

Kings Breeder 761

[Chapter 761](#)

I sat on a fallen log at the edge of town, waiting for the Norwind survivors.

Soren and his men had gathered some supplies. Mostly water and a little food. I knew Soren wanted to have some food for me and the baby, but once we got moving, they'd be hunting for their meals.

"Mila, it's time to get going," Soren said, reaching a hand out to me to help me up.

Sighing, I took his hand and he pulled me up.

"What's wrong?" he asked, brushing his thumb over my knuckles.

"I knew not everyone would come but... I didn't think no one would come," I admitted. I looked down the road toward the village.

Not one Norwind member had shown up. They'd all chosen to remain behind and take their chances with their attackers.

Soren was right, they had their own fates, their own destinies. I couldn't save people that didn't want to be saved. All I could do was remind myself that I'd done everything I could. I'd offered them a way out, it was their prerogative not to take it.

"You did what you could, Mila," Soren said, squeezing my hand.

"And somehow, it doesn't feel like enough..."

"It'll be okay. We have a way out of here and we need to focus on getting ourselves out of Norwind."

I sighed and nodded. "You're right. We've got our own destinies to think about."

Soren nodded to his warriors and they started gathering up our supplies. Mostly, it was camping and survival gear. We didn't want to take any food from Nowind, except what I would need to stay strong and healthy, for the baby, until they could start hunting in the mountains.

"Let's move out," Soren said. He pointed down the road toward the southwestern mountains.

I sighed again and stood closer to Soren. We only made it a few steps when my ears perked up and I heard someone running down the road.

"Miss Mila, wait up!" Enzo's voice called.

I turned around and saw him running after us, breathing heavily and waving us down.

"Enzo!"

"I'm... sorry... sorry we're late," he said. He came to a halt and clutched his side. "We went to get more herbs and healing supplies, in case anyone gets injured along the way."

"We?"

I looked around Enzo and saw more figures approaching.

“Charles... Lilian... Ben...?”

I saw other faces I recognized. It looked like almost all the Norwind survivors.

“Is this... everyone?” I asked.

“Almost. We talked it through. Nearly everyone agreed that you and Mr. Black have done so much for us. We decided to trust your judgment.”

My heart swelled in my chest and I glanced at Soren. He winked at me and I could tell he was proud of me.

“We all understand the risk. If we don’t all make it... well, then that is what it is. It’s better than being trapped here. You know, waiting for some cruel jackass to spare our lives, or kill us off. We’d rather fight for the chance to survive,” Enzo explained.

Charles caught up to us next. He held his hand out and Soren shook it.

“We noticed you left all the food behind. It was a kind gesture, but we can’t be that selfish.”

“There’s no need. We’re warriors and we can hunt,” Soren told him.

“We understand. But we realized if people like you can’t be trusted, who can be? And so, we’ve decided to risk it and have no regrets, no matter the outcome.”

I smiled; my throat tight with happiness. “In that case, let’s get moving!”

“Alright, I want two groups. One in the front to lead and the other in the back to keep anyone from falling behind,” Soren ordered.

His warriors immediately split up and obeyed. We began walking out of the village toward the mountain range.

Enzo and Charles walked with me while Soren made sure everyone was situated and all the supplies were spread around so no one was too weighed down.

“How long is the journey supposed to be?” Charles asked conversationally.

“I think it will take about a week to get to the mountain border. After that, it depends on where we decide to go,” I said.

“Along the way, I’d like to gather some herbs if we find them. Some of our stores are still low,” Enzo said.

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled and let you know if I see anything,” I nodded.

“You know herbs?” Charles asked.

“Some. Not nearly as much as the two of you, but I can pick a few out here and there,” I explained.

“Well, I made sure to get all our supplies on these two herbs that are good for restoring energy,” Enzo said.

“Really? What is so special about those herbs?” I asked.

It seemed odd to focus on the herbs that would restore energy. If Enzo and Charles were worried about healing the sick and injured, energy restoration didn't exactly align with those.

"These herbs are particularly good for pregnant women," Charles interjected. "Travel is rough on everyone, but especially for a pregnant woman. We want to help you be as comfortable as possible."

My heart pattered rapidly and I smiled, looking down at my feet.

"That is very sweet of you."

"Getting those herbs is why we were late. It is really the least we can do to repay you and Soren. You gave me my grandfather back and are helping to save our pack... it is our duty to take care of you and see your child born healthy," Enzo said.

"I appreciate that."

On the first night we stopped, I noticed that the Norwind survivors stayed a little way away from Soren's warriors. It was like there was still a divide between our groups.

I sat by one of the campfires nibbling on one of the energy bars Soren had brought along with us for me. The warriors were out hunting.

"You should be eating more than that," Lilian said, coming over to me.

"I will, once the warriors get back with some fresh meat."

"Come on, I made some soup. It isn't much, but at least it is more than an energy bar."

Lilian smiled and motioned for me to follow her. I walked across the camp to where the Norwind survivors had their own campfire built. There was a pot over the fire bubbling with soup.

My mouth watered and I sat down, eagerly waiting for Lilian to serve me.

She hummed to herself as she ladled soup into a bowl for me. Lilian seemed much kinder to me now. Our first few interactions had been rough but that all seemed to be behind us.

She handed me the bowl and a spoon.

"Thank you, Lilian. I really appreciate it."

"There's plenty more where that came from. If you're still hungry when you finish that, help yourself to some more."

I nodded and took a bite. Immediately, I felt my long unsatiated hunger finally satisfied.

"Also, if you find yourself desperate enough for one of those gross energy bars, come find me. I can whip something up out of almost nothing. And it will always be better for the baby." Lilian winked at me.

After a second bowl of soup, I went back to the campfire on Soren's side of the camp. He was overseeing his warriors as they cut up a deer and started frying up some venison steaks.

"Where were you?" Soren asked when I joined him.

"Lilian offered me some warm soup. Why is there such a divide in the camp?"

Soren shrugged and put his arm around me. "We'll all get used to each other. It might take a little time."

"Next time you go for a hunt, will you ask some of the older boys to go with you?" I asked, looking innocently at Soren.

He arched an eyebrow at me.

"Please? It will be a good way for everyone to get used to each other and the boys need practice hunting if they are going to be able to protect their families someday."

Soren smirked and kissed the top of my head. "You know I can't refuse you."

My suggestion seemed to work. It took a few days, but suddenly, there wasn't a divide in the camp anymore. Soren took some of the older boys hunting and his warriors even began teaching them to fight.

It was like the ice had been broken between everyone.

By the time we made it to the mountains, everyone was completely integrated together. At night when we made camp, there was only one campfire. Soren's warriors and the Norwind survivors didn't separate their tents anymore.

Instead of talking about "us" and "them," the entire group became "we."

It was nice to see that everyone was getting along and getting comfortable with each other. That would come in handy if we had to help the survivors get established in their new homes.

The climb to the top of the mountains was slow and daunting with the kids. When they got tired, some of Soren's warriors shifted and carried them on their backs so we didn't have to slow down.

"We don't have that much further," Payne told me. "I recognize this terrain."

"Good. If we have one more day of this, I'm worried some of the younger kids will give up."

"We'll get there," Payne assured.

"I can see the top of the mountain!" Enzo shouted from up ahead.

A huge sigh of relief went through everyone. They picked up the pace and hurried to the top of the mountain.

I trailed a little behind, trying not to get jostled by the excited group as they rushed ahead.

When I caught up, I noticed them all standing there, staring and frozen in place.

"What's wrong...?" I asked softly, joining Soren and Payne.

I looked over the other side of the mountain and realized what was going on. There was no "other side" of the mountain, no path down to the packland below.

We were all standing at the edge of a massive abyss that sank deep down into the mountains, a dark, black hole that could swallow us all.

I looked to the left and the right, seeing that the chasm spread on for miles in either direction. It would take days to walk around, if we even could! There was no way to tell how far it stretched.

The abyss stretched at least one hundred feet across, or even further.

It was a sheer drop down into the darkness.

On the other side, I could see mountains that sloped down in the opposite direction but there was no way to get there.

That was where we needed to be!

“That mountain over there, it belongs to Pomeni packland,” Payne said, pointing to one of the ridges.

“We’re so close! How can we be stuck here, right on the edge?” Lilian wailed.

“There has to be a way to the other side,” Charles said.

“Do you know of a way, Payne?” Soren asked.

I could feel the panic and tensions rising. Sure, they trusted us while the journey was going smoothly, but now it felt like they were second guessing.

“This can’t be another broken dream!”

“This is what we get for being hopeful!”

“How could we leave our home?”

I tuned out what everyone was saying and stared over the abyss. We’d come this far and I wasn’t going to back down now. We didn’t just have the gear we’d brought with us to rely on.

“Stand back, everyone. Let me give it a try,” I said, holding my arms out.

[Chapter 762](#)

I thought of the spell I’d used to trap Alpha Chandler. Roots were strong, like a bridge. I whispered the spell to myself.

The ground trembled.

The Norwind survivors started to panic, crying out in fear and backing away from the cliff.

I held my arms out, willing roots to grow.

They shot out of the ground under my feet and spread across the giant crevasse. When they connected with the other side, the roots buried themselves in the ground and stuck firmly.

The rumbling stopped and I panted. Leaning forward, I clutched my sides. My hands and legs trembled.

Charles had warned me not to use magic but I wasn’t going to let the Norwind survivors down!

“Oh my...” Lilian gasped, stepping up to the cliff.

“Mila, did you do that?” Enzo asked.

I nodded, righting myself when I caught my breath. "It isn't as strong as a bridge, but if one person can get across, we've got plenty of rope to make a bridge with, along with the roots."

"You want one of us to risk climbing over those roots? How do you know they will hold?" someone asked.

I shrugged and looked at Soren.

"They're strong enough," I assured.

"I'll go," Payne offered. He smiled at me and nodded. "I trust Mila and if she thinks the roots will hold, then I believe her."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

Payne nodded. "Get me some rope. I'll carry it across and make the bridge."

Soren handed Payne several bundles of rope, coiled tightly. "Take it slow."

"I've got this," Payne assured.

I lopped the rope coils around his shoulders and headed off across the root bridge.

The roots bounced slightly under his weight, wiggling back and forth. I grabbed Soren's hand, squeezing. I hadn't tested the strength of the roots before, especially over such a long distance. There was a chance that Payne wouldn't make it...

"Mila."

I glanced at Soren. His brow was creased and he gave me an odd look.

"What is it?" I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

I thought Soren would have his eyes on Payne, but he looked at me with concern.

"Your hair..."

"What about it?"

I grabbed my hair in my hands and turned my head to see the strands as best as I could.

Gasping, I let the silky, blond strands slip through my fingers. Blond hair? For as long as I could remember, my hair had been reddish brown in color. And now... blond?

Thinking back, I remembered the dream vision April had shown me. At the time, I hadn't thought much of it, but I'd been a blond haired child until after my pack was destroyed. One of my mother's last actions was to disguise my appearance so no one would know who I was.

But my hair was changing color now. Back to its original blond.

"The spell my mother cast... it is wearing off," I whispered.

Soren nodded somberly. I knew he'd understand what I was referring to, since he'd been there with me in the dream.

“What could be doing this?”

“Perhaps it is your witch power awakening,” Soren suggested. “You’ve been using magic a lot lately.”

He frowned slightly and it didn’t take much to know what he was thinking. He was thinking about Charlse’s warning with magic and my pregnancy.

I was glad he didn’t say anything in front of everyone else. Soren knew as well as me that this was our only viable option for getting everyone across the ravine.

“I’ve got the rope bridge ready to go!” Payne shouted across, cupping his hands over his mouth so his voice carried farther.

“I’ll get it and bring it back,” Thomas offered.

Before anyone could say anything else, Thomas scurried across and grabbed the rope bridge. He came back, securing it to a tree on our side while Payne tied it to a tree on his side.

The bridge was fairly simple, but it was sturdy.

“Single file across the bridge,” Soren instructed. “Children should go first. And everyone needs to carry something.”

The Norwind survivors didn’t argue or protest. They immediately complied with Soren’s orders.

I waited at the back with Soren and Thomas. Soren made sure that everyone stayed spaced out as they crossed. He didn’t want too many people on the bridge at once and he didn’t want them putting too much weight in one area.

It was slow work to get everyone across, but finally, I got on the bridge, then Soren, and then Thomas.

Soren stood on the opposite side of the ravine, looking at the roots and the bridge we’d just crossed.

Everyone else was taking a quick water break.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Soren, going to his side.

“We can’t leave these here for someone to follow us across. If our attackers track us this way, it will be too easy for them to come after us.”

“You’re right. We need to get rid of it. It will take anyone else months to build a bridge across without magic.”

“Payne, Thomas, can the two of you go back on the bridge and chop down the roots? I don’t want any sign that they were here,” Soren said, snapping at them.

Payne and Thomas went across the bridge, hacking and chopping at the roots until they were all gone. They did a good job of clearing the roots but we still had the rope bridge to deal with.

“We’ll cut the rope down on this side. Payne, can you cut the rope off the other side of the ravine with an arrow?” Soren asked.

“I can. But then there will be an arrow in the tree,” Payne pointed out.

“That’s fine. An arrow won’t be out of place given the battlefield all over Norwind.”

Payne pulled out a bow and arrow and made the shot. Thomas cut the rope bridge down from our side of the ravine and the rope fell into the dark, bottomless pit below.

Immediately, relief swept over me. We were really safe! We got out of Norwind, and everyone that came with us was safe and unharmed. We’d also covered our tracks. It would be a long time before anyone came this way to look for us.

“Let’s move down the mountain enough to be out of sight of the ravine, then we can make camp for the night,” Soren said, shouldering his pack.

I picked up my own bag but Soren took it from me.

“I can carry my bag.”

“You exerted yourself a lot with magic. I’d prefer it if you recovered your strength.”

I sighed and smiled. I wasn’t going to argue with Soren’s sweet gesture.

We didn’t have to go far to be out of sight of the ravine. There were lots of rocks and trees to help shield us.

As everyone else set up tents and the rest of the camp, Soren made me sit still and eat to help recover my strength.

Even though everyone was working hard, I could see their exhaustion. They’d been living in fear for so long, and for the first time, they felt free and safe. They could finally let go of that fear!

“Mila, you saved us,” Lilian gushed. She hugged me.

“It was a group effort.”

“No, we wouldn’t have gotten here without you.” She smiled and walked off to collect firewood.

“Thank you for offering us the chance to get out,” Enzo said, approaching me.

“Thank you for taking it.” I smiled at him.

Enzo grinned and took a seat beside me. “You know, you should be careful with your magic, like Charles said.”

“I am being careful. It was necessary for our escape. I doubt I’ll have to use more magic now.”

Enzo creased his brow. “I hope so. We should be in the clear now.”

I appreciated all the praise but I was also feeling exhausted from traveling and the feeling of relief now that we were safe from the attackers.

“Mila, I’ve got a tent set up for us,” Soren said.

“I’m ready to rest,” I agreed. I stood up and stretched.

"If you'd like, Mila, I can make some tea with those herbs that are good for pregnancy," Enzo suggested, standing up with me.

I noticed the way Soren narrowed his eyes at Enzo. he couldn't be jealous, could he?

"I'll take care of her."

He scooped me into his arms and carried me to the tent. I giggled and shook my head.

"You know that Charles and Enzo are skilled healers," I reminded him.

Soren scoffed. "So was Eros."

"They've proven themselves to be trustworthy."

"Honestly, Mila, I want to keep an eye on you for a bit, no intrusions and no distractions."

I shrugged and rested my head against his shoulder. Truthfully, I wanted to rest. If it made Soren happy to have me all to himself while I slept, I wasn't going to argue.

Soren carried me to our tent and placed me on the cot. He pulled the blankets around me.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Comfortable."

I smiled and yawned.

"Soren?" I heard Charles's voice from outside the tent.

Soren growled and rolled his eyes. "I'll be right back."

He headed out to talk to Charles and I could hear them through the tent flap. Their shadows moved on the wall of the tent and I could see their movements and gestures.

"Is Miss Mila feeling alright?" Charles asked.

"She needs her rest," Soren replied.

"Does she need anything? I can make her tea to recover her energy. We brought some good pregnancy herbs."

"Bring me the tea and I will make sure she gets it. Otherwise, your focus should be on the Norwind survivors. They'll need your support now."

Charles walked off and Soren came back inside. I could tell he wasn't happy and I wasn't sure why.

"What's wrong?" I asked, patting the cot beside me.

Soren came over and sat down, a surly look in his eyes.

"I'm worried about you, Mila, and the baby. You're... with all the magic use and changes to your body... you really need to be more careful now that you're pregnant."

He frowned as he looked at me.

“I’m keeping an eye on my limits, Soren, I promise.”

“How do you know what your limits are? You shouldn’t be doing magic at all if there is the slightest risk.”

“I’m not going to do anything to risk the baby. Trust me.” I batted my eyelashes at Soren and took his hand.

He sniffed and shook his head.

“You worry too much. I love you for that but We’ll be okay. I’ll be the first one to call myself out, okay?”

“Don’t try to sweet talk me. I’m not going to stop worrying about the two of you.”

Soren put his hand on my stomach over the covers.

“I’ll accept your worrying. I think it means you’ll make a great father.”

Soren smirked. He sighed and bowed his head.

“You know that Charles and Enzo only want to help me. I bet the tea Charles makes will keep my strength up.”

“I’m sure it will...” Soren took my hand and kissed the back of it. “Right now, I don’t want any other men around you. You’ve been spending so much time with them.”

Shifting, I propped myself up on my elbows.

“I’m sorry, Soren...”

He ran his thumb along my knuckles and kissed the back of my hand again.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It’s just... the more I’m with you, the more I want to keep you all to myself. Maybe that makes me a selfish man, but if it means I get you all to myself, I’ll be selfish.”

He smirked and leaned closer, resting his forehead on mine. He released my hand and covered my stomach.

My heart melted a little and I cupped the back of his head with my hands.

“You can have me all to yourself, for a little while,” I assured.

Soren growled. “It better be more than that.”

I giggled and nuzzled my nose against his.

Soren’s hand rubbed my stomach slightly and suddenly, I felt a tug in my stomach. Creasing my brow, I gasped.

“Soren...”

“Did you feel that?” he asked.

I nodded vigorously. “You felt it too?”

“Yeah... was that the baby?”

“I think so... what else would it be?”

“But that’s not... I mean... is that possible.”

I shrugged. “I am a witch and a shifter. Maybe... things are different.”

“Wow. That was our baby...”

I smiled and hugged Soren’s neck. He leaned down and kissed me warmly on the lips.

My eyelids grew heavy and I fell asleep, clinging to Soren.

Yawning, I opened my eyes. Soren was next to me. He was awake, sitting up.

“What time is it?” I groaned.

“Not time to get up yet. You can keep resting.”

“I... I have to get up...”

I tried to open my eyes fully but I was still so tired. My body felt heavy and I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

“I can’t... make everyone else late...”

“You won’t cause any delay,” Soren chuckled.

After he spoke, I felt like I was floating. I forced one of my eyes open and saw Soren above me. His arms wrapped around me. I could tell he was walking by the way he moved.

Was he carrying me?

I was so tired I hadn’t even noticed him picking me up and moving again.

As we moved along, I started to wake up a little more. Soren came to a stop and set me on my feet. I leaned against him.

“Why are we stopping?” I asked.

“Look.” he nodded past the mountain.

All of the Norwind survivors had stopped too. They stared over the mountains and gasps floated through the crowd. From there, we could see all of Pomeni packlands.

There were no buildings but the hills were covered in lush, green grass. Patches of vibrant wildflowers poked out through the grass, giving the entire packland a colorful, innocent look.

Beyond the fields, the forest looked healthier and stronger than the last time we were there. It was so bushy with green leaves and the breeze made them rustle together.

A river wound its way around the edge of the territory, glittering in the afternoon sunlight. There was a waterfall over a hill and then the river headed straight out to the horizon.

All the farmland was clear and ready to be used again. It was dusty, the soil red, but with how healthy the fields and river were, I knew that the farmlands could be restored easily.

The packland was an untouched paradise, waiting for someone to call it home.

“Welcome, everyone, to Pomeni,” Payne said, waving his arm over the lovely panoramic view.

[Chapter 763](#)

Soren

I walked through the streets of Pomeni pack and unlike the last time we were here, when everything was crumbled and in ruins, the packland had really turned around.

We’d only been there for a couple of weeks, but already, it had completely transformed.

The land was lush and vibrant and that gave the Norwind survivors hope. I could see it in their faces, how happy and excited they were to have a new home. One that wasn’t completely destroyed by war and floods.

Pomeni had been in rough shape the last time we were here but with just a few weeks of TLC, it was well on the mend, and so were the Norwind survivors.

I stood in the doorway of my temporary home. With the large group we had, it only took a few days to get some temporary houses constructed. That way, they could focus on restoring the land before building permanent homes.

From my doorway, I could see the streets of the packland where the other Norwind survivors moved about in the streets.

They’d cleared away the knee-high weeds and cut the fields of grass so they were less wild. We’d repaired the roads and pulled up any plants growing through the cracks in the sidewalks.

They weren’t perfect and there were still cracks in the street and sidewalks but it was a major improvement to what it had been like when we arrived.

People walked through the streets easily now, smiling and greeting each other. They’d settled in well.

There were some foundations being laid for more permanent houses but they were still in progress and weren’t ready to live in yet. We did have enough temporary housing for everyone to have shelter from the bad weather.

I left my house and walked through the streets, listening to snippets of conversation.

“I can’t wait to start a garden. There is so much space here and we can really make it our own.”

“The kids want to set up a swimming area in the river. We’ll have to find a shallow spot where the current isn’t too strong.”

“Miss Mila wants us all in the town square this afternoon...”

I noticed that none of them talked about life in Norwind. Wherever I caught conversations, they talked about what they wanted to do with the Pomeni territory and the future.

I didn’t blame them for wanting to leave their old life behind.

It must have been a nightmare to look back on what Chandler had done, how their own pack members had betrayed them, twice, and how they were left to starve or be picked off.

They weren't horrible memories for me but even I didn't like to think back on it.

There was so much ahead of them to look forward to, why would they want to hold onto the past?

Ben ran up to me, a big smile on his face, eyes wide.

"Mr. Soren, let's go! The ritual is about to start. We can't be late."

He kept running, waving his hand to beckon me along.

I picked up my pace and followed Ben toward the center of town. The street we were on ended in a roundabout with a large grassy field in the middle. In the center of the field was a beautiful marble fountain with a statue at the center.

The fountain didn't run anymore but the carving of the statue in the center was absolutely stunning.

It was a pair of wolves dancing with each other in such a graceful, playful, intimate way. The detail of the wolves was exquisite.

All of Norwind was gathered on the lawn around the fountain.

I stood at the back of the crowd with Thomas and Payne, but I was tall enough to see over their heads.

Mila stepped out onto the lawn and my heart skipped a beat.

She was barefoot, wearing nothing but a white, flowing gown that fluttered around her as she walked toward the fountain.

Her hair was unbound, hanging loosely around her face and shoulders, rippling in the breeze. It was almost completely blond now with just a few strands of red remaining.

It seemed that her witch power had been growing by the day, and the color of her hair was the most obvious indicator.

Her face was solemn and in her hands, she carried a clear vase filled with water. I knew it was pure water from the river, clean and tied to the packland.

Mila's blond hair cascaded down her back. The dress was the purest white I'd ever seen. She looked innocent and holy.

Around me, I sensed everyone holding their breath. I realized that I was holding mine too.

That was my mate! She was the most beautiful, radiant, holy creature I'd ever seen.

My wolf grumbled, pleased at seeing her this way.

In the past, I'd always seen Mila as a red rose; pretty, bright, and full of thorns, preventing anyone from getting close to her.

Now, she looked like a soft, blooming lotus; unique, enthralling, and too beautiful to describe, welcoming and warm.

Enzo stood beside Mila. He handed her a knife.

Quickly, she sliced her palm, wincing and sucking in a sharp breath. She held her hand over the vase, squeezing a few drops of blood into the water.

Mila had told me about the ritual already. None of what she did surprised me and I knew the importance of what she was doing.

Chanting in a low voice, words I didn't understand, Mila walked in a circle around the fountain, pouring water from the vase onto the ground.

When she completed a full circle, I felt the air around me get lighter and all the pack members sighed, like a weight had been lifted. The sun felt warmer and all the colors of the packland seemed a few shades brighter.

It felt like the whole land was waking up from a long, winter sleep.

Lilian gasped. "May the Goddess bless our new home. May the Goddess bless Miss Mila!"

The crowd erupted in applause and carried on Lilian's chant. Many of them even bowed to Mila.

"May the Goddess bless you," they murmured to her.

Mila nodded and smiled softly. I could tell she wasn't sure what to say with all the praise and well wishes.

Ben took the empty vase from her.

"What did you do?" he asked, tilting his head as he stared into the empty vase.

"I helped the land create a protective border and asked the Moon Goddess to bless it."

"How?" the inquisitive boy shifted his gaze to Mila.

"On the outer edge of the territory, I instructed the forest to grow a wall of vines and thorns. It will create a maze for all those who enter the packland, hiding this land from enemies or those that would cause harm," she explained.

"But what if a friend comes to visit?" Ben asked.

Mila smiled and patted his head. "Then the path will open up to them. Friends are always welcome."

"Really!?" the boy gushed.

Mila laughed. "Yes, really. Just wait until this evening. You'll see."

We'd planned a celebration dinner in the field with the fountain to follow Mila's ritual. She hadn't had a moment when she wasn't surrounded by Norwind pack members, all praising her and gushing over her.

I could tell she was getting a bit worn out but I left her alone as she talked to everyone.

This was her big night and I didn't want to bother her. Instead, I settled for watching her.

My chest swelled with pride whenever I glanced her way. She never stopped surprising me. I could have watched her all night and felt nothing but joy and happiness for her.

“Amazing how quickly people can rebound from their misery, isn’t it?”

Thomas appeared from behind me and he handed me a stiff beer.

I raised the glass to Thomas and nodded in agreement before taking a sip.

“Not only the people but the land, too,” I said.

“Ahh, yes. Returning the Alpha blood to the land. The land recognized Mila as its rightful owner and woke up. I never understand that...” Thomas chuckled and shook his head.

“You make it sound like the land is an entity of its own. It isn’t like that. But the land has been protected by her blood.”

“Because of Mila’s mother?”

I took a sip of my beer. “Maybe her mother, perhaps Helen. It could have been both, which is what I think.”

“No wonder this place feels so powerful. With that kind of witch bloodline watching over it... speaking of, your little witch mate is really something.”

Thomas smirked at me and gulped his own beer.

I growled under my breath. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Yes, it is very much a compliment. Jeez, you’re a protective alpha, aren’t you?”

Thomas chuckled and shook his head.

I narrowed my eyes. “Is there a problem with that?”

Thomas shook his head again. “Nope. My advice is to cherish these times. Tonight, you can feel like a big tough man.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Just tonight?”

Thomas shrugged. “Well, your mate is getting pretty powerful. She’s getting stronger every day. Pretty soon, she won’t need your protection anymore. So, enjoy it while you can. And when the time comes, you can vent to me...”

He chuckled and gulped down his beer.

I smirked and glanced sideways at Thomas. “Well, I’ll just protect our baby, then.”

Thomas paused, beer at his lips. He nearly choked, coughing and pounding his chest. “What!?”

Casually, I shrugged and took a sip of my drink.

Thomas stared at me, wide eyed and confused. “I... you... Oh, man! CONGRATULATIONS! Cheers.”

He clinked his glass to mine and took a long swig.

I grinned and clapped Thomas on the shoulder. "Thank you. By the way, what is this drink? It tastes pretty good. I've never had it before."

"Enzo and Ben dug this out from the basement of one of the old houses. It is a nice rice wine, the kind that tastes better the longer it sits."

"Ahh... like me?"

Thomas had just taken another sip. He spit his drink out and quickly wiped his mouth.

"Since when did you become so cocky?"

"Is it still being cocky if it is true?" I challenged, smirking.

Thomas rolled his eyes and finished off his drink.

I glanced around at the rest of the party. It was a gorgeous night with stars in the sky and night blooming flowers growing in the field. The perfect night for a gathering like this.

Fireflies lit up around the old houses and some of the kids tried to catch them. It was a good way to practice hunting skills, even if they saw it as a game.

I found Mila in the crowd. She still wore a big smile and was surrounded by people that absolutely adored her.

A murmur went through the crowd, then excited cries rose up.

"They're here!" Someone shouted. "Look, they're here!"

Immediately, the field buzzed with excited anticipation.

[Chapter 764](#)

Mila

I watched as all of the Norwind survivors ran toward the newcomers. A large group of people were coming in through the magical maze I'd made.

Payne was coming back with several of Soren's warriors. The Norwind survivors knew him and recognized him, of course, they'd be excited.

Smiling, I followed along as they ran over to greet Payne and the other warriors.

Whenever they came by, they'd bring more food and supplies to help keep the new packland thriving.

Soren spared no expense in helping the pack survivors get settled.

Ben ran along beside me.

"Wow, Miss Mila, you're right! The forest did let our friends through. That's so... magical!"

I chuckled and patted his head. "Well, it is a spell I cast, so you're right, it is magical."

Ben giggled and went off to help some of the warriors with their supplies. He always wanted to be part of whatever was happening.

I looked at Payne and nodded. "Welcome back, Payne."

He bowed to me. His lips were unusually tight, jaw tense. He had purple bags under his eyes and he sighed heavily. I got the feeling that his spirits were very low. He was a little off.

I was surprised by this. Payne was usually so composed and emotionally steady. I'd rarely ever seen him show his emotions openly. Whatever was bothering him had to be serious enough to throw him off balance.

For the moment, I didn't address it.

I made sure all the warriors and Norwind members were helping unload the supplies and put food away.

Soren and Thomas joined me with Payne. Soren shook Payne's hand. "Welcome back, Payne. "I thought Ashley was coming back with you."

"Oh, that's right, I wanted to talk to her," I muttered.

Payne bowed his head. "She did come with me... but she said she's tired and wanted to rest."

I glanced around at the clearing. The party was still in full swing. There were people laughing, dancing, and drinking. Ashley loved parties and celebrations.

She was totally a social butterfly.

It wasn't like her to "need rest" in the middle of an event like this.

I wondered if something was wrong.

Why would she be hiding herself?

"Payne, is she okay?" I arched an eyebrow at him.

He nodded firmly. His reaction was too quick and fast. Suddenly, he sighed and his shoulders slouched. He shook his head.

"It's because of Eros, isn't it?"

We'd all suspected that Ashley was the one to release Eros. She probably didn't think he'd come after us and steal the artifact and cause trouble.

"Ashley learned about everything that happened in the Norwind territory. Specifically, everything Eros did. Ever since then, she's locked herself in her room," he explained.

"She should know that what Eros did isn't her fault!"

Payne sniffed and shook his head. "Mila, she admitted that she was the one who let Eros out. If she hadn't given in and released him..."

"Eros is her mate. The pull between them is strong, I'm sure she just wants to believe he has good in him," I argued, crossing my arms.

"Perhaps, but if she had not released him, he wouldn't have taken the artifact. He was obviously there as an agent of the king and he could have been the one to blow up the mountain, nearly killing you."

“We don’t have proof that he blew up the mountain.” I shook my head.

Payne sighed. “Regardless, she knows of his treacheries and she blames herself... as she should.” His tone hardened and his eyes narrowed.

“That’s all in the past now. We’re all right and that is what matters. We should talk to her and help her understand that.”

Soren grabbed my arm. “Mila, there are some things that only time can heal.”

“But if she knows we don’t blame her, maybe she won’t blame herself anymore.”

He shook his head. “If Eros really is her mate... she’ll need time to get over his betrayal and come to terms with who he is. It can’t be fixed overnight. We need to be patient with her.”

“I agree. She’ll come around but we need to give her time. I’ll check on her later, don’t worry.” Payne nodded.

“Alright, alright,” I agreed.

Payne and Thomas headed off to help square away the supplies.

I looked at Soren and frowned.

“I’d really like to help Ashley.”

“And you will. When she’s ready.” he reached out and ran his thumb along my lower lip. “Come for a walk with me on this lovely evening?”

I bit my lip and nodded. “Okay.”

Soren took my hand and led me away from the clearing and the celebration.

I recognized the road we were on. It took us to the cabin that my parents kept as a small vacation retreat when I was a child.

I’d fixed the cabin up and refurnished it with simple furnishings. It was a nice place to visit but it wasn’t close enough to the central village area. I had to be around the Norwind survivors a lot and being in a remote cabin was inconvenient.

“You know, even after coming here with you and learning what happened, I never imagined reviving this pack and the packland,” I said, tucking myself closer to Soren.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a side hug.

“You’ve accomplished so much, Mila, and in a very short time. Your parents would be proud of you.”

I paused and creased my brow, tilting my head to meet his gaze.

“Would they be?”

Soren arched an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I used to think that I was abandoned by my birth parents, which made me resentful when I was young.”

"I remember you telling me that before," Soren nodded.

"But then I learned about what happened to the pack in that dream. I started to think they were the victims of someone else's greed or some conspiracy..."

"Where are you going with this Mila?"

"If what Sebastian said was true, then they could have been responsible for the destruction of our pack because of what they did to him..."

"I wouldn't put much stock in what Sebastian said. We don't know for sure what happened back then or why they moved against the king. It was a hurtful accusation from a desperate man."

Soren squeezed me against him again.

I smiled lightly. "I know. It's not like I trust him or believe him entirely. I'm sure my parents had good reasons to do what they did... if they are, in fact, the ones that performed the soul exchange."

"Then why are you so worried?"

"I was just thinking that everything in my life always seems to take a strange turn... something I don't expect."

Soren threw his head back and laughed. He pulled away from me and went to the couch in the cabin.

"I hate to break it to you, Mila, but that isn't just your life. It happens to everyone."

I scoffed and shook my head at Soren. He was teasing me over something very serious! I thought about what he said and the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right.

Sighing, I giggled slightly and put my hands on my hips.

"Okay, you're right. And here we are now... instead of avenging my parents, I brought people from one of their enemy packs to their land. If they were still alive, I imagine they'd scold the hell out of me."

I laughed somberly and sighed again.

"How I wish they could be here today to do that."

Soren looked at me with deep, affectionate eyes. "Mila, I'm not your parents and I can't speak for them. However, there is one thing I know..."

He held his arm out to me. I walked across the living room and sat on the couch beside him. Soren grabbed my hips and pulled me closer.

I grinned and put my hands on his shoulders.

"What is that?"

"Any decision we make in life will only impact those who are living. Not those who have passed away."

Soren's words relaxed me.

When I thought about it, it did feel strange that I'd brought people from an enemy pack to my parents' land. Had I made the right choice?

Seeing how happy they were, Enzo and Ben, always smiling and lighthearted, I knew these people weren't my parents' enemies.

Yes, I'd done the right thing.

I let out a long, slow breath and pressed my forehead to Soren's chest. I squeezed my hands around his strong shoulders.

"Thank you..."

Soren leaned down, his cheek pressing against mine. I could smell the faint scent of alcohol on his breath.

And why wouldn't I? We were at a party. I was pregnant, so I wasn't drinking, but that didn't mean Soren had to stop.

Soren rubbed my back soothingly.

Sitting with him, moonlight streaming into the cabin windows, it felt like the perfect night. The lights in the cabin were low and gentle but I could see the lights from the town through the window and it reminded me how happy everyone was at the party.

The cabin, the packland, the entire world seemed like it was made for just Soren and me.

I felt Soren's warm breath on my neck and he chuckled.

"Umm... maybe you're right. Maybe your parents should be scolding you..."

He kissed my cheek and a shudder ran through me.

"Huh..."

Soren kissed my neck. He pulled back so I could see his face. He smirked at me, his eyes lit up with desire.

His voice became smooth as butter, sensual and alluring. Soren grabbed my chin and forced me to look at him.

"They should be scolding you for bringing a man to this cabin in the middle of the night, knowing that he has been craving you and wanting to... devour you... among other things."

His eyes sparked again.

A shiver ran down my spine. I looped my arms around Soren's neck and put myself in his lap, straddling him. He curled his hands around my hips. I pressed my lips to his ears.

"Well, they can be mad at me all they want. But there's nothing they can do about it because I am crazy about this man..."

I kissed Soren on the lips. He growled, tightening his arms around me. Soren rose up on his knees and lay me on the couch, his fingers quickly, and roughly, removing my dress.

I pulled his shirt off and pushed at his pants.

Soren nipped at my neck and eagerly helped me get him out of his clothes. He grabbed my wrists and held them above my head. Spurred on my lust, and maybe the alcohol too.

He kissed and nipped at my neck like he really would devour me whole!

Soren kissed down my chest. He moved his mouth to my right n****e, rolling his tongue over my puckered flesh. He pinched my other n****e lightly, tugging at it. My n****s tightened into little buds.

His tongue pushed my n****e around. I arched my back, moaning as my core tightened.

Soren moved his mouth to my other breast, licking and sucking. His hand moved down my stomach, brushing my naval and over my mound. His fingers slipped between my legs, effortlessly gliding over my creamy folds.

I shuddered and clenched my thighs.

Soren kissed and nipped at my neck, his fingers caressing and pushing deeper. My swollen clit ached and I writhed on the couch. Soren's fingers brushed my clit and I quivered, panting.

He smirked against my neck and rubbed my throbbing nub in slow, deliberate circles. My legs trembled and I knotted my hands in his hair, tugged at the roots.

"S-Soren..." I panted, pressure building in my core.

He grunted and kept circling his finger around my clit.

I arched my back, the pressure inside growing until...

Gasping and panting, my body undulated with the intense spasms of pleasure that ran through me. I clenched my legs around Soren's hand, desperate to prolong the feeling of my orgasm.

Soren chuckled lightly and moved his hand down my thigh, gently coaxing my legs apart.

I felt slick precum on my thigh from his swollen, firm c**k.

Suddenly, Soren paused.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. His brow was creased, a glazed over look in his eyes.

Sighing, Soren pulled away and dressed quickly.

"What's wrong?"

"Thomas needs me. He thinks there was a perimeter breach. It is a matter of security."

"Okay, go..." I tossed my hand to the door with a sigh.

Soren smirked. He leaned down and kissed me.

"If you wait here, I'll come back and we can pick up where we left off," he purred.

My stomach fluttered and I nodded.

After Soren left, I put my dress back on. I wasn't sure how long he'd be gone.

Suddenly I heard footfalls from outside, heavy wolf footfalls. My spine stiffened and I was on full alert.

I ran to the window and looked out. There were two wolves running through the fields. It looked like one was chasing the other. I recognized... Ashley! Ashley was the wolf chasing the other.

Without thinking, I ran to the cabin door and yanked it open. I wanted to shift and run after Ashley.

Something fell out of the door. For a moment, I forgot what I was doing, seeing a white envelope addressed to me. Someone had stuck it in the door.

I grabbed the letter and put it in my pocket. I could read it later. Right now, I wanted to help Ashley.

[Chapter 765](#)

I kept to the shadows and ran after Ashley. It was easy enough to track them. They left a wide trail.

When I caught up to them, they were in a clearing in the forest, the two wolves facing off.

I took cover in some underbrush and stayed out of sight. It was weird to see the two of them just staring at each other. If Ashley really thought the other wolf was a threat, she would have destroyed him.

It took a moment, but the moonlight was bright enough that I could recognize the other wolf.

Eros.

Ashley growled and launched herself across the clearing, straight at Eros. Her teeth bared; claws outstretched.

Eros didn't defend himself. Instead, he shifted back to human form, far more vulnerable and defenseless.

Ashley stopped dead. She licked her lips and growled, flicking her tail back and forth. Her ears were plastered back on her head. She was pissed!

Eros stood still, a calm look on his face.

"Ashley, are you really going to kill me?"

Ashley's wolf opened her mouth and hissed, showing off her sharp teeth. Part of me hoped Eros would provoke her because she was seconds away from shredding him to ribbons.

"If that is what you really want, Ashley, then do it. I won't even defend myself."

I covered my mouth and gasped. Eros was beyond manipulative!

If he begged Ashley or made up excuses, Ashley would get angry enough to attack him. Instead, Eros just stood there and accepted her anger and whatever she wanted to do to him.

I knew Ashley well enough to know that it would probably cause her to stop raging and let Eros go. He knew her well enough to know that, too.

Ashley's wolf let out a frustrated snarl and shook her head.

"Believe me, Ashley, I'm not here to hurt you... I-"

Ashley shifted back and threw her arms up in the air. "Shut up! Stop lying! Since the very beginning, all you've done is lie. All you wanted was those artifacts! I was stupid enough to believe you then and I won't make that mistake again."

Her nostrils flared as she ranted.

I nodded to her, silently praising her for standing up for herself and putting Eros in his place. It was time someone called him out.

"I... I'm sorry, Ashley." Eros's voice was soft and gentle now.

Ashley paused her tirade.

I winced, hoping his apology and the change in his demeanor weren't enough to dissuade her anger.

"Sorry?" she scoffed in a hard tone. "If you're sorry then you'll never stand before me again! How dare you even come here? What are you plotting this time? You want to lead your f*****g master here and wipe out all these people? Just like you did in Norwind!?"

I smiled to myself, glad that Ashley was standing her ground. She was smart and I could see that enough was enough. She wasn't going to be jerked around by Eros anymore.

My chest swelled with pride. This was the best way for Ashley to move on, face him with the truth.

"Listen to me," Eros said in that same gentle tone. "Whatever I did... I never wanted to hurt you! You're my mate and I would never-"

"Stop calling me that!" Ashley screamed. Her voice echoed through the trees.

I cringed and sank deeper into my hiding place.

"I'm not your mate! You listen to me, now. I, Ashley Chambers, reject you, Eros Lee, as my mate. I will never see you again and you better not come near me ever f*****g again!"

I gasped again, still keeping my hands over my mouth.

A shiver went through Ashley and she sagged a little, like the entire weight of the world was on her shoulders. Rejecting a mate was painful.

I saw a tremor go through her but she held her ground.

Eros on the other hand... his face was completely pale. He looked like he'd just been b****h slapped or stabbed in the back. He stood there completely frozen and dazed, like he could collapse into a broken, shattered heap of a million pieces if the wind blew too hard.

Ashley might feel some pain as the rejector but Eros was the one being rejected, it would be a lot worse for him.

Privately, I felt like he deserved it.

Ashely put her hands on her hips. I couldn't see her face but if I had to guess, I bet she was glaring at Eros.

"Now, get the hell out of here! I don't ever want to see you again. And if you dare mention a word about this place to anyone... I swear I will hunt you down to the ends of the earth! There will be nowhere to hide, no escape. I will destroy you!"

Ashley threw her arm out to the side. She was so strong and firm right now and I couldn't help but be impressed.

Eros stood perfectly still. I wasn't sure how much of Ashely's words he'd hear after the rejection. He didn't refuse to accept her rejection, though.

I wondered if part of him wanted it so he could run off and do his own thing without feeling the pull of the matebond. If that was the case, why didn't he just do it himself?

He kept staring at Ashley, looking completely broken and lost. It was like he didn't understand what had happened or he was hoping he'd heard Ashley wrong.

Eros didn't beg or plead. He didn't verbally accept the rejection, but he slowly turned away from Ashley. He dragged himself out of the clearing like his feet were bricked in cement. He looked like he was limping as he shuffled along.

I was about to go to Ashley but she collapsed on the ground, sobbing and beating the ground with her fists.

I stayed where I was. My heart broke for her but I knew it would be better if she could get all her anger and sadness out. She needed to vent.

She kept sobbing, hugging herself and rocking back and forth. I wasn't sure if she was crying because of the pain of losing the matebond or because she was heartbroken at Eros turning away.

Slowly, Ashley's sobs turned to sniffles. She wiped her face and stood up, brushing her clothes off. Sniffing one last time, Ashley straightened her hair and headed back to town.

Even after everything he'd done, she couldn't bring herself to kill him. She hadn't warned Payne, Soren, or Thomas that Eros was here, she'd chased him on her own. Ashley had every chance to end Eros, and she didn't.

I sighed and bowed my head. She must have really loved him. Otherwise, the betrayal wouldn't have hurt so much.

Once Ashley was gone, I stood up. Something crinkled in my pocket.

The letter!

I ripped the envelope open and took the letter out. In the bright moonlight, I could read it perfectly.

"I know you're alive. Right now, I have your Aunt Helen.

If you ever want to see Helen alive again, come to the royal palace by yourself. Do NOT let others know where you're going and do not let them follow you!

Otherwise, I can't guarantee Helen's safety.

I'm looking forward to seeing you,

Kind regards,

Alpha King Sebastian Crimson."

My jaw dropped and my heart galloped like a herd of horses.

The last time I'd seen her in a dream, she'd told me she was dying! I hadn't heard or felt anything from her since.

Sometimes I wondered whether she had died, but I always ended up denying that thought and telling myself that she must still be somewhere.

I needed to believe that she was still alive...I had to.

I ran my thumb over the name at the bottom of the very short letter. It was direct and to the point. The perfect blend of threat and cordiality. Was this a trick and a trap?

Was this a letter from the Sebastian I'd met? The one trapped in Dylan's body?

Or was this a letter from the Sebastian that sat on the throne? The one who wore Sebastian's face but was really his cousin Dylan? It was impossible to tell in a letter. Why would the real Sebastian contact me this way?

When we'd been trapped in Nowind and when he'd held me captive, he made no mention of Helen. He'd taunted me about being pregnant. If he'd had Helen, he easily could have used her as a bargaining chip.

Not to mention the letter was inviting me to the palace. I doubted that the exiled Dylan had the authority to invite me there. Most likely, this was a letter from the Sebastian that sat on the throne.

What did he want with me?

Sighing, I rubbed my stomach. Helen and I were the last threats to him. We were the only ones that could reverse the soul swap and send him into exile.

I chewed my lower lip, all my peace and contentment vanishing. For weeks helping Norwind and seeing them get settled had allowed me to forget about the threats beyond our borders. But they were out there and now, they were right on our doorstep!

I always knew I'd have to face reality again. I had hoped it would be later rather than sooner.

"If you ever want to see Helen alive again, come to the royal palace by yourself. Do NOT let others know where you're going and do not let them follow you!"

I thought of the words in the letter. There was no room for dispute.

What was I supposed to do?

Protecting my child was my number one priority. But Helen was my only living family. She could still be helpful with all the soul swapping and getting all the pieces of the artifact. She could probably tell me more about my powers...

Saving her was important. But what proof did I have that Sebastian even had her? Helen seemed convinced she was dying the last time we spoke.

Could I really run off and leave Soren again? We were expecting a baby and I knew how happy that made him. If I left now without any word, it could destroy him.

Besides, it was a dangerous situation. It wasn't like I was heading off for a spa treatment. I was going to the Alpha King. Helen had warned me about him and he knew I was a threat to him.

Somehow, I knew that being pregnant wouldn't win me any sympathy or leniency from him. After all, my baby could be a threat to him too.

Helen was the one that warned me about the Alpha King. Did she mean the real Sebastian or the one using his name? Could I risk finding out the hard way?

I clenched my fists around the letter, crumpling up the edges. This was an impossible decision to make.

After standing there for what seemed like forever, I tucked the letter away and put my hands on my belly protectively.

I knew what I had to do.

[Chapter 766](#)

Soren

Fists clenched, I stomped toward Thomas, glaring at him. Mila and I finally had some alone time and now this...

I was angry, frustrated, and more than a little wound up.

Thomas arched an eyebrow at me as I approached.

"Something wrong?"

"This better be urgent," I snarled.

Thomas smirked and shook his head. "I didn't interrupt something, did I?"

Scoffing, I threw my head back. "Tell me why you called me here."

Thomas had hit the nail on the head, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. He would just tease me anyway, and we had more pressing matters, according to him.

"Patrol reported a breach on the southeast side of the packland. Mila's maze was breached," he told me.

"How?" I asked, creasing my brow.

Thomas shrugged. "We haven't figured that out yet. All we can tell is that at least one intruder got inside and has been sneaking through the packlands for about 30 minutes or so."

"Do we know who they are or what they want?" I crossed my arms, my annoyance quickly dissipating as the safety of these people became my only concern.

"No," Thomas shook his head. "We couldn't identify the intruder. Soren, if this is one of the king's men... we've been exposed."

I held up a hand to keep Thomas from working himself up more.

"I doubt that the king would send one lonely soldier to warn us he was coming. Right now, focus on the Norwind survivors. Check for any injuries, fatalities, or damages."

"Already done. No one was injured, definitely no fatalities, and no damage. This intruder slipped in. It was like they didn't want to be found, like a spy."

"Hmm."

"They were cunning and didn't leave a trace. Our patrols couldn't track them down. You still think the king isn't involved?"

I shook my head, not sure of anything. "Were there any pack members that could identify the intruder? Any witnesses?"

Pretty much everyone was at the party, other than you and Mila. no one spotted the strangers."

I stroked my chin.

"You're wrong, Thomas, not everyone was at the party..."

"Ashley!"

I nodded. With silent consent, Thomas and I headed to Ashley's place. It was a temporary house that was set up for the warriors who were coming and going with supplies. Ashley had claimed a single room for herself.

Her room was empty.

I sighed and bowed my head.

"Eros," I muttered.

"It had to be," Thomas agreed.

"s**t! Eros was a trick to lure me away. I left Mila and the baby...!"

I bolted from Ashley's room, heart racing. Without looking back, I tore across pack territory toward the cabin.

Thomas was hot on my heels but I wasn't listening to anything he was saying.

How could I let myself fall for such a simple trick!? It was so obvious!

Just before I got to the cabin, I saw two figures limping out of the woods. One of them was Payne. He had Ashley supported on his arm and he was half dragging her.

I stopped dead and raked my eyes over her. She wasn't physically injured, and I didn't smell blood.

Her face was pale and she seemed to be having trouble walking on her own. I thought her face looked red and puffy, like she'd been crying, but it was hard to tell in the low lighting.

"What's wrong?" I asked, nodding to Ashley.

Payne growled. "Eros came."

"So, it was him," Thomas grumbled. "No wonder he could get through Mila's maze. The matebond... It probably made the spell think that Eros was a friend, allowing him to get through."

Ashley scoffed and shook her head. "Well, he won't be able to do that ever again..."

She sighed and leaned against Payne, her eyes glistening.

With how much emotional pain she was in, it was like she'd had her heart broken. But the only way for Eros not to use the matebond again...

I frowned. "You rejected him?"

Ashley nodded. "I made sure he was gone. He's left the territory, and hopefully, now the spell will keep him out. We're not connected..."

I glanced at Thomas. He shrugged. What did one say to someone who voluntarily rejected their mate?

Payne broke the silence, thankfully.

"Where were you rushing off to? Were you going somewhere?"

"I was worried about Mila. I thought Eros lured me away so he could get to her. I was on my way to find her."

Ashley shook her head. "Mila? She wasn't with Eros. He didn't get close to her, I promise."

I wanted to ask Ashley why Eros had come there. She seemed to know more about it. Fresh tears streaked her face. It wasn't the time to bother her with questions about the man she was grieving for.

He hadn't kidnapped Mila and it didn't sound like she was in danger. I could leave the rest unanswered for now.

Sighing, I nodded gratefully. My heart stopped racing and I unclenched my fists.

"Thank you, Ashley. Why don't you take the next couple of days off? If you need anything..."

Ashley sighed heavily and smiled weakly. "Thanks."

"I'm sorry you had to go through this."

Ashley snorted. "No, it was necessary. Now, I can move on."

"That is very wise. I think you are incredibly strong."

Ashley's smile widened slightly.

"I'm going to get her to bed," Payne said.

I nodded as the two of them left.

Thomas touched my shoulder. "Since Mila's safe, I'm going to go strengthen the weak spots in the perimeter."

"Good idea."

"Besides, I don't want to be the third wheel," he said, winking.

I chuckled and waved to Thomas. "Fine, I'll see you tomorrow."

When I got to the cabin, I burst through the front door. "Mila!"

Silence.

My heart sank like a stone. I ran around the inside of the cabin and then went outside, looking around, trying to catch her scent. There were several scent trails leading in different directions.

Where had she gone?

I didn't smell Eros at all, so I knew he hadn't taken her. If her fear was strong enough, I would have felt it, wouldn't I?

I looped around the cabin again, looking for any clue. Back in the cabin, I plopped down on the couch. Something under the cushion crinkled.

Creasing my brow, I reached underneath and found a note written in Mila's handwriting.

Thomas, Payne, and I headed to the palace.

We'd made sure there were plenty of warriors to guard Pomeni and then arranged to leave. Despite my protests, as well as Payne's, Ashley insisted on coming with us.

She was still recovering from the matebond but she seemed to do better when she was with us, her closest friends. And when she had something to focus on, like going after Mila.

"I'm coming with you, Soren. It is my fault. I should have killed Eros right then and there. Maybe then, Mila wouldn't have gone missing," she insisted.

"It isn't your fault, Ashley," Thomas assured.

"It is! I was weak and I believed his lies!"

"No, you believed your mate. And there is no shame in that."

"I don't blame you, Ashley." I patted the note I kept in my pocket. Whether Eros had been there to hurt Mila or not, I knew she hadn't left because of him.

I kept us moving at a brisk pace. I didn't want to fall too far behind Mila.

“Soren, we can’t keep moving at this pace,” Payne warned me when Ashley wanted to rest and take a water break.

“Then catch up when you can, I’m going to go ahead.”

“No! I can keep up.” Ashley got to her feet and brushed by Thomas.

I nodded and turned, hurrying off in the direction of the palace.

As much as I trusted Mila, I couldn’t believe she’d taken off on her own, again! Would she ever learn to trust me?

At least, this time, she left me a note telling me where she was going and why. It wasn’t good enough!

She was pregnant and a target of the Alpha King and his enemies. It was risky to be running off on her own, especially when she couldn’t use her magic as liberally and when I couldn’t fully feel her through the matebond.

Why did she always have to run off and put herself in such dangerous situations!?

I glanced back to make sure the others were still following me. They didn’t have the same urgency I had but I wasn’t going to slow down. If they wanted to lag behind, they’d get left behind.

Sighing, I touched my pocket with the letter again. I could understand why Mila left.

She had to help Helen. Her aunt was her last remaining family member and link to her past. I would have done the same thing.

But it didn’t change the fact that she could have waited for me at the cabin and we could have come up with a safer plan!

“Soren, why didn’t we leave right away? If you’re in this much of a rush now, why wait a whole day before going after her?” Thomas asked.

He caught up to me and kept pace at my side.

“Because Mila asked me not to. She gave clear instructions in her note.”

“Why did you listen to her? Aren’t you worried?”

I stopped dead.

“Of course, I f*****g wanted to go after her immediately! She’s my mate and pregnant with my child... but she asked me to trust her, and I need to do that if I’m going to make her my Luna.”

Thomas nodded slowly and we started moving again. “What if they harm her? What if she was wrong?”

I clenched my fists and closed my eyes.

The last thing I wanted to think about was Mila being in danger or in pain, or falling into a trap.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. Being angry and furious wasn’t going to help Mila. I had to stay calm, for her sake.

“There’s no ‘what if.’ If Sebastian or Dylan or whoever the f**k wants Mila dead they would have given Eros the order to kill her long ago. But he hasn’t. If anything, he’s tried not to hurt us.”

Thomas nodded.

“Besides, it’s not like we can just show up at the palace and make demands. We need time to come up with a plan. We’re going up against the ruler of the realm and we can’t be reckless. Running off half cocked... that won’t work this time.”

“Alright, do you have any ideas about what the king wants with Mila?”

I shrugged. “I have a guess...”

Thomas chuckled. “One downside of talking with you, Soren, is that you always leave me wondering with your vague responses. Can you sum it up for me, in one sentence?”

I scoffed. “The king on the throne is afraid of the real Sebastian and he knows his old foe is out there. He couldn’t spend time and resources looking for him because then the people might get suspicious about his interest in one man. He’d have to find ways to justify it and it would just draw far too much attention to him and the real Sebastian.”

“That was more than one sentence.”

I glared at Thomas. “He needs to protect his identity and that means getting his enemy to come to him.”

“Soren, in case you didn’t notice, you still haven’t answered my question. What does he want with Mila?”

“To use her as bait...”

[Chapter 767](#)

Mila

When I arrived at the palace, I stood at the front gate, too stunned for anything else.

There were acres of beautiful, manicured gardens out front with walking paths through them. I could see staff members gardening and keeping things clean and tidy.

Beyond the gardens, I saw the palace. It rose up at least ten floors with several additional wings jutting out. I was pretty sure that some of the wings had wings!

Did the royal family really need so much space? I felt like the entire Saboreef territory would fit in the gardens alone. The palace was like a whole city on its own.

I thought of Soren. He’d be on his way to catch up with me by now, but I had time to talk to the king and figure out what he wanted with me.

I knew Soren would be upset... A letter wasn’t a substitute for talking in person and I was carrying precious cargo. I could practically hear the lecture Soren would give me once he caught up to me.

But I had to do this!

Clenching my fists, I walked into the gardens. Many of the staff glanced at me but they didn't stop me. It was like they were expecting me.

I wasn't going to turn back now. Helen was supposedly in the palace. If there was even the slightest chance she was here, I had to find her. The last time I'd seen her, she was so weak and didn't seem like she had much time left.

If I'd waited to make a plan with Soren, it might have been too late for Helen.

He'd understand that... I kept telling myself.

Helen was my only family and I wasn't going to lose her!

Before getting to the interior palace, I came to a gate that separated the gardens from the palace. There were guards blocking the gate.

One of them nodded to me.

"Miss Hathaway, his Majesty has been expecting you."

"Lead the way." I motioned through the gate.

Only one of the guards led me through and into the palace courtyard. The other remained behind to guard the gate.

As we walked through the courtyard, I heard children's laughter. Instinctively, I looped my arms around my stomach and looked at where the laughter was coming from.

To the right of the courtyard was a large field with smaller gardens in it. I could see three kids playing there.

The guard led me right over to the garden. He bowed when the eldest boy looked at him.

"Crown Prince Justin," he greeted.

The oldest boy who looked to be about sixteen just nodded and kept a sharp eye on his younger brothers.

"Prince Warren, Prince Theo," the guard greeted them as well, though they didn't seem to care. They were too busy playing.

Warren looked to be about eleven and Theo was only a toddler, about two years old, toddling around.

"Who is this?" Justin asked, arching an eyebrow at me.

I bowed respectfully.

"This is Miss Hathaway, a guest of the king," the guard answered.

"Hm..."

The crown prince studied me for a moment.

Inwardly, I sneered but I didn't let the princes or the guard see. I wouldn't exactly call myself a guest but it wasn't the right time or place to make a scene. Especially with a toddler who could barely walk.

I couldn't help studying the children. They didn't exactly look related...

A sudden thought occurred to me. If Sebastian really was Dylan and the soul swap had happened 13- 14 years ago, then Prince Justin wasn't his child! It was an odd realization, and one I knew I had to keep to myself.

"I won't keep you boys any longer," the guard said.

He bowed again and I did the same. Then he led me into the palace.

The halls were so big and empty. Everything was perfectly clean and well decorated but it didn't feel like a home. It felt like a museum.

Instead of bringing me to some cold, damp room or a dungeon, the guard brought me to the King's office.

He was waiting with a warm, friendly smile on his face.

"Welcome, welcome. Come in, don't be shy," he said in a friendly tone.

I walked into his office, rubbing my hands on my thighs. As nice as he was being, I couldn't let my guard down. I was still a hostage. I still had been forced to go somewhere I didn't want to be.

The king studied me with intense eyes. He emanated strength and power. Even the way he sat was regal and authoritative. That aura wasn't diminished by his friendly smile. If anything, it made me question the sincerity of the kindness he showed me.

My eyes drifted to the man standing next to the king. Eros!

I glared at him but noticed he still looked pale and weak. I thought if I blew on him, he'd fall over. It must have been from the pain of Ashley's rejection.

He stood straight and stiff but it was obvious that he wasn't well.

I turned away from him, refusing to acknowledge his presence more than I already had.

"Your majesty, may I present Miss Hathaway," the guard said, bowing to the king.

Quickly, I bowed too. I'd almost forgotten my manners but I still needed to maintain appearances.

I expected the king to be cold and distant, like I always imagined royals to be. Instead, he stood up and walked around his desk. Leaning his hips against it, there were only a few feet between us and he smiled, it could almost be called friendly.

"Ahh, Mila Hathaway. Finally, we get to meet each other!" He waved at his guard. "Leave us."

The guard bowed and backed out of the room.

I bit my lower lip. Alone with Eros and the king... this wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

“Your Majesty, I’m sorry to say this, but if I’m being honest, this isn’t a meeting I was looking forward to.”

The king shrugged one shoulder, not appearing too offended. He chuckled lightly.

“I appreciate your honesty.” He turned to Eros. “Why don’t you help make your friend here feel more comfortable.”

“Excuse me, Sire, but he isn’t my friend! My friends don’t betray me!”

Eros’s lips tightened but he didn’t respond to me. He didn’t even look at me. Instead, he bowed to the king.

“Your Majesty, bringing Miss Hathaway to the palace was my last task in servitude. You said you would release me as a free man. I request that you please honor your word and free me from being your slave.”

My heart thumped in my chest.

Eros was a slave? I didn’t think the royal family would have slaves!

The king nodded and regarded Eros casually. “Yes, Eros, you’ve done well. In all these years, you’ve never disappointed me. Not once.”

Smirking, the king gave Eros a sly smile and I caught the concern in Eros’s eyes.

“You know, it would be such a pity for me to let someone of your talents go... Are you sure you don’t want to remain in the palace? With your skills and qualities... Well, the sky’s the limit.”

Eros bowed stiffly. “I thank you for your kind words and your generosity over the years. However, please excuse my forwardness. With my lack of ambition, I would be of no use. Please, I beg of you, release me.”

It was so strange to see Eros begging. Every time I’d seen him, he’d been so confident. He didn’t act like a slave at all.

Sure, he could be so down because of Ashley’s rejection, but it almost seemed like he was always this submissive and docile around the king.

I wanted to feel sorry for him. But Eros had made a selfish deal with the king. Me for his freedom! I never would have traded someone else’s life for my freedom.

Eros probably had to retrieve the artifact for the king, too. Why else would he take it? And I was the final task to set him free...

The king sighed and nodded. “Well, if I can’t change your mind, then I will honor my word. When you walk out that office door, you’ll be free. You may go.”

He held his arm out to the door.

Eros bowed and I could practically see the tension lift from his shoulders.

“Thank you, your Majesty. I will excuse myself.”

The king just nodded and walked back around his desk.

As Eros walked by me, he caught my eye for a moment. Something in his gaze made me follow him with my eyes. His back to the king, eyes on me, he mouthed two words in silence.

Helen. Dungeon.

I didn't react to Eros's tip, looking back at the king as Eros left. The door clicked behind me. It was just the king and me now.

"Well, now that that's out of the way, I'm sure you're curious about why I invited you here."

"Invited me?" I asked coldly. I crossed my arms. "I believe invitations are cordial. That letter was nothing short of threat after threat. I didn't have a choice."

The king smirked. "Would you have come if I'd been less threatening?"

"Come now, let's not beat around the bush," I said, smirking. "Where is Helen?"

"Why so impatient, suddenly?"

I squinted my eyes.

The king c****d his head to the side, a strange look on his face.

"Has anyone told you how much you look like your mother?"

My breath caught and I held it. He was looking at me like he knew my mother, far more personally than he should! I didn't think my mother had that kind of relationship with the king and I didn't like that he was implying it.

At the same time, I wanted to know more about my parents and their involvement with the royal family.

"Not just your looks, from what I hear, but you have her same soft, useless heart," he sneered.

I gritted my teeth.

"Did you really invite me here to insult my parents? Because if that's all I'm here for, then please excuse me. I have more important things to do."

I backed toward the office door.

"Such as?"

"Such as looking for my aunt. And if you're not willing to tell me where she is, then I have my own cards to play. Perhaps I will go find that ex-Beta of yours... He would probably—"

"Stop!" the king growled, his expression growing dark as he looked down. He shook his head. "Oh, Mila. I must say, you are bold, aren't you? Too bold for your own good. Is that really how you speak to your king?"

I shrugged. "Are you my king? It just so happens that someone else told me he was my true king." I smirked and tilted my head to the side, provoking him. "Who should I believe? I asked your enemy the same question... What should I call you, King Sebastian or Beta Dylan?"

The king snarled, showing his teeth. His careful, cordial composure cracked. He shook his head, his hands clenched on his desk.

“Obviously, you prefer being treated as a prisoner rather than a guest. So be it. Guards!”

Several guards rushed into the room.

“Take Miss Hathaway to the dungeons.”

I smirked as the guards grabbed me. Little did the king know, he was doing just what I wanted.

[Chapter 768](#)

Two guards came to either side of me. Before they could grasp my arms, I told them, “Don’t touch me. I have legs, and I can walk on my own.”

They glanced at the king, and he waved his hand, allowing the guards to respect my request. As a result, one of them nodded to me, showing me the way while the other followed behind, keeping a close watch.

I kept my head down but I constantly shifted my eyes from side to side, looking at my surroundings, memorizing my way through the palace to the dungeon.

I caught sight of several paintings on the wall that stuck out, embedding them in my mind.

When we got to an entrance leading to a tunnel going underground, the pitch black pathway had me stop for a moment. One of the guards pushed me onto the stairs.

“Hey!”

“Just keep going. You’ll be where you belong soon enough,” he growled.

The staircase was long and winding. When we got to the bottom, the air was damp and musty. Thankfully, I found the walls were lined with luminous stones, giving off a dim light. Once my eyes got used to the darkness, I could see again through the faint lighting.

“Straight ahead,” the guard barked at me.

I noticed there were hallways on either side, too.

The guards made me walk down the central hallway. That was easy enough to remember.

Despite my better judgment, I kept thinking about Eros. Had he told me the truth about Helen being in the dungeon? Was it all another part of his game?

He’d been deceiving us right from the start. Always lying about who he was and what he was after.

I understood that he wanted his freedom. Hell, I’d been there too. I nearly killed myself with poison to win my own. But the way he went about it... I had to question myself, if it was me, would I make the same choices as him?

Honestly, I didn’t know.

For someone like me and him, a slight chance for freedom meant everything.

Approaching some strangers, buying their trust, stealing from them, and giving a powerful and dangerous man even more powerful artifacts without any concern for what the king would do with them...all of that might sound worth it for me during my most desperate days.

Putting myself in Eros' shoes, perhaps I would make the same decisions as him—if this was just between Eros and me.

However, he'd hurt Ashley. He'd taken advantage of her, his own mate, over and over again. That I couldn't understand.

Ashley's rejection hurt him greatly, I could tell. Not just physically, but also emotionally. He had to really care about her in order to look devastated by the rejection. Yet, between matebond and freedom, he chose the latter, destroying not only himself but the one and only person he was fated to.

It seemed like he was only out for himself.

So then, why would he be trying to help me find Helen just now? After all his treacherous doings, why would he care about anyone else all of a sudden?

Was this because he wanted to make it up to me, to us? If he was as selfish a person as he seemed, why could he care?

Regardless of the potential small flickers of goodness in him, I couldn't bring myself to forgive him. Everyone had to live with the consequences of their actions. What was more, if he needed to make it up to anyone, it should be Ashley, not me.

In this case, being rejected and losing his matebond was the price he paid. It was a loss he might never recover from. Part of me wanted to ask him if it was worth it. He might actually think it was. Or, he might not know the answer yet.

Shaking my head, I pushed those thoughts about Eros aside and focused on my own situation.

I'd made decisions that I had to live with. Like coming to the palace. It was for what I believed to be the right reasons, but that didn't change the fact I'd knowingly put myself and my baby in harm's way.

I would never know whether it was worth it until everything was over. I could only hope I wouldn't regret my decision.

Now that I was in the dungeon, I was fairly certain that the king wasn't going to kill me. Between being the last of my family, for the most part, and the artifact, he needed me for something. I could just feel it in my bones.

But what would happen when he got what he wanted? I'd be expendable then.

Sighing, I looked at my feet as I walked. In the distance, water dripped. I saw several cells lining the walls beside me but I couldn't hear anything from inside. Were there even prisoners in them?

I put my hand on my stomach. Was it safe for the baby to be in a cold, damp place like this? Hopefully, I wouldn't be here long.

At the end of the day, regardless of right or wrong, sometimes we had to take risks and follow our hearts. That's what I'd done the moment when I read the king's letter.

Soren's face swam in my mind suddenly. Oh, he was going to be so mad!

Did I do the right thing, telling him about where I was going and why? At least, I was honest. I hoped that would be enough for him to forgive me, given time.

"Here you are, your new home," a guard said. He grabbed my arm and pushed me into the nearest cell.

I flew against the back wall, the bars clanging closed behind me. I shuddered as I heard the lock click in place.

The guards walked away, laughing as they went. I was left alone in the dimly lit prison.

Now wasn't the time to think about Soren. Once we were back together, he could be as mad as he wanted and I could figure out how to make amends then.

As soon as I couldn't hear the guards anymore, I sat cross-legged on the floor and put my hands on my knees. Taking deep breaths in through the nose and letting them out through the mouth, I concentrated on finding Helen.

Whenever I saw her, it was in a dream or meditation.

In the past couple of months, the witch power had grown in my body. I could feel it. Sometimes, it was an urge to chant out spells, and sometimes it was an instinct telling me what to do. At this moment, I just had a feeling that Helen was nearby, and I might be able to find her as long as I try hard enough.

In through the nose, out through the mouth...

I didn't know how long it had been. One hour, maybe two. It felt like forever. The more anxious I was to drift away, the harder it was for me to enter the dream realm or meditation.

Suddenly, I felt a little flutter in my stomach. It was as if the baby could feel my anxiety and it was trying to comfort me. A smile climbed up my face.

I whispered, "It's okay, little one. Mama is doing all right, but you're right, I shouldn't be this unsettled. It doesn't help the situation."

My hand rubbed my belly gently, assuring the small life inside that we would figure this out together. I was no longer cold and lonely. The little one in me gave me strength, as well as peace of mind.

For the first time in hours, I was able to relax and focused on my breathing and my breathing only.

Slowly, the dampness of the air and the noises made by the guard seemed to fade away. My mind drifted.

When I opened my eyes again, I was expecting to be in the same forest I'd always seen Helen. But I found myself standing in front of a long, dark tunnel. It was the first time I'd seen this place in a dream but I knew it well—this was the tunnel right under the royal palace and I'd just walked through it to get to this cell!

Creasing my brow, I stared at the gaping hole of the tunnel. For a moment, I couldn't tell whether I was really in a vision or still in the dungeon.

I decided it had to be a vision because I wasn't in my locked cell anymore. Everything around me was perfectly quiet. There was no dripping water, laughing guards or even my own breathing.

The lights were gone too. This tunnel was completely dark and empty.

A shiver ran through me and I couldn't help but think that something horrible waited for me at the end of the path. My self-preservation warned me that I should not go in there.

Yet, I'd already come this far. There was no way I could go back now.

Taking a deep breath, I headed into the pitch black. Shadows consumed me and I followed the one long, dark passageway. Now and then it shifted slightly to the left and right but mostly it was straight.

But it was too straight, because sometimes, I even walked through a few walls.

I couldn't see anything. My feet stumbled along the coarse, uneven ground. It felt like the walls were breathing around me, like I was walking into the mouth of some large beast.

Even though I couldn't see, there was something in my chest guiding me. It pulled me along. However, the deeper I got, the more my knees trembled. All the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stood on end.

Finally, a small glow came from the end of the tunnel. I hurried toward it, holding my breath. There was a thin red light on the ground. After getting close, I realized that it was coming from the crack under a door.

What was a random door doing in a dark dungeon? It seemed to be locked. My legs carried me over to it. However, when I reached for it, my heart skipped a beat because the lock clicked open without me even touching it.

The gentle sound of metal seemed extremely loud in the deadly quiet dungeon, and I worried someone might hear or worse, I might have woken a great beast dozing on the other side.

Trembling, my hand reached the door knob again.

My vision led me here for a reason...

Logically, there was no reason I shouldn't go into the room in front of me, but my instinct screamed that I'd better stay away.

I hesitated and almost took a step back, but I held steady in place and stopped myself from escaping. Helen was close, I could feel it. She might be right there behind the door, I couldn't give up now.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, took a deep cleansing breath, and then pushed the door open.

[Chapter 769](#)

Whatever light had been in the crack of the door was an illusion. It was completely dark on the other side.

I stepped into the room and let out a sigh of relief. This wasn't as bad as I thought.

Drip, drip, drip...

The strong scent of copper and rust filled my nose. I frowned. Blood.

There wasn't light, but I could see clearly. There were pools of blood on the floor. Some were fresh, but some were old and dried.

The same crimson red was covering the walls, too.

Then I noticed there was someone else here—she was bound to a platform in the center of the room.

Her hair was messy and unkempt, clothes torn and shredded. She was tied to a post, arms behind her back, a gag in her mouth. Her skin was smeared with blood and dirt, eyes red and puffy. But the rest of her was pale and thin. Nothing but skin and bones.

I gasped. The fresh blood was dripping from her legs, which had been cut off at the knees!

A rough, dirty tourniquet had been tied around them but it was obvious these people didn't care if the wound got infected.

Tears sprang to my eyes.

"Helen!" I shouted.

Although this woman didn't look anything like the Helen I'd seen in my dreams, I knew it was her. Her face was younger and she was so beaten and tortured, but it was her!

"Aunt Helen!" I called again, but she didn't move, as if she didn't seem to hear me.

A man came out of the shadows with a whip. The end of the whip was split with several flogging strips. At the end of each one was a needle.

Smirking and chuckling, he snapped the whip at Helen.

She groaned into the gag, the sound muffled but the pain all too clear in her wide eyes.

The needles raked across her skin leaving dozens of tiny slices across her back, where hundreds of scars matched the fresh cuts.

"No, stop!" I cried, but my legs were so heavy all of a sudden, I couldn't move.

Helen's head rolled backwards and she groaned. I thought she'd pass out in a minute. But the whip swung again and as soon as it struck her, she cried out, her body jerking and spasming against the pole.

Blood soaked through the gag. She was either biting her own lips, her tongue, or her cheeks in pain, causing her mouth to bleed. Drops of blood dripped from the corners of her mouth, hanging off her chin and one tear rolled from her eyes.

"No...no...please...stop!" I begged, but no one in the room paid any attention to me.

Another man appeared from the shadows. Both of them wore masks. They looked at each other, showing clear distaste for Helen's responses.

One of the men started turning a wheel and the post Helen was tied to lifted in the air even more on a pulley. Helen whimpered, being lifted with the post.

The other man threw charcoal bricks on the floor. He grabbed a torch and lit the coals, which burned and smoldered, causing the air rippling with heat.

They waited as all the coals turned red, glowing in the darkness.

All of a sudden the platform dropped, and I heard myself shrieking in horror as Helen's muffled scream tore my heart.

Her arms were almost ripped from her body!

"Stop!"

Those bastards, how could they...How could they do this to her?!

Through my tearing eyes, I saw the second man start to slowly lower Helen closer to the coals.

The blood on her severed legs started to bubble and what clothes remained on her body curled and withered in the heat.

My eyes bulged and I wanted to look away but I couldn't!

Her arms were torn and broken, her legs were cut off and being burnt, and she whimpered and shook her head back and forth.

A little closer, and suddenly, her skin started to blister and burn.

How could one bear so much suffering?

The men tied the post in place, keeping her just close enough to sear and scar her but not to light her on fire and kill her.

At first, she tried to fight it but then she couldn't. Helen screamed and screamed in pain.

My eyes watered relentlessly.

My sobbing mixed with her screams as they echoed in the air.

That wasn't good enough for her torturers. The one with the whip snapped it at her gag, tearing the fabric until it fell away.

Helen's hoarse screams filled the cavern, echoing around. She thrashed and struggled to no avail.

I could almost smell her burning, sizzling flesh.

"Kill me! Please, just kill me!" Helen pleaded.

The torturers looked at each other and chuckled.

"No can do. We're having too much fun. You'll live to suffer, b***h!"

"Kill me now! Please!" She kept begging.

My stomach lurched and I fell on my hands and knees, dry heaving. My vision was blurred by tears.

“Stop! Stop it! Please STOOOOOOP!” I shouted, my voice was dry and I couldn’t make any more sound.

It all fell on deaf ears. They couldn’t hear me, because what I saw wasn’t real, instead, something happened in this room years ago.

I covered my eyes, and slowly, all the noises started to fade. The torturers weren’t laughing and Helen wasn’t screaming. The only sound left was my own weeping.

When I looked up, Helen and the men were gone. So was the post she’d been tied to.

Sniffing, I wiped my tears and got control of my heaving. Everything that had been around me was gone. I was back in a black pit of silent, hopeless despair.

For a moment, I thought I’d fallen out of my vision. But if that were the case, where was my cell?

I squinted my eyes into the darkness and realized I was still in my vision. I was still in the room Helen had been tortured in. The only difference was, the contents of the room had changed.

At the center of the room, something heaped on the floor.

Squinting harder, I tried to get a closer look. It was the shape of a person. However, I still couldn’t move.

“Helen...Aunt Helen, is that you?” I cried, my voice hoarse. “Wait for me, I’m coming. I’m coming!”

Suddenly, I snapped awake in my cell. My mind raced and I clutched my chest as my heart and lungs tried to claw their way out.

What I saw must be Helen’s past...So the real Helen must be the person I’d seen in a heap on the floor!

All I knew was that room was where Helen had been tortured and probably kept for years. I had to get there!

My cheeks were damp and I quickly wiped the tears away. First thing first, I needed to get out of this cell.

When the guards had brought me down here, they’d hung the keys at the bottom of the dungeon stairs. I heard it just before they left. It seemed like it was so far away, but it wasn’t a problem for me.

I grew a root in my cell and made it longer and longer until it touched the key hook. The root picked up the keys and brought them back to me. Quickly, I let myself out of the cell and put the root back in the ground.

There was a luminous stone on the wall nearby and I grabbed it, just like Soren had done in Norwind. My knees wobbled as I raced down the hallway, which was the tunnel in my vision, toward the door at the end.

My footsteps echoed through the dungeon reverberating over and over again until I couldn’t tell if I was the only one running through the hallway.

It didn’t matter, I knew where I was going and nothing would stop me.

Knowing what I might find brought tears to my eyes. With every step closer to the door, I sobbed, shaking even more.

I remembered the turns from my vision, and had to figure out a few hidden entrances disguised as walls. The dungeon was an enormous maze. Had I not had my vision to rely on, I would never be able to find my way.

When I got to the door, I fumbled with the keys. My vision blurred, it was hard to find the right one. I tried several on the key ring and finally the lock let out a dull clang sound. Without pause, I threw the door open and ran inside.

It was the room from my vision, and just like what I had seen, there was a crumpled heap in the center of the room... a person.

I held my breath and moved closer. The person was missing all four limbs. Her hair was gray and dingy, her body broken, twisted, and bent. Her bones stuck out against her skin and I could see her ribs and her vertebrae under her thin, stretched skin.

My aunt Helen... she was dry and papery, gray.

Hearing me approaching, her body moved slightly. Thank the Goddess she was still breathing!

Fresh tears came to my eyes and I threw the keys and luminous stone on the floor. Dropping to my knees and sobbing, I carefully picked Helen's emaciated, fragile body up and wrapped her in my arms.

"Helen, I'm here," I whispered.

I brushed her brittle, straw-like hair from her face and was careful not to hold her too tightly or touch her with too much pressure.

She was so light and delicate I thought she'd break apart in my arms if I wasn't careful. She mumbled softly and I was afraid I'd hurt her. I tried to look into her eyes for any sign of pain but I couldn't—because her eyes were gone.

She looked 30 or 40 years older than she really was. Not at all the same person as the one I met in my dreams, but I was certain this was her.

"Who did this to you!? Was it Dylan or Sebastian? Tell me who it was and I will kill them! I will kill them all!"

I kept my voice soft and soothing. I didn't want to startle her or hurt her with my loud voice.

Helen trembled in my arms and turned her head from side to side. Her pale, chapped lips pulled back and I thought she was trying to smile. Behind her lips, she had no teeth left. They'd been broken off at the roots, like they were smashed with a hammer, not pulled out.

Helen's mouth moved a little and I had to lean down to hear what she had to say.

"Ah, Mila, you're here..."

The stretched smile over her skin and bone face broke my heart. Tears dripped from my eyes and landed on her wrinkled cheeks.

“My... dear, sweet M-Mila...I’m so glad to... meet you again... in person... now th-that you’re grown.”

“Shh, don’t talk. Unless you’re going to tell me who did this,” I whispered. Talking was such a strain for her, I could tell.

“You shouldn’t... be here.”

“I’m here to take you home, Auntie... Let’s go home.”

She shook her head almost imperceptibly.

“Mila, don’t waste your time on me...”

Sniffing, I ignored her. I cradled Helen’s body in my arms and picked her up. She was so weak and skinny she was light as a feather.

Suddenly, I heard noises from outside the room. People were coming directly to the room. Had the king figured out my plan already?

My fists clenched in fury, blood boiling.

Slowly, I went down on one knee and placed Helen carefully on the floor. I stood between her and the door, ready to destroy anyone that dared come near her.

“Go... Mila... go.”

I scoffed. “Let them come! If those bastards dare touch one hair on your body, I’ll make them pay with their lives!”

I chanted the spell and modified it slightly. What ripped out from the ground were arm-thick roots that grew lethal, sharp thorns, large enough to impale a grown man. They flailed around, the thorns slicing at the air like bloodthirsty monsters.

They would take down anyone that came into this room!

“Mila!” Helen gasped, her voice breaking.

The footsteps got closer and the door opened.

I froze.

It wasn’t the Alpha king I’d been expecting.

[Chapter 770](#)

I froze as the shadows cleared and I saw the person that had come to the dungeons.

It was Eros.

His eyes widened and he stared at my thorny, waving roots. He cringed slightly.

What the hell was he doing here?

"Is that..." he pointed at Helen.

"What do you want?" I snapped.

Eros cleared his throat, "We need to go. They are coming."

"Who?"

Before I could react, Eros dodged past the flailing roots. He scooped Helen into his arms.

"Let her go, or I will end you!" I snapped, spinning around and aiming my roots at Eros.

"Really, Mila? Do you want to waste time and fight the entire elite royal guard, or do you want to get out of here?"

I stared at him. He was right. As furious as I was, there was no way I could fight off an entire army and get us out of here easily on my own.

"Follow me, quickly!"

He ran toward the dungeon door and I followed him. There weren't any other better choices at this point.

Eros confused me. Why was he back here? He had his freedom, he didn't need to risk his life for me or Helen.

Why didn't he leave when he had the chance? What was he trying to prove?

Was it possible that he was here because of Ashley? Was he trying to show me, and her, that he wasn't that horrible after all?

I didn't know if I could trust him but I followed because I didn't want him to take Helen out of my sight.

For a moment, I wondered if Eros was still working for the king. It couldn't be a trick from the king, could it?

There was no way I was letting my guard down around him but if he was going to help, I'd take what I could get. He already had Helen in his arms and I didn't have any other choice.

"Why are you here?" I asked, hurrying to keep pace with him.

The king freed him. He should have been halfway across the realm by now! Why had he come back?

"I was on my way out, but guess who I saw?"

"Just answer my damn question!"

He glanced at me and the slight smile on his lips faded. He must have realized I wasn't thinking of him as a friend. Again, he cleared his throat.

"I saw people... a lot of them. They were sneaking into the palace using some hidden passageways. Tunnels."

Immediately. I thought of Soren. Had he caught up to me already? It wouldn't surprise me. I knew he'd come after me quickly.

"Well... I'm not sure 'people' is the correct term anymore," Eros scoffed.

"What?" What did he mean by people that weren't people?

I creased my brow and looked at my feet as they hammered down the dungeon hallway. I wanted to know what he was talking about but I didn't want him to think that I trusted him or that we were friends by any means.

Also, how did Eros know about hidden passageways into the palace?

"Weren't you set free?" I asked, "I'm sure the king won't be too happy to know you're invading the dungeon, prying into his secrets, and releasing his prisoners. Especially, not so soon after he freed you."

Eros shrugged and frowned. "Do you really think the king ever truly frees anyone?"

"I..." I trailed off. It seemed genuine, but now that Eros mentioned it, it seemed strange he would free someone that knew so much about what he was up to.

"It was a show, an act. I know too much and he knows it. He just wanted me to think that I was free. As soon as I left the capitol, some 'accident' or 'rogue attack' would befall me and I'd wind up dead."

"You seem pretty certain."

Eros scoffed. "He forgets that I've seen him do it before."

"So, you came back to the palace dungeon instead? That doesn't make any sense... How would it help solidify your freedom?"

"The king can't mindlink with me anymore. That was severed when he freed me. He figured he wouldn't need it anymore because he thought I'd go right for the city limits. So, while his ambush lies in wait, I can come and go as much as I want," he explained.

"But why...?"

"The truth of the matter is, I know a lot more than the king ever thought I knew. And because of that... Well, I have an upper hand he doesn't know about. Here."

Eros handed me a spray bottle. I arched an eyebrow.

"Spray this on you. It will help mask your scent."

I sighed and thought about the repercussions. Eros had given a fake treatment to Soren once. He could be trying to trick me now.

His eyes were deep and imploring. It was a true look of sincerity I didn't think I'd ever seen from him before.

I grabbed the bottle and sniffed the contents. It smelled harmless enough, so I spritzed it on myself.

Eros grinned and nodded. He looked almost relieved that I'd accepted his help.

I handed the bottle back. "Why did you say those people can't be called people? What are they doing here?"

"Well... That's difficult to explain."

"Try," I scoffed.

"I won't have to. You'll find out the truth soon enough. And then... Well, you'll see."

My stomach shifted uncomfortably. What was I getting myself into? What was he hiding from me?

Eros turned down one of the dungeon hallways. Almost immediately, we came to a dead end.

I whipped around and prepared myself for an attack to come down the hallway, regretting trusting Eros so quickly. "Eros, how dare you!"

"Don't be so dramatic," Eros muttered.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw him feeling around the wall. He stopped, his hand on an oddly shaped stone.

He muttered under his breath a little, turning the stone like it was a spin dial on a safe lock. He stopped turning with the pointed edge of the rock at a very precise angle.

Click. Click.

Something in the wall shifted and part of the wall opened up, revealing a hidden doorway.

"Come on."

Eros disappeared into the passageway. I followed closely and as soon as I was on the other side, he pressed a rock in the wall. The door slammed shut behind me and looked like a solid rock again.

Eros hurried down the passage and I ran along behind him. We could only fit single file.

At first, the floor was just solid stone. Eventually, it became pebbles and gravel. Then, it shifted to solid pavement.

For fifteen minutes we ran along the path. It angled upward slightly. I hoped that meant it would lead us above ground from the dungeons.

Eros slowed down and I looked ahead. The one passage we were in opened up into what looked like an underground maze. However, this was naturally formed, not dug out like the dungeon.

"Very few people know about this part of the underground passageway. It will lead us outside. Follow me." Eros nodded into the maze.

I took a few steps and stopped dead.

The tunnels echoed with strange noises. Like clawing or snarling. I couldn't really pick out the different sounds.

I cringed. Were those some creatures we had to face or was it just my imagination?

“Hang on,” Eros said, stopping too.

If we tried to go down them, we’d run into whoever, or whatever, was skulking around.

“Over here, we need to hide...” Eros ducked behind a rock, holding Helen protectively.

I hunkered down under the rock with him. While we were crouched down, I checked on Helen. She was barely conscious but she was alive and it almost seemed like her pulse was stronger.

The noises got louder, and I peeked out from behind the rock.

Ice trickled down my spine and my hands shook. I couldn’t breathe!

“Well, I told you that you’d find out soon enough...” Eros whispered.

From the tunnels came hoards of people. Well, at first glance they looked like people. They were all built as strong, powerful, elite warriors but something was wrong with them.

They lumbered aimlessly bumping into each other and scratching against the walls. They didn’t speak, but gurgles came from their mouths like they were trying to talk. Every single one of them had a blank, dead look in their eyes.

“Oh, my Goddess!” I gasped, covering my mouth. “I know...”

The Alpha and Beta of Saboreef were among the zombie-like warriors. There were others I recognized too.

My heart beat so loudly I thought it would give us away!

What had happened to all those people? I’d seen them in Norwind not that long ago.

In the middle of the hoard, I saw the last person I wanted to see at that moment.

Dylan, aka the real Sebastian.

I wasn’t surprised to see him alive. It was too much to hope that he’d died somewhere.

But I was surprised to see him surrounded by these... things. So many warriors. While I recognized some, there were a lot I didn’t. They weren’t left over from Norwind either.

“Where did he get all those troops?”

I pried my eyes away and looked at Eros.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged and pointed to Sebastian. “But look... Isn’t that your good old pal from Norwind? Too bad he didn’t die in Norwind. I thought I got him.”

He must have been referring to the explosion that trapped us all. I glared at Eros.

“Don’t you mean that it is too bad your explosion didn’t kill us?”

Eros frowned. “Mila, Believe it or not, had I tried to kill you there, it would have succeeded.”

I shook my head and waved it off. Now wasn’t the time to talk about when I was trapped under the mountain. It was not a pleasant memory I wanted to relive while we were in another underground cave.

I looked around the rock again at the strange warriors.

They seemed to be linked to Sebastian somehow. They were following his movements like they were orders. Like they were puppets and he was the puppet master.

"I know some of them. Alphas and Betas from smaller packs. Some of them were elite guards and warriors for the royal family," Eros continued.

"What are they all doing with him?"

"That's the wrong question. You should be asking what that 'friend' of yours did to them."

I wondered if Eros knew that Sebastian and Dylan had gone through a soul exchange. It wasn't the kind of topic I wanted to explain right now.

"You know, Eros, I don't think they have their free will anymore..."

"That does seem to be the situation. Um... wait a moment... do you see that?" he pointed to Sebastian's waist. "Isn't that the Dagger of Mercy?"

Just then, one of the puppet warriors looked in our direction.

Both Eros and I shrank behind the rock immediately, hoping he didn't spot us.