," I said, moving closer to Soren.

Soren arched an eyebrow at me as he straightened out the blankets. He didn't say anything but the look made it seem like he didn't understand what I was saying.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked, crossing my arms.

I felt really unsettled and exposed under that look.

"I'm just surprised that you were worried about Ashley's happiness," Soren admitted. He shrugged and got back to fixing the blankets.

I scoffed and arched an eyebrow. "Should I not be concerned? Am I that much of a selfish jerk in your eyes?"

Soren chuckled and shook his head. "Not at all, Mila. I'm glad to see that you two girls have become friends. It is nice to see you connecting with others."

"Wait, what do you mean 'connecting with others'?" I asked, putting my hands on my hips.

Soren smirked and stood up. He stood right in front of me, toe to toe. He gave me an intense look, his eyes brighter than the stars in the sky above.

"You're one of a kind, Mila," he said, putting his hands on my shoulders. "But even the strongest shifter needs friends and companions in life. I am happy to see you making friends."

"That's nice, I guess," I said, shrugging.

Soren's hands moved to my neck, his thumbs stroking up and down my throat. A shudder ran through me and I had to look away from his intense, glowing eyes.

"You know, I was just thinking..."

My heart skipped several beats as Soren trailed off. I opened my mouth to speak but all that came out was a croak.

I cleared my throat and swallowed several times.

"Thinking about what?" I managed to ask.

Soren smirked and leaned in, his forehead touching mine. It was impossible not to look him in the eye. There was something there, mischief and curiosity.

"What about me?" he murmured.

"What about you?" I asked back, my throat still dry and hoarse. My heart hammered in my chest and I was sure that Soren would hear it.

"Are you worried about my happiness, too?" he clarified.

My heart skipped again and I gasped. When I licked my lips, my tongue brushed Soren's mouth because we were so close.

His warm breath struck my face, filling me with his sweet, overpowering scent. It made me a little drowsy or... fuzzy. With each inhale, I thought I'd get drunk off his scent and the warmth of his skin.

"I..."

Soren pressed his warm, soft lips to mine, cutting me off.

[Chapter 728](#)

My heart raced in my chest. I thought it would leap right out and gallop off into the wilderness.

Soren's lips were gentle and tender, moving slowly against mine and slowly opening me up. I gasped and leaned into the kiss, my whole body heating and my core tightening.

Strong emotions for this man ran through my mind and my heart. They were getting out of control! Something hummed under my skin and I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling myself even closer to him.

I moaned against his lips and rolled my body against his.

Soren smirked against my lips and tightened his hands on my hips.

I felt like if I didn't feel his skin on mine, I would burst. The feeling was so strong and I'd never felt it before. Was this what the mate bond felt like? An uncontrollable need to be close?

If that's what it felt like, was Soren my mate?

He slipped his tongue into my mouth and I met it with mine, tasting him on my taste buds as his tongue explored my mouth and rolled over my cheeks.

It wasn't possible for Soren to be my mate, was it?

He had told me that he had no mate and that he needed no mate. If I was his mate, he would have felt it sooner. He would have said something, wouldn't he?

Soren's hands moved under my shirt and he caressed my back. A shiver ran down my spine and my knees buckled. I thought I might melt into a puddle at his feet. His arms tightened around me as he held me up.

I ached for him. My body and my core pulsed with desire.

"Ah!" I squealed as Soren scooped me into his arms, bridal style.

He grinned and carried me around the rock in the opposite direction that Eros, Payne, and Ashley had gone.

There was a patch of tall grass growing on the opposite side of our campsite. Soren laid me down in the grass and I shrugged my backpack off. Since I was carrying the artifact pieces, I only took the backpack off when I was sleeping.

Soren latched his lips onto my neck and he started sucking.

Gasping, I arched my back. I grabbed his shoulders and squeezed.

His hands slid under my shirt again. He pushed it up as far as he could and cupped my breasts. Soren massaged them gently and pinched my n****s.

The cold night air contrasted against my hot skin. I shuddered and arched into his touch.

I clenched my thighs, my clit throbbing with need.

Soren propped himself up beside me. He kissed my lips urgently, his fingers tracing the center line on my abdomen, down my stomach to my belly button. His thumb circled my naval and I tilted my head back, gasping and panting against Soren's lips.

He moved his hand lower, to the waistline of my pants. Soren slipped the tips of his fingers into my waistband and teased my skin with soft caresses. My legs trembled and my fingers clenched and unclenched around his shoulders.

His hand slid further into my pants, over my mound and between my thighs. I bit my lower lip as he gently coaxed my legs apart.

I thought I'd burst if he didn't touch me soon!

Soren's fingers moved to my entrance. He ran the tip of his forefinger up and down my slick, wet p***y slit. I writhed under his touch. It was just enough to feel good but he was just teasing me. I wanted more!

"Soren..." I gasped, begging him with my body.

Soren chuckled and nibbled on my neck. I moaned and threw my arm over my eyes. He was going to torture me to death!

He pushed one of his fingers inside of me and my muscles clenched around him. Soren growled and pushed a second finger inside. He moved them around, bending his fingers and stroking my inner walls.

My p***y quivered and I rocked my hips as pleasure sparked through my abdomen.

Soren thrust his fingers in and out of me. His thumb probed between my moist, creamy folds. I bit my lower lip.

He pressed the pad of his thumb to my swollen throbbing clit. I cried out in pleasure, arching my back. He circled his thumb around my clit in slow, deliberate, pleasurable circles.

Soren's fingers moved in and out, his thumb circled my clit.

Pressure built in my abdomen. I moaned and sobbed, moving my hips in time with his thrusts and circling thumb.

Every inch of my body was on fire with growing pleasure.

His lips closed on my neck and Soren nibbled and sucked on my skin.

I wrapped my arms around him, curling my hands around his shoulder blades, gripping tightly.

Soren pushed his fingers in deeper, pressing harder against my clit.

I came undone, moaning and writhing as he guided me through the intense pleasure of my orgasm.

Panting, I closed my eyes as every muscle in my body relaxed in the afterglow.

Soren popped the button open on my pants. He pushed them down just enough.

I bit my lower lip and put my hands under his shirt, running my fingers up and down his spine.

Soren let out a pleased grunt. He grabbed my hips and positioned himself between my legs. I reached down and curled my fingers around his hot, pulsing c**k.

Soren's eyelids fluttered and he gasped. He thrust into my hand.

I smirked and bit my lower lip. Curling my pointer finger around the tip of his erection, I squeezed and teased him. Payback for what he did to me earlier.

Soren growled and leaned down, pressing his lips to mine. He kissed me hungrily, nipping at my lower lip and shoving his tongue into my mouth.

I moaned, arching my back. I wrapped my hand around his shaft and stroked in light, quick strokes. Soren's grunts and pants encouraged me to keep going.

Suddenly, he pushed my hand away and grabbed my hips, like he couldn't take it anymore!

He pressed the tip of his c**k to my entrance and I bit my lower lip in anticipation. Soren thrust into me with a sharp groan, burying himself deep in my soft, wet insides.

His c**k spread me apart, rubbing against my inner walls. Pleasure rippled through my muscles, down my legs. I lifted my hips, rolling them against his.

Soren quickened his pace, thrusting into me faster. He wrapped his arms around my back, pinning me against his chest. I looped my arms around his neck and put my hands on the back of his head. I cradled his head and he rested his forehead in the crook of my neck.

Soren's breaths came in quick, ragged pants. I clenched my thighs, tightening my channel around Soren's thick shaft. He grunted, pleased as my muscles constricted around him.

He nipped at my shoulder and his arms tightened around me. We were smooshed together and I didn't want to be parted from Soren, ever again!

"Mila..." Soren purred my name, his lips grazing against my earlobe.

I shuddered and held him closer.

Soren groaned and his c**k trembled inside of me. He groaned loudly, releasing hard and bringing us both to the final precipice of pleasure.

I kept my arms tight around Soren's neck and he breathed heavily as he rested on top of me. Part of me wanted to fall asleep right there, our bodies pinned together with the open air around us.

The only thing that stopped me was thinking about Ashley and Payne when they found us.

I blushed at the very thought and started to push Soren away.

He sighed and helped me clean up. I pulled my pants back up but when I sat up, my muscles turned to gooey rubber and I laid back down.

Soren smirked. He took his jacket off and lay it on top of me to keep me warm. He lay down next to me, slipping an arm under my neck. I rested my head on his arm like a pillow. The grass helped conceal us but we still had a perfect view of the sky.

"Oh my Goddess! Did you see that?" I asked, pointing to the sky.

A small burning light streaked across the sky, a long tail of fire trailing behind it.

“The meteor shower has started,” Soren said. He kissed my temple sweetly. “Don’t forget to make a wish.”

“Why would I make a wish?” I asked him.

“That’s what people do. They wish on shooting stars. You’ll get a lot of wishes tonight,” he teased.

I sighed and shook my head. Then I gasped as another meteor went across the sky.

“What are you going to wish for?” I asked, glancing sideways for a quick second.

“I can’t tell you or it won’t come true,” Soren said. “So, when you make a wish, don’t tell me what it is, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, giggling.

I held my breath as the meteors came more frequently, sometimes two or three streaking across the sky at once.

My heart fluttered in my chest. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was so beautiful and so majestic. I realized just how full the world was of magic and mystery.

I thought about what I wanted to wish for. No matter what I thought about, my mind kept coming back to Soren.

His arm under my head was a nice pillow, despite his strength. The jacket he gave me was covered in his scent and was still warm from his body heat. With the sky exploding with beautiful light, I felt closer to Soren than ever before.

It felt like a truly romantic moment, meant for just the two of us.

I knew what I wanted to wish for.

When the next meteor streaked by, I took a deep breath and made the wish in my mind.

“I wish that the man who has cared for me and supported me, the one that I am hopelessly in love with, Soren Black, lives a long, healthy, happy life.”

I glanced at Soren again and was awed to see how transfixed he was on the starry sky. My heart was peaceful and content. The meteor shower filled the sky with streaks of light and lit up the night world with beautiful colors.

It was easy to relax after the amazing s*x we’d just had but the meteor shower was also making the night feel magical and relaxing.

This moment was perfect, this night was perfect. It wasn’t a wish I made on the shooting stars, but I did wish that time could stop and Soren and I could stay in the moment forever.

I could lie to myself and tell myself that Soren loved me and that we could stay together forever, at least on a perfect night like this.

We could sit in perfect silence together and enjoy this night.

A shadow appeared in the campsite and I looked over. Eros approached us with an easy smile on his lips.

I bit my lower lip and instinctively moved Soren's jacket to cover my backpack. Even though Eros didn't know about the artifacts, I still felt protective of them and worried about his motives.

Soren sat up, pushing me into a sitting position with him. He slipped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a serious look, conveying with his eyes that I didn't need to worry or be nervous.

"What do you want?" Soren asked.

Eros was alone. Something about that felt off.

"I just wanted to tell you that the meteor shower is almost at its peak. The view from the cliff is much better," he said, nodding in the opposite direction.

"Thanks, Eros. That's kind of you to tell us," I said smiling at him.

Soren's arm tightened around me and I looked at him. He gave Eros a stern look.

"Really Eros? Is that what you want? I thought you were here to ask me about the artifact," he said smoothly.

"What?" I gasped, staring at Soren.

Eros looked equally as stunned. His eyes widened and he took a half-step back.

Why would Soren tell Eros about the artifact? We didn't know if we could trust him!

"Where are Ashley and Payne?" Soren asked.

That's why it seemed so weird that Eros was Alone. Ashley wasn't with him anymore. Neither was Payne. Ashley should have been laughing with him and Payne glaring at him.

I knew Ashley wouldn't miss out on a romantic meteor shower with Eros. Not with how she felt about him.

Worry settled into my stomach.

Eros smirked suddenly and shrugged. "Soren, you know, it's really boring dealing with someone as smart as you. I can't have any fun."

[Chapter 729](#)

My heart sank like a stone.

Soren and I had both suspected that Eros had ulterior motives and that he might have been trying to trap us. As much as I suspected it, I had hoped against hope that it wasn't true.

I had suspected that he was after me or the artifact, possibly both. I figured he'd try to steal the artifact pieces but I hadn't pegged him for being dangerous. But Eros had done something to Ashley and Payne first. He had gone after my friends!

No, not just my friends. He'd done something to my pack!

“What did you do to them?” I demanded, glaring.

My hands trembled. Soren and I had left Payne and Ashley alone with him. We’d overestimated their ability to protect themselves against him and underestimated what Eros was capable of.

Guilt curled in my stomach like a poisonous snake. Soren and I had been enjoying each other and the romantic meteor shower while Ashley and Payne were in trouble!

Eros smirked. His eyes lit up devilishly and for the first time, I saw just how dangerous and mischievous he could be. That easy going, sweet healer in training was just an act! Underneath the facade, he was a demon.

“Don’t worry, they are only taking a rest. Though, whether or not they wake up any time soon depends entirely on the two of you,” he said, grinning cruelly.

He must have poisoned them or made some kind of tonic to knock them out! I was starting to think that Eros wasn’t a healer in training but a fully capable doctor. He had dangerous medical tricks up his sleeve.

I glanced at Soren. He was still composed and serious, staring intently at Eros.

“I have the artifact. But if you want it, you need to tell your master to come and get it. I don’t go through pawns,” Soren insisted with his own cruel smirk.

Usually, when Soren said those things, the people he spoke to showed surprise or appeared infuriated and intimidated. It was a tactic I’d seen him use to provoke others into making mistakes and revealing more about themselves.

Eros shrugged. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Soren, but I don’t have a master. You’re dealing with just me.”

Soren scoffed and shook his head. “Unlikely. You’re a pawn, whether you know it or not.”

“I’m not here to banter with you. Give me the artifact!” Eros demanded. He crossed his arms.

“Well, well, I suppose I should be giving you a thumbs up then, Eros. Kudos to you for your bravery to come face me by yourself,” Soren said, smirking again.

“Save that crap,” Eros warned. He turned to me. “Now, if you want to see your friends again and if you want me to return them to you in the same condition as you left them, give me the artifact!”

I sucked in a sharp breath and glanced at Soren.

“Don’t look at her!” Soren growled.

Eros chuckled and shook his head. “You’re all bluster and no bite. I want what I came for.

“I have a few artifacts,” Soren said, shrugging. “The question is, which artifact do you want?”

Eros sneered and shook his head. He held his hand out to Soren, as if he expected Soren to just hand over the artifact.

“Don’t treat me like those brainless idiots out there! Your rumor of a universal artifact might fool the more gullible but it won’t trick me. I’m only interested in the Blade of Souls,” he insisted.

I gasped and instinctively glanced at my bag again.

Soren didn't seem concerned. "Very well, come and get it!"

Jumping to his feet, Soren launched himself at Eros. They rolled in the dirt together.

I grabbed my backpack and put it on for safe keeping. Standing up, I watched Eros and Soren fighting.

They rolled on the ground, puffs of dirt flying into the air. Above them, the meteor shower was in full swing, making the mountain range light up like daytime.

Snarling, Soren grabbed the sides of Eros's head and slammed it into the ground. Eros struck Soren in the back with his knee.

Soren grunted and pitched forward. Eros rolled out from under him. They both sprung to their feet and started throwing punches and kicks at each other.

Eros blocked most of Soren's punches and delivered several right back. Soren kept blocking but I could tell that he couldn't get enough of an opening to deliver an incapacitating blow.

They were equally matched.

I'd never thought Eros would fight so well. He looked so wiry and slender but underneath it all he was strong and powerful. Eros had played us all! He was much more dangerous than we'd thought and he played the weakling so well.

Soren threw a punch at Eros's face. Eros threw his arms up to block and Soren thrust his knee into Eros's stomach. Grunting, Eros doubled over.

I cheered silently as Soren finally got the upper hand in the fight. From this point on, I knew he could handle it. Adjusting the bag on my shoulder, I left the concealment of the grass so I could find Payne and Ashley. If there was a chance I could wake them up without Eros, then he had nothing to threaten us with!

Just as I got out of the grass, I saw that Soren had Eros pinned.

Eros didn't look concerned or like he was losing the fight. Instead, he smirked at Soren.

"You didn't really think I came alone, did you?"

"Grrr."

I froze and squinted into the shadows. Bright, glittering eyes of wolves appeared on the edge of the shadows. I'd thought they were fireflies, but now I realized that the crickets had stopped.

Without even realizing it, Eros's shifters had closed in around us.

They all had their eyes fixed on me.

Eros slipped out of Soren's grasp and kept him busy, fighting one on one.

"Mila, run!" Soren shouted at me as the wolves closed in from all sides.

Soren wouldn't be able to get to me in time. There was no way I could fight all these wolves alone!

I gripped my backpack straps and whipped around, ready to run. The wolf on my left jumped at me. I dodged his lunge but it brought me too close to a second wolf. I couldn't get away fast enough and it swiped its paw at me. I staggered back and the wolf advanced, ready to jump at me.

I held my arms up, waiting for the attack.

It never hit me.

More snarls broke out and I heard the sounds of scuffling and squabbling. Lowering my arms, I saw a new group of wolves swarming into the campsite. They were quickly overtaking Eros's wolves.

I heard Soren chuckle. "I didn't think you came alone, which is why I didn't come alone either."

Soren's wolves subdued Eros's wolves in moments.

Eros still didn't seem worried. He smirked and he lunged at Soren again. They both shifted, jaws and teeth snapping at each other. Their fight got even more intense.

For the moment, I was safe and so was the artifact.

Suddenly, Ashley appeared, her eyes wide, totally appalled.

"Eros stop! What are you doing!?" she cried. She tried to get between Eros and Soren but Payne grabbed her arm.

Doctor Lee appeared behind them and I realized he was the one that brought Soren's backup. He had probably also revived Ashley and Payne from whatever Eros had given them.

Ashley broke free from Payne and ran in between Eros and Soren.

Eros's eyes darted around wildly. I could tell that he realized he was losing the fight. His backup was out of commission and Soren was clearly now the stronger warrior.

Growling, Eros launched himself at Ashley. He shifted back to human, pinning her arms behind her back and wrapping an arm around her neck, tightening dangerously.

"Let me go or I'll kill her!" Eros shouted.

Soren snarled, holding back the shifters that threatened to jump at Eros.

Payne clenched his fists, shaking in anger, but he wouldn't risk attacking and getting Ashley hurt, I knew that.

"Eros..." Ashley cried, tears dripping from her eyes. "What are you doing? Tell me this isn't true..." she sniffled. Her voice was filled with anguish and betrayal.

My heart broke for Ashley. This was what I had been afraid of. I didn't want to see her miserable and in pain.

Eros didn't respond but I saw something glimmer in his eyes. Did he really have feelings for Ashley?

Thwap! Zing!

I heard arrows whizzing through the air.

“Watch out!” I cried as I saw the arrows flying right at Soren and Ashley.

Soren easily dodged the arrows in wolf form but one headed right for Ashley.

Time seemed to come to a standstill. I was watching the arrow move in slow motion, aimed right at Ashley’s chest. Soren and Payne were too far away to intervene. And if no one stepped in, her heart would be pierced by the arrow.

Growling, Eros tightened his grip on Ashley. He spun around, shielding her, and the arrow embedded itself in his back.

Eros groaned and trembled, blood spurting out from his back. The arrow stuck out.

I cringed. That had to be painful. But Ashley was safe. My moment of relief was short lived as I realized that Eros had just saved Ashley... his hostage!

Why would Eros do that? My mind reeled. He’d just taken Ashley hostage and threatened to kill her. Had that been a bluff? Why would he save her when he was ready to kill her?

Immediately, Payne shifted into a wolf and tackled Eros, pushing him away from Ashley. Eros shifted again, knocking the arrow out of his back. He was badly wounded, though.

Eros wiggled away from Payne. He rolled onto his feet and lowered his head, growling and licking his lips.

Payne curled around him, his tail straight back and his ears perked up. Growling, Payne lunged at Eros and tackled him again. He thrust his front paws into Eros’s stomach, pinning him harshly to the ground.

He opened his mouth, ready to clamp down a killing blow on Eros’s neck.

“Payne, stop!” Ashley cried.

She ran over and knelt down over Eros, holding her hands up like a shield against Payne.

Payne growled in protest and paced back and forth. He licked his lips, his bright eyes narrowed on Eros. The second Ashley moved out of the way, Payne would pounce and end Eros once and for all.

Even though he saved Ashley’s life, I didn’t blame Payne for wanting to kill him. Eros had falsely healed Soren, followed us, set a trap for us, drugged him and Ashley, and taken his sister hostage. That couldn’t just be overlooked.

“Please... don’t hurt him,” Ashley begged. “... he’s... he’s my mate!”

[Chapter 730](#)

Soren

Payne hissed at Eros, snapping his jaws and pawing the ground.

At my command, everyone else stayed perfectly still. Mila clutched her backpack but she was also frozen in place.

Despite his heroics in saving Ashley, she seemed to be the only one willing to turn a blind eye. I knew where I stood and I agreed with Payne. Eros was malicious and dangerous. It was time to end him.

"Please, Payne..." Ashley begged.

Payne, still in wolf form, looked in my direction. I shook my head, letting him know that it was up to him what he wanted to do. He looked at his sister and I saw his hesitation.

Arrows still flew around us but they were coming slower and less frequently. I had my suspicions as to why and it only meant that I still had the upper hand.

Suddenly, Eros smirked, showing his true colors yet again. Saving Ashley, taking an arrow, it meant nothing to him. His eyes reflected his malice.

He lunged at me again.

I grabbed Eros by the throat and threw him down on the ground, slamming his back into the rocks. He coughed and wheezed, the wind knocked out of his lungs.

"Awwwwooooo!"

A howl broke through the night and I looked to a higher peak where the howl came from. The arrows stopped. One final arrow slammed into the ground, sticking straight up and down.

Rocks and pebbles skittered down from the highest peak and Thomas slid into view. He had an unconscious body draped over his shoulder.

With a wide smile, Thomas threw the body onto the ground in front of me. He was wearing a familiar outfit and I narrowed my eyes on the badge he wore on his chest.

"He's a Norwind warrior," Thomas reported.

I scoffed and glared at Eros. So, he was with Norwind. I knew he was lying to me when he said he didn't have a master or that he wasn't working with anyone.

"I see that. Thanks for coming," I said, squeezing Eros's throat a little more.

"Sorry I'm late. I knew you needed my help down here but I didn't know there was more of an ambush up there until the arrows started flying," Thomas explained. He nudged the unconscious warrior with his toe.

"Neither did I. At least, the only casualty was this i***t who took an arrow," I said, snarling at Eros.

"So, the healer brat is from Norwind," Thomas said.

"It appears so," I confirmed. "I guess that means Alpha Chandler sent you to follow up with Mila after we kicked his ass, didn't he?"

Eros rolled his eyes and shook his head. He tried to talk but it came out a gurgling gasp.

"Uhh... Soren, you might want to loosen your grip on his throat," Thomas said pointing and smirking at Eros.

Sighing, I eased my fingers and Eros coughed again.

“Don’t insult me!” he snapped. “I’m not one of Chandler’s pawns. He’s a useless piece of garbage when it comes to actual leadership. All he cares about is his dead luna.”

“By all accounts, you’re not much better,” I pointed out. “If you’re after that artifact, it can’t be for anything other than greedy or selfish reasons.”

Ashley’s sobs cut into our conversation. She crawled over and knelt at Eros’s feet. Her eyes were puffy and red and she sniffled.

“How could you do this to me, Eros? I’m your mate. We’re... I thought...” her voice broke and she trailed off.

Ashley hugged herself and rocked back and forth.

Payne came up behind her, in human form. He put a hand on Ashley’s shoulder but she ignored him, crying and rocking.

I growled and narrowed my eyes at Eros. He was going to pay for breaking Ashley’s heart and for making a mockery of their mate bond. It was obvious to me that once Eros knew about his connection with Ashley, he just manipulated her to get to us. Once he had Ashley wrapped around his finger, he got her to let her guard down which was all he needed to incapacitate her and Payne.

“Alright, Eros, you have a lot to answer for. Least of all, hurting my friend,” I growled.

“Ugh. You really think that is something I should answer for?” he asked, rolling his eyes again.

“Who do you work for?” I asked, squeezing his throat just enough to cause pain. I let up so he could talk again.

“Stop interrogating me, Soren. I lost, that’s it. You’re not going to get what you want out of me.” He sighed and shook his head.

I glanced at Thomas and Payne. Payne nodded and Thomas shrugged. I looked at Mila too. She was still clutching her backpack and she looked ready to bolt at any second.

This wasn’t the right place for a proper interrogation. But Eros was wrong, eventually, I would get what I wanted out of him.

“Very well. Thomas, secure Eros and his cohorts. Take him back to the rogue zone and lock him up,” I ordered.

“Yes Alph-”

I shot him a sharp look.

“Sure thing, boss,” Thomas corrected.

Even though I’d decided to start building a pack, I didn’t want the others to start asking questions about my past. If they heard an old friend of mine refer to me as ‘Alpha’ before I established a pack, they’d have questions.

I released Eros when Thomas tied him up. Before Thomas helped Eros up, I leaned in and whispered to him.

“Eros, one more thing you should know about me, I’m a very patient man and I can wait until you’re ready to give me what I want. Even if it takes the rest of your life,” I threatened.

There was a moment of fear in Eros’s eyes but it passed quickly. He smirked at me.

“Bring it on. You’re all bark and no bite,” he challenged.

I glared at him. Oh, I would have fun getting answers out of him! The more proud they were, the harder they fell.

Thomas and his warriors got Eros and his followers tied up and into the Jeeps they’d brought.

“Ashley, are you alright?” I asked, meeting her gaze.

She sniffled and wiped her nose. “I can’t believe...” Sighing, she hardened her expression. “I’ll be fine!”

I nodded but I wasn’t convinced. Ashley could put a strong face on but I knew she was a lot more sensitive underneath that. For now, I let her portray the hard, strong person. When she was ready to face the heartbreak, Payne and I would be there.

“Payne, why don’t you take a Jeep back with Ashley and Thomas? Mila and I can keep walking. We’re only a few hours from the rogue zone,” I suggested.

“Thank you, Soren,” Payne said. He grabbed Ashley’s arms and pulled her into a standing position. Payne put his arm around his sister’s shoulders and guided her to the Jeep.

“Mila?” I stood up and waved a hand in front of her face. She still looked like she might bolt at any second. “Are you alright?”

“I’m not hurt,” she confirmed.

“Good. We’re going back to the rogue zone,” I said. I held a hand out to her.

She was timid as she took it but willing to let me guide her.

After a few days of settling in, I met with Thomas and he showed me the renovated training facilities.

“I put in new fencing and training dummies. There’s also a weapon’s shed and we have sign-in sheets for those that want to reserve training times for themselves,” Thomas explained, pointing to the different areas of the training fields as he described them.

“This looks good,” I said. I stepped up to one of the fences and watched some of the new recruits sparring.

“They’ve come a long way. I’m putting a heavy emphasis on cooperation and fighting as a team or a unit.”

“Good. Rogues aren’t used to that,” I said, nodding.

“They’ll be an organized, disciplined army soon. Perfect for a pack for your stature,” Thomas reported, smirking.

“Thank you, Thomas. This is really good work.”

“It is my pleasure, Alpha.”

I glared at him but this time, I didn’t correct Thomas. I’d have to get used to being called that if I was serious about starting my own pack.

Glancing at Thomas, we shared a look, the kind that only lifelong friends share.

“I’m sorry I have to rely on you for helping start a pack. If you have other responsibilities...”

“I don’t,” Thomas assured. “And it isn’t a problem. I’m supposed to be helping you with your pack matters, remember?”

“Well, when you put it like that,” I grumbled.

“You know, I’m honestly surprised that you didn’t ask Payne to do this,” Thomas admitted, creasing his brow.

“Hmm. Payne and Ashley are from the same pack as Mila. Her parents’ pack,” I said. “If they decide to rebuild their pack, he will have his own obligations.

Thomas’s eyes widened. “That’s... not what I expected. You think Mila will want to rebuild her pack?”

I shrugged. Talking about Mila with Thomas usually ended in him telling me to let her go. I wasn’t sure I wanted to get into it.

“I have to say, Soren, I’m sorry about what I said about Mila the last time. It was out of line for me to tell you what to do with someone that isn’t your mate, or who is for that matter,” he said.

“Thomas... I think she is...”

“She is what?” Thomas asked, arching an eyebrow.

“My mate. I think Mila is my mate,” I clarified.

Thomas stared at me. His jaw slacked and he started to turn purple.

Chuckling, I slapped him on the back. He coughed and wheezed.

“You can breathe, you know.”

“I just... you said... last time you said she wasn’t,” he sputtered.

“She still had a copious amount of Blackfire poison in her veins and her witch blood wasn’t fully activated. The stronger her witch power got and the more doses of the Blackfire antidote she took, the more I could feel it,” I explained.

“That’s a whole lot of complicated scientific babble that I didn’t understand,” Thomas joked, smirking.

I rolled my eyes. “Basically, I couldn’t feel it before, now I can.”

Thomas smiled and nodded. "I'm happy for you, Soren. Are you going to ask Mila to be your luna?"

I pursed my lips and shrugged. "That depends on if she wants to rebuild her own pack."

"Soren, don't be an i***t," Thomas teased. He grinned, showing me all his teeth.

"Do I need to pull rank on you?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Seriously, any woman would choose to be your luna over rebuilding a pack. Trust me, a pack doesn't look nearly as good naked as you." Thomas broke out laughing.

I groaned and rolled my eyes.

"I'm pretty sure it has more to do with what she wants than who looks best naked," I snarled.

"Well, when you ask her, you should be shirtless. That would probably be the best way to secure a yes from her," he added, laughing.

"Don't you have work to do!?" I snapped, crossing my arms and glaring. "So, shut up and go do it."

"Sure, sure, you're the alpha..."

"Oh, Thomas, speaking of Mila, have you seen her?" I asked as he turned to leave.

Thomas laughed and threw his head back. "You really can't be away from her for more than ten minutes, can you?"

I sighed and shook my head. "That's not what this is about. She has a tendency to run away if she's left alone too long."

"Don't worry, she's at Scarlett's place. Went over this morning," Thomas said laughing lightly.

"Why wouldn't I worry about that!?" I snapped, throwing my arms out to the sides.

Who knew what crap Scarlett was filling Mila's head with.

Thomas shrugged.

"Well, she's not running away and she's not there to meet other guys," he said, smirking.

"Why would she go to Scarlett's?" I asked, more to myself.