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Luckily, nothing else happened. However, we could also tell from the noises that Sebastian and his troop hadn't moved much either. We waited a little longer before we started peeking out again.

The dagger swung against Sebastian's leg, tied to his belt loop. Almost instantly, I knew it would fit in the sheath of the artifact.

"That's the last piece of the Blade of Souls," I whispered. "I thought the king had it... Isn't that why you stole the two parts from me so the king would have the completed artifact?"

Eros rolled his eyes at my comment. "The king did have it, but obviously, he lost it again"

Sebastian got the dagger, what would he want next? Obtain the other two parts and switch bodies again!

"What can the dagger do? I mean, I thought all the artifact pieces had to be together to work, but do you think it is the reason Sebastian is able to control all those...those things?" Eros' question pulled me out of my thoughts.

Helen's eyes snapped open. Her voice croaked and what came out first was just a rasp.

I reached out and touched her comfortingly.

"It's okay. You don't have to talk."

"The Dagger of Mercy... It was a weapon of mercy from The Goddess because it doesn't kill the person that gets stabbed in the heart with it..."

"Then it is rightly named, for it truly is merciful," I whispered.

"Is it?" Helen sighed, "It doesn't kill their body but it takes the soul of the person. Their body becomes an empty vessel, alive but thoughtless. With the right spells, they could easily be controlled and moldable."

"So... all those people..." My skin felt clammy suddenly. "All those people out there were made into mindless... slaves by Sebastian?"

"Holy s**t!" Eros muttered, shaking his head. "If that was me... I'd rather die than be made into a puppet!"

I peeked around the rock again to look at Sebastian's groups. He's literally made a mindless army to obey his every command! And they would die for him without question and he'd never care about the ones he lost.

Finally, they started to slowly move into the narrow pathway we had just come from. Sebastian seemed to know this place well. After all, he used to be the rightful owner of the royal palace.

Then one of the warriors in the puppet army caught my attention and I almost gasped.

He was further away from Sebastian, trailing towards the end of the group. His build and height were similar to Soren's but his face was hidden in a hoodie.

No. I shook my head. That guy couldn't have been Soren.

Sebastian never would have gotten close enough to Soren to turn him into a puppet. He'd never overpower him either.

Suddenly, a sweeping longing washed over me. I must be missing Soren so much that anyone who looked slightly similar reminded me of him. How I wish I could see him right this moment!

Now that I had Helen, whatever Sebastian and Dylan got into, it was their problem to sort out. I couldn't care less. All I wanted was to get back to Pomeni and back to the man who had my heart. We could settle down and have our baby...

Instinctively, I tried to reach out and mindlink with Soren. No surprise, it didn't work.

I should have taken that last dose of the antidote!

As Sebastian's group moved closer, I held my breath, so did Eros. They were only a few feet away and we worried that even breathing may draw their attention.

Unfortunately, while we could control our body, we couldn't control other beings—I felt something tickling my leg and I looked down. A rat scurried over my calves.

Gasping, I pulled back and then quickly covered my mouth.

Dammit! Did they hear that?

I closed my eyes and sat as still as possible, praying that Sebastian and his army would keep moving without noticing me while counting numbers in my head to calm my racing heartbeat.

One, two, three, four—

"Who's there?!" Suddenly, Sebastian's dangerous, vicious voice shook the underground maze, making me almost jump. "Come out!"

I kept my mouth and nose covered.

My heart pounded like thunder in my chest. Even if my breathing didn't give us away, my heartbeat would!

Sebastian's footsteps moved closer and closer. I could feel them vibrating through the stone floor. He must have been carrying a torch, because a small glowing bubble of light got closer, his shadow getting larger and longer on the wall in front of me.

I looked at Eros who was also as concerned as me.

What were we supposed to do?

Taking a deep breath, I turned to Eros and pointed at him and Helen and gestured for the two of them to run away. "Take Helen and find Soren," I mouthed silently.

“Wait!” He tried to stop me but I turned on my knees and sprang up, confronting Sebastian before he could look around our hiding spot.

Slowly, I walked sideways from the rock, holding Sebastian’s gaze so his focus would be on me. Hopefully, Eros and Helen would get away.

I put my hands up in surrender. “Alright, you got me.”

Sebastian scoffed. “Hmmm. What a surprise to see you here. I’ve been looking for you and now... the Goddess has delivered you to me. Isn’t that wonderful, my dear?”

I snorted. “As if! We aren’t friends.”

“Oh?” Sebastian smirked. “That is true. There is no need for us to be friends. So, take comfort that you’re still useful to me. Otherwise... you wouldn’t even be breathing.”

I swallowed hard and kept his gaze, but it was hard to stay brave.

“Now, come along with me.” Sebastian held his hand out to me. “We have unfinished business to attend to.”

I glanced at the underground maze. “I would love to. Unfortunately, I’m on my way out and I really don’t think we are headed in the same direction.”

Sebastian laughed, tossing his head back. “You think where you’re going is up to you? Take her!”

Two of Sebastian’s puppet warriors grabbed my arms and held me still.

I glared at them and then back at Sebastian. I was no match for these guys. I wondered if they could even feel pain, if they were empty and void of any soul or substance that made them people.

“Tell your puppets to unhand me! I know what you have done to them. However, just because you have the Dagger of Mercy doesn’t mean you can defeat the man on the throne!”

Sebastian arched an eyebrow at me.

I continued, “If I were you, I would settle down and live a peaceful, enjoyable life. Why bog yourself down with the past when you’re the one who gets to be free?”

Sebastian raised his hand and the two warriors let me go. He leaned down so our heads were level and narrowed his eyes.

“Alright, little girl, what else do you know?”

I had his attention now, I just needed to come up with something to keep him occupied, to stall him.

“Well, for starters, I just came from down there,” I said, nodding toward the tunnel. “I know you’re walking into a trap. You know... he wants you here.”

Sebastian growled. He knew I meant Dylan, or the real Dylan, whoever was sitting on the throne.

“So?” He lifted the Dagger of Mercy. “With this, the more men he attacks with, the larger I can grow my army. He’ll just be giving me more help! Ha ha ha ha!”

He tossed his head back again, laughing louder. It filled the underground chamber, resonating off the walls.

A shiver ran down my spine but I kept my composure.

“You know that kind of overconfidence is... well, they say that pride comes right before the fall.”

“Shut your pretty mouth! Or I will shut it permanently. Tie her up!”

Two of his guards pounced on me before I could react. They tied me up and handed the end of the rope to Sebastian.

“I told you that you didn’t have a say in where you go. Now, be a good girl and don’t try to run. My patience is thin and if you try it... it won’t matter if you’re still useful. There’s a lot more I can do than just tying you up.”

His threat was too open ended for me to risk being uncooperative.

Sebastian tugged on the rope and I was forced to follow along.

As we walked through the narrow passage, I hoped that Eros and Helen had gotten away. That was all I cared about right now. Because I knew that Soren was still coming for me and as long as I played along, Sebastian wouldn’t hurt me.

When we got to the end of the tunnel, Sebastian opened the same gate Eros did and Sebastian’s army flooded into the dungeons. He held me at the back.

The gate behind us slammed shut again but Sebastian’s warriors had stopped moving forward.

“What is going on up there?” Sebastian snarled.

He tugged on my rope and dragged me to the front.

The entire royal guard filled the dungeon. I guess I wasn’t too far off when I said that the king had set a trap for Sebastian.

The Alpha King stood a few rows back, very well protected and surrounded.

“Well done, Mila,” the Alpha King chuckled and clapped his hands twice. “I see you didn’t disappoint me. You led him right to me.”

I gave the real Sebastian a haughty look. “I told you it was a trap.”

“Come now, Mila,” The Alpha King said. “You wouldn’t be my guest but you let yourself become his captive. That was a bad move.”

“Right, like I chose to be either of your prisoners,” I hissed, rolling my eyes. What was wrong with these guys?

Why couldn’t they just keep their family s**t in the family?

“I assume you saw your aunt,” the Alpha King jeered. “Do you know who cut off her limbs? I’ll tell you. It was the man standing right beside you!”

Something inside me snapped. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. I rounded on him, as much as I could being tied up.

“You!” I growled towards Sabestian. “You did all of that to her!?”

Sebastian ignored me, instead, he hissed at the Alpha King, full of hatred, “You f*****g bastard! You were my Beta, my family. I always treated you well and you betrayed me!”

The Alpha King shrugged. “That sounds like a tall tale.”

“You and that witchy b***h Helen! Shut your f*****g mouth, for once in your life. Today, I’m here to take back what belongs to me, what you stole!” Sebastian pointed a fierce finger at the Alpha King.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Dylan,” The Alpha King spat, emphasizing the word “Dylan”, reminding Sebastian he was no longer the person on the throne. “You are completely delusional. That’s why I had to let you go as my Beta all those years ago.”

“How dare you! How f*****g dare you!” Sebastian snarled. “You took my name. You took my body and you took everything that belonged to me!”

The king shrugged and turned around. He addressed his royal guards.

“See, you heard him. He has lost his mind, hasn’t he? Does he look like the Alpha King?”

The guards all burst out laughing. They shook their heads and keeled over against each other, slapping their chests and each other’s backs.

None of them believed the real Sebastian and his claims.

Sebastian snarled and waved for his puppets to attack. The hoard sprang into action!

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The king, however, didn’t seem to be too concerned. He sneered at Sebastian. “What now? You managed to trick that dumbass Chandler and buried his entire pack. Now what do you have left with those losers you gathered?”

I glanced at Sebastian, whose face fell. Was his confidence wavering at all? It was hard to tell. He seemed so steady and sure of himself.

“Do you think those guys would follow you if you didn’t bewitch them? You’re no king or leader!”

I wanted to tell the king that, unfortunately Sebastian actually did bewitch them. As soon as the king’s words ended, they started assaulting the king’s guards, unstoppable.

The guards recovered from their laughing attack quickly, defending the king and standing their ground.

Sebastian moved through the chaos, the Dagger of Mercy raised.

“Watch out!” I shouted, warning the king’s guards. To me, Sebastian and Dylan were equally bad, but I’d rather deal with living beings than the half-living, half-dead, mindless monsters.

However, my reminder didn't change anything. Sebastian plunged the blade into the heart of one of the king's guards. He smirked at the king tauntingly, and stabbed another as he chanted some words.

The fallen warriors stood up again. Their faces were blank, their bodies empty. They were Sebastian's puppets now!

Immediately, they turned on the other royal guards, their own allies, and started attacking.

It was just like Sebastian said. The king had hand delivered him an entire army to convert for his own uses. With the Dagger of Mercy, the more men the King brought, the more will be added to his own puppet force. His puppets would more than double at this rate!

The Alpha King glared at Sebastian and took several steps back. He didn't look so confident or sure of himself now.

"What have you done to them!?" he shouted.

"Oh, I enjoy seeing you like this, cousin! Now, you're the scared coward, aren't you?" Sebastian shifted his attention to his puppet army and ordered. "Take them all down!"

I watched, horrified as those mindless warriors threw themselves into the fight. They were fearless and it was still hard to tell if they felt pain or not. Even if they did feel pain, they didn't slow down because of it. Any time one of them was injured, they would get right back up and keep fighting.

Whenever one of the king's guards was taken down, the puppets dragged them back to Sebastian and he'd stab them and turn them into another puppet. Sebastian's army got larger and larger, and it would overwhelm the king's guards briefly.

When I'd first sent Eros off, I hoped he'd cross paths with Soren and bring him back with help. Now that I saw what Sebastian was capable of, I wanted Soren and his men to stay as far away from him as possible.

It was like watching a demon claw his way from hell and devour whoever they saw, turning those in their way into horrible, horrendous monsters.

The guards must have realized it now because they started to panic.

The dungeons filled with curses and screams of fear and terror.

I covered my ears, but the sounds still got through, making the entire dungeon tremble and shake as the screams continued.

I saw the awful smirk on Sebastian's face. He was drunk on vengeance, crazy and wild. He was the king of demons and he looked it!

The Alpha King's face fell and seeing he was most likely losing the battle, he motioned for his guards to retreat and they all obeyed instantly. "Well, let's find another day to finish this then," he said as he backed away.

A wall at the end of the corridor began to lower. It would cut Sebastian's puppets off!

However, the stone wall stopped halfway down.

Sebastian scoffed. “Have you forgotten that I am the real master of this place? There’s nothing about the palace that you know and I don’t!”

The king froze for a second and immediately turned to escape, but it was too late.

Sebastian’s warriors pounced. Some were in human form, and some had shifted, but even as wolves, they were still slaves to Sebastian’s will.

A sickening shudder ran through my gut as Sebastian’s army tore through what remained of the Alpha King’s men. The tunnel became a gruesome scene of gushing blood and tearing flesh. Armor and limbs flew in every direction as horrified screams of pain and terror echoed into silence.

The scent of copper and rust filled the air, turning my stomach. I wanted to get away but I was still tied up and Sebastian was right next to me. If I tried to escape, he’d pounce on me.

He seemed distracted and occupied but I couldn’t risk him not paying attention to me at this moment. It seemed unlikely he’d forgotten about me, especially since he was winning!

The last of the royal guards sputtered his final breath, leaving the king standing alone to face Sebastian’s insatiable, bloodthirsty horde.

Then, in unison, they jumped at the king, about to tear him apart!

“Keep him alive!” Sebastian ordered, and then he turned to me and smirked viciously; his eyes glinted with pure excitement.

I cringed away from him.

This was his moment. He’d captured me and could use me for whatever he needed. He’d defeated Dylan, the current king, his ex-Beta who’d betrayed him. He was riding the high of success.

Sebastian went to a corner passageway. He touched something on the ground that I couldn’t see too well. The dungeon wall moved and revealed a large, open space behind it.

I peered around Sebastian as best I could and saw what looked like some kind of altar at the center of the open space.

Two of Sebastian’s puppets hauled a struggling, squirming Dylan to the altar. They laid the real Dylan on it and tied him down.

Smirky, Sebastian stepped forward and searched Dylan’s pockets and clothes. It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for—the two pieces of the artifact that Eros had taken from me, the Sheath of Protection and the Moonlit Crystal.

Now he had all three parts of the Blade of Souls!

With swift movements, Sebastian put all parts together. He turned to me with that same, vicious smirk. It was like he didn’t think anything could go wrong and nothing could stop his wish from coming true.

From the looks of it, he wasn’t wrong.

“Now, be a good girl and perform the soul exchange. I’ll spare you and your baby if you do. But if not...”

He grinned and held the Blade of Souls out to me.

“Hah. Hahahaha!” It was Dylan interrupting.

I turned toward the altar where Dylan was laughing maniacally. He strained against the bindings and looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

“Stupid girl...I can’t believe it. I can’t believe that you’re going to serve the cruel murderer your parents died to avoid,” Dylan called out.

I paused. “What do you mean?!”

Sebastian snarled, interjecting the conversation. “She is making up for her parents’ sins, her whole family’s sins! They betrayed their real king, and put you, a useless piece of s**t that doesn’t know how to rule the country, on the throne! She should be grateful I’m showing her mercy.”

“First, let’s get this straight,” Dylan snapped, “My great-grandfather was the real crown prince and the heir to the throne! Why did he die early mysteriously? It wasn’t due to the so-called unknown illness, but because his dear brother, your great grandfather murdered him! Talking about the real king, you’re not, I should be! Secondly, her parents’ sins? Hahahaha!”

I looked back and forth between Sebastian and Dylan. I didn’t care about their family strife, but I had never really heard the full story of what happened back then regarding my parents. The bits and pieces I’d gotten from Helen and others didn’t give me a good idea of what really went down.

What I did know was that my parents did the soul swap, and then our pack was attacked and wiped out by the combined forces of many powerful and greedy alphas. Was there more to the story?

Dylan continued, “Her parents did the right thing. Had you not treated Helen the way you had, Jessica never would have done the soul exchange ritual.”

Sebastian scoffed. “Helen... that piece of s**t cunt of a witch! She deserved every second of her punishment because of her magical meddling. Who did she think she was, spreading rumors about my reign and my future?”

I gritted my teeth and clenched my jaw. From head to toe, I trembled.

“You know what... neither Kaleb nor Jessica wanted to do it. But after they saw what you did to Helen... after they witnessed your cruelty, they knew it was better for the country to remove you.” Dylan laughed again.

I could see the blood rise in Sebastian’s cheeks. He sneered, “My cruelty? What had I done wrong before then? I’d never been cruel to anyone. Yet, that cunt, Helen, still paid secret visits to the alphas around the country and hurt my reputation and reign, in the name of a stupid prophecy!”

Dylan scoffed and shook his head as best he could from where he was tied up.

As much as I wanted to scream at Sebastian for the horrible things he’d done to Helen, I felt like I was finally getting some answers, so I held my tongue.

“They were not wrong about how destructive you can be,” Dylan continued. “The only mistake Jessica made was sparing your life!”

Sebastian growled.

“She should have killed you right after the exchange when you were weak. Yet... she let you go. And afterward, you spread the rumor that Kaleb had a mysterious powerful artifact. All your talk of the Blade of Souls resulted in the destruction of Pomeni! Her stupid kindness and hesitation cost her not only her own life but her entire pack!”

I stared at Dylan, shocked.

“Dylan, this is between you and me. Don’t waste any more of my time with pointless bickering over the past. Let’s get this over with!”

Sebastian loosened my ropes and pushed me closer to the altar. “b***h, do it!”

I glared at him. Did he really think I would help him after what I just learned?

“I don’t know what to do,” I gritted through my teeth.

There was no way I was helping Sebastian, but there wasn’t any way for me to get away either. I needed to stall.

“Oh, you’ll figure it out. I have faith in that... because you know, I was able to destroy Pomeni once before. I can do it again.” Sebastian grinned cruelly and held the knife out to me.

How had he found out about the work we’d done on rebuilding Pomeni? We’d hidden the pack well. I even used magic!

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Sebastian knew way more about this world than I did.

“You leave my pack alone!” I growled.

Sebastian sighed.

“Very well.” He gestured to the Blade of Souls. Smirking, he thrust a hand out and grabbed my neck, squeezing his fingers tightly around my throat.

“If you don’t follow my instructions, I will kill you in an instant. You and your baby, then your re-established Pomeni pack!”

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My heart leaped into my throat and for a moment, my mind panicked. He could and would kill me. Then he’d go after Pomeni pack and rip them apart one by one, just because he could. Even if I laid my life on the line, it wouldn’t be the end.

He’d try to kill anyone that I was close to, anyone that I helped.

And my baby... Soren’s baby. I couldn’t make reckless decisions anymore because it wasn’t just my life I was dealing with.

The only problem was, I really didn't know how to do the soul exchange!

If I failed, it would bring the same outcome.

Luckily, the moment I reached for the artifact in Sebastian's hand, it started to glow and hum, like it recognized my essence or who I was—the artifact was calling out to me!

Thinking quickly, I picked up the knife. I could try to make it look like I had an idea of what should happen, but the moment the knife touched my hand, I suddenly just knew what to do. Without hesitation, I sliced open my palm, letting the blood pool into my hand.

I spilled a few drops of my blood on each part of the artifact. They all started to glow even brighter, humming louder.

The stone and the sheath rose into the air and the dagger trembled in my hand. I released it and it floated up with the other pieces. They swirled around each other and then merged together into one.

The dagger had a gorgeous blood-red gem in the hilt, the Moonlit Crystal, or according to Soren, moonstone. The sheath no longer looked dingy and drab. It was embroidered with glittering, shimmering red designs. Even the dagger looked different. The blade had the same design as the sheath etched into it.

The dagger slid into the sheath and it floated back down.

"Well done, well done!" Sebastian gushed excitedly. His hands trembled a little and I was able to step back from his grip.

He didn't try to grab me again, so I walked over to where Dylan was strapped to the altar.

"You're really going to listen to him!?" Dylan yelled at me.

I pulled the dagger from the sheath and hesitated.

Sebastian was cunning, manipulative, and dangerous. He'd proven that more than once. I knew the horrible things he'd done now and I didn't doubt that they were true.

He'd hurt everyone I cared about, my friends and my pack. Doing what he wanted me to wasn't the most pleasant thing. However, Dylan and I were not in terms either.

If I could save everyone that was important to me at the cost of Dylan's life, it wasn't a bad deal.

I gripped the knife tightly in my hand, the blade trembling slightly.

Sebastian stepped up behind me and grabbed my neck again, his thumb pressing against my pressure point. With one hard squeeze, I'd be dead.

"Do it, now!" he commanded. "I'm losing my patience. I'll count to three and if you still haven't done it, you and your baby will be dead! Along with everyone else you care about. At this point, I'm leaning towards killing you all!"

I gritted my teeth and raised the dagger higher.

"Three!" Sebastian cried.

'Mila!' Soren's voice rang in my head loud and clear through the mindlink.

'Soren!' My heart caught in my throat and I almost broke into tears!

"Two!" Sebastian shouted again.

'Mila, listen. I'm here. Try to get away from Sebastian,' he told me.

My heart fluttered. Knowing he was close was enough to give me strength and courage.

"One!" Sebastian's clutch tightened. I swallowed back my tears and gasped a few times, pretending I was out of breath from Sebastian's tight grip.

"I... I'll do it but... I-let go... I can't b-breathe," I gasped. "I... I can't r-run a-away..."

Sebastian growled. He flung me forward, but his hand was still around my neck.

I slammed against the altar. It jiggled and Dylan groaned. I bit my lip and glanced around, trying to find the best way to get away.

"Okay." I nodded and raised the dagger again.

I aimed it right for Dylan's heart. He closed his eyes and tensed.

Taking a deep breath, I slammed the knife down.

Clang!

The blade vibrated violently in my hand but I held it firmly.

The entire dungeon fell silent as the sound of the blade echoed off the stone walls.

Sebastian patted himself down. His lips twisted into a wolfish grin. "Ha. Ha... Hahahaha!" He threw his head back, laughing. "I've been waiting for this day for years!"

The sound echoed around the room even louder than the knife.

Meanwhile, I glanced at Dylan who was muttering something softly under his breath.

"Wha—"

The blade was stuck into the wood of the altar right between Dylan's chest and arm. It had struck some metal underneath, causing a loud sound.

Dylan opened his eyes, panting. He looked around wildly and then his eyes fell on me.

"I'm still..."

Sebastian then finally realized that I didn't stab Dylan as he expected. His laugh halted abruptly and his eyes glared at me with all the hatred I could imagine.

"You f*****g b****h! You're a cunt just like your mother and aunt. Why do you always have to challenge me? And you wonder why I lose control when you witch bitches mess with me over and over again!"

He flailed his arms around and struck a deadly blow as he roared, "Well, you had your chance. Get ready to die!"

"Grrrr!"

His blow did not land on me.

A beautiful, sleek, black wolf launched over the crowd of Sebastian's puppets and landed between me and Sebastian, snarling and standing before me protectively.

I watched as Soren's wolf struck Sebastian to the ground. He groaned and tried to get up but Soren pinned him down with a massive paw.

My heart raced and I smiled as Soren's wolf head turned toward me, giving me a nod.

Shadows approached from behind and my smile faded instantly.

The shadows were Sebastian's puppet warriors. They swarmed around Soren.

"Soren, look out!" I cried, pointing.

Snarling and growling, Soren fought them off, ripping their empty, shell bodies to shreds. He destroyed several of them with wide swipes of his paws while still keeping control of Sebastian.

I sighed in relief.

"Mila, release me. Help me so I can help Soren," Dylan called to me.

I glanced down at him, still strapped to the altar. "Why? I don't trust you any more than I trust Sebastian. Just because I didn't do what Sebastian asked me to do doesn't mean I want to help you."

Dylan snorted. "You don't have to trust me. But the enemy of my enemy is my friend. You don't have any other choices. Soren will lose against that army!"

"No, not a chance!" I snapped, backing away from him.

However, from the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Soren. No matter how many he killed, more and more came after him. His back paw slipped, and I saw he was losing the upper hand.

A puppet warrior ran past Soren while he was distracted, coming right at me! I lifted my hands and muttered a spell.

Roots sprang up from the ground, long, sharp thorns impaling some of the warriors and lifting them off the ground. They flailed in the air, stuck on the thorns. They weren't dead but at least they couldn't get free.

"What if I give you my word, Mila, to leave Pomeni pack and those Norwind survivors alone?" Dylan offered.

"How do I know I can trust your word?"

"In the name of the Goddess, I swear on my identity and my own life."

Dylan clenched his fists so hard that his nail sliced his palm. I saw blood drip out onto the altar of the Goddess.

A blood oath to the Goddess could not be betrayed. The higher ranking someone was, the heavier the punishment from the Goddess would be. As Alpha King, he was completely bound by his vow.

I turned my eyes to Soren, who was still fighting but definitely struggling. Then I looked back at Dylan.

Killing the king was never something in my plan, regardless who he really was. The country needed a ruler and I wasn't going to cause more chaos. If we could get out of here alive, I had to think about the future... and that meant the future and safety of Pomeni pack. It wasn't a secret anymore.

And if the Alpha King swore not to harm the pack, then that was solid protection we would need while rebuilding.

"Come on, Mila, I can provide resources to help Pomeni rebuild and grow," Dylan added.

I wavered again. It was almost too good of an offer and that was what concerned me.

"I can offer protection when needed, too."

How could I say no to that? The Alpha King would be the most powerful threat against our pack and he was offering protection instead? It was a good deal!

I watched Soren a moment longer.

He was fighting ferociously but I knew he couldn't keep it up much longer. I knew that the only reason he hadn't been torn apart was because he still had Sebastian pinned.

The way the warriors moved around Sebastian, they didn't seem willing to put their puppet master in harm's way, and that made it more difficult for them to attack Soren.

It was only a temporary solution. One of them could knock Soren off balance at any moment and then they'd be able to take him down while Sebastian recovered.

What was worse, we were still trapped in this underground chamber. Even if Thomas and Payne had been nearby, I had no idea how long it would take them to find their way here.

"What are you waiting for? Cut me loose so I can at least get us to the exit!" Dylan implored.

"Fine. We've got a deal. Just remember what you have promised, because I won't forget it!"

I moved another root through the ground and wrapped it around Dylan's neck, thorns placed against his jugular. It was harmless where it sat but one wrong move and it would stab him, or I'd tighten the noose.

Dylan scoffed but didn't argue as I cut him free.

Oddly enough, it had been Sebastian that gave me the idea when he'd threatened to choke me. Magic was my greatest defense and I wasn't about to let Dylan forget that I had advantages of my own.

"Get us to the exit," I demanded. "But if you try anything, we'll find out whether or not the Alpha King is really blessed by the Moon Goddess when my root closes around your throat."

Dylan didn't say anything this time. He jumped up the moment he was free and ran to one of the corners of the room, fighting off the warriors as needed but doing his best to avoid being tangled down in the battle. Knowing he was trying to get us out, I helped where I could as well.

It was dark, so I couldn't see exactly what he was doing at the corner. But after he went to the last corner, the wall Dylan had tried to close on Sebastian's army started to open again. The last time, Sebastian had thwarted the attempt.

This time, he couldn't.

"What are you doing you fool! Don't let him escape!" Sebastian cried, struggling under Soren's paw. "He's not what you think."

"He's getting us out, which is more than I can say about you," I hissed.

Soren was panting heavily. He still fought hard, but I could see his fur was matted with blood and there were scratches all over his face.

The wall lifted all the way and my heart soared.

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Payne, Thomas, and all of Soren's men stood there, shocked looks on their faces.

I imagined they'd come into the dungeon to rescue us and met a dead end in a passage that was supposed to be open, and they were left wondering what to do.

"Miss Mila, you're okay!" Payne exclaimed. I noticed the look of relief in his eyes.

Thomas grinned. He made a motion, like he was wiping sweat off his brow.

I was just as happy to see them as they were to see me.

Payne and Thomas did a quick glance around, evaluating the situation.

"Finally, we can make ourselves useful!" Thomas whistled, his eyes darted over to the army and he immediately led an assault on the puppet soldiers that were swarming Soren.

Payne was staring at the king, his eyes were focused on the thorny root around Dylan's neck.

Dylan was practically unrecognizable. He was covered in dirt and his clothes were torn. It wasn't what a king would normally look like. I was keeping a close eye on Dylan, making sure he wasn't going to try and sneak away.

"Is that..." Payne followed my gaze.

"The Alpha King," I confirmed. "He is going to lead us out. Isn't that right, Your Majesty?" I raised my voice at the end so he'd hear me clearly.

Payne balked and stared at the dirty, disheveled king. He looked more like a war prisoner than royalty.

"Well... Surely," Dylan muttered. "If you could loosen this root... that would be even better." He pointed at his neck.

I arched an eyebrow at him.

"I'm not sure what the royal guards would think if they saw this. Better they don't think you're threatening me," Dylan pressed.

I turned to Payne. "Can you please ensure that His Majesty is 'taken care of?' I don't want him... slipping away."

The corner of Payne's mouth twitched. "Yes, of course, Miss Mila." Payne motioned Dylan over and the king complied.

As slippery and crafty as Dylan was, Payne wouldn't let him get away.

I made the root go away the moment Payne had him surrounded by our men.

Payne moved Dylan out of the way of the puppet warriors.

I turned my attention back to Soren and Thomas. With his reinforcements, Soren was finally able to subdue Sebastian in a way that made the puppet warriors back off.

It looked like the situation was starting to get under control.

"Soren!" I called out to him.

He was still injured and I wanted to run to him and help him heal—I'd learnt a few new healing spells.

Before I took a step, I felt him in my mind.

'Stay there, my love. We're going to finish this off quickly,' he told me through the mindlink.

His voice was so soft and tender.

I nodded and looked down. He must have been furious at me for coming to the palace in the first place. I hadn't had a chance to talk to him about it yet.

But he didn't scold me or blame me like I expected. He just nodded to me. And from the moment we could communicate, he'd been gentle and kind...

My heart swelled with warmth and a flush spread over my skin. His soft words of "my love" echoed in my mind, bringing tears to my eyes.

'Be careful, and...' I mindlinked back, watching Soren turn his attention back to Sebastian and the warriors. It might not have been the best time, but I wanted him to know. 'I love you.'

He didn't reply. Not that I expected him to while he was in the middle of a harsh battle.

I sighed and took a step back. Finally, things were working out.

A shadow crept across my peripheral vision. I whipped my head around and stared at the newcomer.

"What the hell are you doing here, Eros?" I snapped, recognizing him immediately. How many times have I had to ask him the same question?! "I told you to take Helen and get to safety!"

Eros shrugged. "If I ran away, Ashley would kill me the next time she sees me."

As if on cue, Ashley appeared behind Eros. She glared at him, bristling. She was ready to pounce!

“You shut your mouth!” she snapped. “We don’t need to wait until ‘next time’ for me to do that.”

Eros ran his fingers across his lips like he was closing a zipper. “Hmmm. Mmm. Hmm.”

Ashley wasn’t alone. Lee and Madam Scarlet were with her.

What were they all doing here? I didn’t think either of them would interfere with anyone else’s issues. Especially not Madam Scarlet.

Lee would do Soren’s bidding, but I’d never seen him proactively come to a battlefield before.

“Hmm. HmMMMM,” Eros kept making those annoying humming sounds.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked Eros, frustrated by his untimely goofiness.

Eros glanced toward Ashley and motioned to her and then his lips.

I rolled my eyes. Just because Ashley said “shut your mouth”, Eros had to make a scene, ha?

Ashley groaned and rolled her eyes. “For f**k’s sake, just say what you want to say!”

Eros looked back at me. “I can’t stop Helen...”

“From what?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“From coming back...”

“What are you talking about!? Why the hell can’t you stop her? She’s so fragile and weak that she could barely speak and you’re a full-grown warrior wolf!”

Scrape. Scratch.

A shiver ran down my spine as I heard something dragging across the stone floor.

“What is that?”

Eros patted my shoulder. “Get ready, Mila. You’re going to be surprised...”

A dark silhouette appeared from the shadows. Based on the shape, it looked like a poised lady wearing a long dress.

When the silhouette came close enough for me to see clearly, my eyes bulged out of my head and I gasped.

A beautiful woman was gracefully making her way down the pathway toward us. It was none other than Aunt Helen! She didn’t look broken or weak and she was moving freely! How could that be?

While I was still at a loss for words, she had already come to stand right in front of me. Only then, I realized that she hadn’t magically grow new limbs, instead, she had used magic to wrap herself in roots. They held her upright and acted as her arms and legs.

The bottom roots carried her around, allowing her to move freely, and the roots that replaced her arms moved similarly to real arms. The color was all wrong but if I'd seen only her silhouette, I would have thought she grew her arms and legs back!

However, I was more in awe when I saw her face.

Her cheeks were healthy and glowing. On her smooth and fair skin, there were barely any wrinkles. Her hair was glossy and straight, all the way down to her waist. She'd even used magic to cover herself in a dress of little green vines with leaves and purple flowers.

What was more, her eyes were no longer empty or focusless, instead, the stunning green orbs were now fixed on me!

That pitiful, injured old lady I'd found in the dungeons was gone. She looked like an elegant forest elf or fairy, full of vitality and power. She now looked like the woman I'd always seen in my dreams. Only now, she looked more youthful and gorgeous.

"Aunt... Helen?" I gasped.

"I told you you'd be surprised," Eros chuckled beside me.

"Yes, my dearest Mila, it is me," Helen said, still beaming. A smile filled with strength and power. The roots that acted as her legs made her taller than everyone else in the room so she had to slightly lower her head when she spoke to me.

Her entrance was so beautiful and breathtaking. All I could do was stare at her. And I wasn't the only one. Everyone else had stopped what they were doing too, their eyes wide in shock.

Even Sebastian, who was still subdued by Soren, couldn't hide his shock. His jaw dropped open.

"No... that's not possible," Dylan gasped.

"How..." Sebastian murmured. "How... the fuck... is this possible?"

Sebastian growled and tried to leap at Helen, but Soren ground him into the floor. He lowered his head and snapped his jaws near Sebastian's face.

Helen's smile widened and she held a root arm out to Soren. Her face was glowing and she looked like an angel.

Her voice rang out beautifully. "It's okay, Mr. Black. You can let him go. You've already done more than you need to. Thank you." She nodded to Soren.

Soren perked his wolf ears up but he didn't release Sebastian right away.

"By the way, it is nice to meet you, Soren. I've heard a lot about you."

Soren took a slight step back. He tilted his head to the side, looking at Helen with confusion. He lowered his head, nodding to her and slowly backed away from Sebastian, retreating to a corner of the dungeon, still in wolf form.

As soon as Soren released him, Sebastian launched himself toward Helen with a fierce snarl.

My heart leaped into my throat and I tried to jump between them. No matter how good Helen looked right now, she must still be recovering from her fragile state. How could she defend against an attack like that?

However, she shook her head at me and lifted her chin.

The ground trembled, the stone floor split, and several leafy vines burst from underneath. They wove a wall between Sebastian and Helen.

Then she murmured something, several of the vines rushed forward and slammed into Sebastian. He tried to block or dodge, but how could four limbs fight against a hundred arm-thick, deadly stick weapons?

My ability to manipulate roots and vines was like a childish joke compared to Helen's!

In a blink of an eye, before any of us had time to react, two spiky sticks pierced Sebastian right through the heart.

My jaw dropped.

She defeated Sebastian...just like that?!

Sebastian's eyes flickered and his legs gave out but the vines held him in place.

"Finally, we are bringing this to an end." Helen's voice was firm as she "walked" over to him. "I have been waiting for this day for a long time."

Sebastian coughed and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. He opened his mouth and closed it again, but no words came out.

Helen looked at him with pity, she sighed, her tone was calm and soft, "The suffering should end, for both you and me."

He stared at her for a moment, and gave up struggling. Then his eyes closed and his last breath escaped, long and ghostly, from his lips.

Things happened too fast. For a moment, it was difficult to believe that the root cause of so many mysteries, conspiracies, resentment and pain that stretched over a period of 14 years, was just put to an end.

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Dylan was still staring at Helen. His face was a mixture of excitement, awe, and fear. But he did seem relieved that Sebastian had been defeated.

Helen met Dylan's gaze, her expression was peaceful. She nodded to him, and said something that only the few of us could understand, "Rest assured. What's done is done. I don't regret my decision."

However, that was the only thing she said to the king, and it didn't seem that she had any desire to converse with him more.

Payne stood by the king, keeping him from running off, shock in his eyes, too.

The puppets that were left stopped attacking. They started wandering around, bumping into each other and off the walls.

Soren came out of the shadows in human form. He'd found a t-shirt and sweats to throw on. Thomas must have brought spares in case they had to shift.

"Your Majesty, we don't want to hurt you," Soren said to the king. "However, based on your history, I think it would be best if you were to accompany us until we get to safety."

That was Soren's nice way of telling Dylan we were taking him hostage without making it sound like a threat.

"There are far too many hidden mechanisms in this place and I'm not going to risk getting trapped here with my men," he continued.

Dylan, or at this point, King Sebastian as he would be known going forward, didn't respond. He just looked at the guards around him, like he was saying he didn't have much of a choice.

Soren turned to Eros. "Lead the way. Let's get the hell out of this dungeon."

"Yes, Sir," Eros said cheerily. He headed off and motioned to us over his shoulder. "This way, follow me."

I saw Ashley roll her eyes but she followed after Eros with everyone else.

"Aunt Helen..." I went over to her. She was still supported by all the roots. "Are you able to move freely?"

Helen nodded and came down the corridor with us.

Eros was leading us back to the maze that led to the exit he'd tried to take me to earlier.

Soren and I stayed close to Helen. A few times, the roots that supported her slipped and I held my arms up to steady her. I thought it must be hard for her to "walk" like that. The ground was uneven and the roots couldn't feel the floor the same way feet could.

"Are you okay?" I asked, ready to catch her again.

"Don't worry, Mila. I'm just tired. I haven't used magic like this in a long time," she said, still smiling. She still looked strong and beautiful but I could tell that she was getting weary. Her energy was fading.

When Eros opened the last gate of the secret passage, sunlight streamed in, along with claws and teeth snarling at us.

More royal guards had arrived to protect the king.

Soren cleared his throat. "Please ask your men to back off. We're no threat to you."

"Back off!" the king barked. "These people are not your enemies. They are my prestigious guests and they saved the kingdom."

At the king's order, his royal troops stepped back, allowing us to file out into the sunlight.

I left Helen and followed Payne and the guards that surrounded the king.

“Your Majesty,” I called to him.

The sun hit me full force and I blinked several times. How long had I been in the dungeons? It felt like forever!

“Yes, Miss Mila?” the king asked, a pleasant smile on his face. He almost looked harmless and trustworthy.

“Before we leave, I want you to make good on your promise. Then we will let you return to your guards.”

“Very well,” the king replied. Then he told one of his guards, “Ask the Head of Finance to come see me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Soon, a he-wolf who was bowing his head over a large leather-bound logbook ran towards us. The king ordered, “Patton, I want you to prepare gold, food, and other supplies for the old Pomeni packland. Enough for a well-sized pack to thrive off of for several seasons.”

“I will see it done, Your Majesty,” the head of finance said as he started scribbling in the leather-bound logbook, and then hurried away.

“Are you happy now, Alpha Mila Hathaway?” the king asked.

I shook my head.

The king arched a thick eyebrow.

I smiled and pointed to Payne, “No, I’m not the Alpha. He is!”

Payne’s eyes bulged. “Miss Mila!”

I ignored Payne and continued to make my request to the king, “In the name of the Dark King, please name Payne Chambers as Alpha of the new Pomeni pack. From today, and every day going forward.”

The king c****d his head at me. “Are you sure?”

I nodded firmly.

He stroked his chin. It was clear he found it intriguing but he didn’t ask more questions.

“Fine, fine. I, the Dark King, Sebastian Crimson offer the blessing of power and leadership upon Payne Chambers. He will henceforth be the Alpha of the new Pomeni pack under my protection and will receive my aid while the pack grows and prospers,” the king said in a deep, formal tone.

Payne stared at the king. Then he turned his eyes to me, shock clear on his face. I didn’t think he’d be able to form words.

He looked at Soren, too, almost like he needed someone to confirm that what he heard was true.

I smiled at Payne and nodded. He’d really earned the leadership role and I knew he cared about Pomeni and the pack land, perhaps way more than me. He’d take care of it and the refugees.

And I...I just wanted to be with Soren and I knew his future was elsewhere.

From now on, I was all Soren's. If he wanted to have a pack, then I would stand beside him. If he wanted to stay a rogue, then I would be more than happy to live my life as a rogue.

My gaze met his, and like Payne, he was surprised. However, in his gaze, I got a sense of appreciation and pride as well.

Shortly, Patton returned with some shipping orders and handed them to Payne.

"We'll continue sending additional shipments over the next couple of months," he explained, showing Payne where to sign.

It was up to Payne now to get the supplies to the refugees.

I moved closer to Soren. We hadn't had a chance to talk yet but there would be plenty of time to catch up on the way back. I could wait a few more minutes.

Soren waved a hand at his men. "Help Alpha Payne with the shipments. We'll stay with the king," he ordered.

Payne, Thomas, and the rest of Soren's men all quickly got to work on loading up the first shipment of supplies to transport away from the palace.

I wasn't sure what we were waiting for but Soren kept a sharp eye on the king.

They stared at each other, neither one speaking or making a move.

Suddenly, Soren perked up and nodded. He must have received a mindlink from Thomas. He was the only other person I knew Soren could mindlink with.

"Everyone is safely away from the area. They are well beyond the Royal Pack's control," he told me.

"Alright, your Majesty, it looks like you're free to go," I said to the king. "Thank you for your generosity."

"And please rest assured, your secret ends with the three of us, as long as you leave us alone," Soren said, his voice dropping into a low threat.

Helen, Soren, and I were the only people left alive that knew the king's real identity. That gave us a powerful bargaining chip over him. Especially since I was still the only one that could perform the soul exchange.

"Yes, yes, I understand," the king said dismissively.

"Farewell, then, Sire," I said, bowing a little, letting out a relieved sigh. Thank the Goddess that everything seemed to turn out alright.

I'd rescued Helen, and resolved a significant threat for Pomeni. It was almost too good to be true, but I wasn't complaining.

We started to leave together, Helen moved a bit slower with her magically manufactured limbs compared to before. She must have been exhausted from using magic to this extent!

I couldn't wait to get out of here so we could all take some rest.

“Oh, Mila, one more thing!” King Sebastian called out from a hundred feet away.

I tensed and turned to face the king. His voice was warm, but I knew better than to lower my guard toward him.

When I turned around, he was holding his hand out. An exquisite hairpin rested on his palm.

The pin portion was made of gold with an intricate design engraved in the metal. The top of the pin was polished wood with a detailed butterfly carved into it. The butterfly’s wings were encrusted with real, sparkling gemstones. It looked like sapphires, rubies, and emeralds.

“This belonged to your mother. I think it is time I return it to its rightful owner.”

Something of my mother’s? My heart fluttered and I immediately wanted to take the hairpin. Other than the box of things she left me, I’d never had a personal item of my mother’s.

I took a step forward but Soren grabbed my arm. “Mila, keep going with Helen and watch out.”

He nodded down the road, his tone left no room for argument.

I didn’t fight back. He was right, we shouldn’t risk going back. As much as I wanted the hairpin, our safety was more important. Soren didn’t trust the king, neither did I.

I sighed and continued walking towards the forest ahead of us. Once we were there, the lush trees and complicated terrain there would provide sheltering for the three of us.

However, I stopped in my tracks when I realized that Soren didn’t come with us—he had gone back to the king to retrieve the hairpin!

“Soren, come back!” I tried to stop him, but he was already halfway there.

I stayed put. All the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and my heart raced. I had a knot in my stomach. My instinct told me that this wasn’t going to end well.

Soren

I needed to get the hairpin for Mila. It was sentimental, a personal item that belonged to her mother, potentially the only item we would ever be able to get.

In the dream that April had given us, I remembered seeing this same hairpin in Jessica’s hair. There was no disputing it belonged to her and I was going to get it for Mila.

But I didn’t trust the king’s motives. I wouldn’t risk her but a little risk for me was worth it.

I kept one hand shoved in my pocket, holding the hilt of a dagger I kept on me at all times. If the king tried anything, I could take him hostage in a second with the knife.

Standing in front of the king, I took the hairpin gingerly.

Nothing happened.

The king smirked. "Don't be so nervous. It is one kind deed for another. After all, this does rightfully belong to Mila..."

Sighing, I nodded and turned to return to Mila.

"...however, it should have been buried years ago, just like her!"

I froze, pupils dilating.

"s**t! Mila, run!" I shouted to her.

[Chapter 776](#)

My heart hammered in my chest, practically breaking my rib cage. I raced across the lawn toward her.

Something whizzed past my ear and sunk into the ground. An arrow.

I heard the sounds of whizzing in the air behind me. It sounded like hundreds of arrows descending on us all at once. Any second, they'd rain down and we wouldn't be able to dodge them all!

How had I let myself underestimate the king and his own penchant for cruelty? I'd hoped it died with Sebastian, but I should have known that Dylan came from the same ruthless blood!

I dodged arrows as they plunged at me.

Mila and Helen used their vines and roots to fend off the incoming projectiles. They created their own shield wall, for the time being.

"Your Majesty, are you really going to go against your blood oath!?" Mila cried over the sound of pelting arrows.

Blood oath? When did that happen?

If Dylan was about to violate a blood oath, maybe I hadn't underestimated him at all. He was just dumb!

The king laughed loud enough to be heard over the arrows.

"How am I breaking my blood oath? I agreed to help Pomeni pack and leave Pomeni alone. I will honor that. But you... you so graciously gave away your ties to that pack. And I did not make a vow not to kill you!"

"Mila, just run! You can't reason with him," I shouted.

I waved my arms, trying to move her and Helen along.

Of course, the king would want to take her life. She knew his secret. She had the Blade of Souls, and she was the only one that could do the soul exchange. He couldn't let her live!

"Come on, Soren. I'm not leaving without you!" she motioned for me to get behind the plant shield.

She opened a crack in the shield wall and I moved to the opening.

Click. Click. Click.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw three crossbow bolts flying right at Mila's heart.

By opening the shield, she'd exposed herself! Crossbow bolts moved much faster than regular arrows. There was no time for her to dodge or close the shield in time.

When I looked back at Mila, I saw the terror in her eyes.

I threw myself across the opening, all three bolts lodging in my chest.

White hot, searing pain tore through me. It felt like my insides were being ripped apart. One of the arrows shattered my ribs, another went through my stomach.

My heart clenched and warm blood soaked through my shirt instantly. One of them must have grazed my heart as it beat in a rapid, panicked rhythm.

For a moment, time stopped. I felt like I was suspended in midair, laughing at myself as I felt the pain of a real "broken heart."

The real agony came when I twisted and saw Mila's face. Horror reflected in her big, blue eyes. Her mouth was open in a silent scream.

Vines and roots burst from the ground around me. They encased me and pulled me behind the shield wall, protecting me from any more harm.

"Soren, what..." Mila dropped to her knees beside me, pushing the roots away.

I looked up into her eyes, seeing tears streaking her face. Her eyes were red and puffy. She grabbed my hands but already my fingers were numb and I could barely feel anything.

Except for the agonizing pain!

"Soren, look at me. Stay with me," Mila pleaded. She turned my face to stay focused on her.

I wanted to stay with her but I knew I was dying. No matter how much I fought, no matter how much I wanted to stay with her, I couldn't fight off death...

I tried to smile and pushed the hairpin toward her.

Mila sobbed and threw herself across my chest. Her tears mixed with my blood, soaking my shirt through. She gripped the torn fabric, tears streaming down her beautiful face.

"I don't want it! I don't care anymore. I only need you. I love you, Soren. Please, don't leave me. Don't leave us... You can't leave me and the baby."

Her words broke my heart for a second time. But I knew there was no recovering from these wounds. My insides were too damaged.

Forcing myself to use my numb arm, and using all the strength I had left, I put my hand on the back of her head. Her hair was soft and silky, slipping through my fingers.

My sweet, beautiful, strong Mila... I loved her more than anything in this world, or any other.

She was my mate and my life, and inside her, was our precious baby. How I wished I could have met our child...

She shuddered against me, crying even harder.

I wanted to tell her how much she meant to me and how much I loved her, but if I did that, when I died, she would live her life in sorrow. She'd be haunted by my memory, she'd be alone.

Thus, I couldn't tell her my true feelings.

I couldn't let my love become her burden. I couldn't so selfishly bind her to my death. I couldn't let her spend her life mourning me and I wouldn't allow our child to grow up without a father.

I had to do something...

"Mila..."

"Shh. Don't speak! You need to rest."

"Soon enough... I will rest... Mila... listen..."

She lifted her watery eyes to mine, sniffing.

"You are a wonderful woman but I need to be honest before I go..."

"Soren, stop talking!" she urged, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry...but you're not my type...I've been lying to you... because one day... if I survive this... I will have to go back to my realm... I need to go back to her..."

Mila's eyes widened and she went dead quiet for a moment, staring at me in complete disbelief.

"You deserve someone... better... younger... more handsome... and most importantly... someone who treats you with a true heart."

"Soren..."

"Your child needs a father. But I'm... I'm not the right one..."

I could barely force the words out, and not just because my energy was fading fast. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her and break her heart, but if I did this now, hopefully, she would be upset with me, angry at me, and after some time, move on from me...

"Shut up!" she snapped. "I'm not listening to that crap."

"You should go...Leave me now and go."

"No!"

Sighing, darkness clouded the edges of my vision. My consciousness was slipping.

"Mila!" Helen gasped, perking me awake. "They are burning the forest!"

I tried to fight the wave of fatigue that gripped me, like little hands reaching up from the underworld, grabbing me and dragging me down, but I couldn't resist the cold numbness that took over my body.

Helen's voice rang again in my head. I couldn't understand what she was saying and it took a moment for me to realize that was because she was speaking another language.

Then, it all went silent.

“Soren!” Mila’s devastated scream pierced my ears.

I opened my mouth to speak. The words were so clear in my mind but I didn’t know if I actually spoke them.

“I’m sorry...”

Blackness consumed me.

Mila

My hands trembled as I put my palm on his chest and leaned over so my cheek was above his nose.

His heart was still.

No breath came from his nose.

My heart shattered into a million pieces as fresh tears poured down my face.

I stopped caring that the king was getting closer and that he wanted to kill me. The sounds of arrows pelting the plant shield faded into the background.

Soren was gone and I wanted to die with him!

The forest shook with small explosions. Each one got closer and closer, shaking the ground.

It was like the forest itself cried and protested the loss of my love.

Fire burned all around us. I could feel the flames but they weren’t hot. I should have been sweating, and burning, but all I felt was icy cold.

“I’ll fix this, Soren,” I whispered, remembering the times I’d used magic to stop death. “Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat.”

I started chanting,

“Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat.”

“Mila, he is dead!” Helen came to my side. She used one of her magical arms to try and pull me away.

“No!” I wailed. I clung to Soren’s bloody, torn shirt. I could see his wounds clearly.

“Mila!”

“No, look!” I gasped, pointing to his chest. “The wound... it is healing.”

Helen stopped trying to push me away. She leaned in closer, narrowing her eyes. “That’s...” she frowned.

“Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat.”

“Dead bodies don’t heal, Mila.”

“Then he has to still be alive!”

Helen’s frown deepened. “Soren was blessed by the White Queen.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. I couldn’t pull my eyes away. It was slow, but I could see his other wounds improving, too.

Helen sighed and shook her head. “It just means that his body, his physical body, heals faster than normal people. Listen, Mila, your spell may heal his wounds, but it can’t raise him from the dead.”

I looked at Soren’s still form. “No! It has to work! He isn’t dead... he can’t die... he just can’t! Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat. Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth—”

“Mila, stop!” Helen insisted, interrupting me sharply. “You’re going to hurt your baby. You still have to live, Mila, for your child. That is how you keep Soren alive, through his child!”

It was like lightning struck me and I was really hearing Helen’s words for the first time.

She was right. There was a small, innocent life growing inside of me. A part of Soren was still inside of me. I couldn’t allow his bloodline to end. It was my responsibility and the meaning of the rest of my life to see our child born and grown.

Tears still poured from my eyes but I lifted my head to look at Helen, but my heart sank more and I was terrified when I saw her face.

Helen had completely transformed again. She looked like she’d aged over fifty years!

Her face was wrinkled, and her skin drawn tight over her bones. Her hair was gray and scraggly and she looked pale and weak.

“Aunt Helen!” I gasped.

“Mila, no time to explain. Help me! Chant with me. We are going to use the Sheath of Protection. You still have the artifact, right?”

I nodded dumbly, pulling out the artifact and handing it to Helen.

She shook her head and touched the sheath with one of her magical hands, so we were both touching it.

“Aborra covista nonat,” Helen chanted. “Mila, please, chant with me. Aborra covista nonat”

I nodded and began chanting, copying Helen’s words.

The sheath began to glow. The light got brighter and bigger, creating a bubble around us. The bubble spread, keeping the fire, explosions, and heat at a safe distance from us. It couldn’t hurt us now.

“I’m not leaving Soren,” I insisted. I stood up and weaved a make-shift stretcher, dragging him along with us.

Helen sighed, but she didn’t stop me.

The explosions and fire were devouring the entire forest and mountain and even with the protection from the Sheath, we couldn't stay here for long.

We picked up our speed. Helen stumbled a little as she walked, her magical limbs shaking slightly.

"This barrier will shield us as we move but we've got to get somewhere safer," she instructed.

The king had blown up an entire mountain in Norwind and tried to bury us alive. I shouldn't have been surprised that he'd burned down an entire forest to kill us.

Luckily, no one could pursue us, for anyone else who set foot into the forest would be burned to death in just a few moments.

We hiked non-stop for at least three hours before finally making it to a cave that was in another well-covered forest. Looking back, the fire and smoke from the burning mountain could still be seen even from here, which was miles away.

"Let's take shelter here tonight," Helen suggested.

It was far enough that even if the royal clan decided to comb through every mountain and forest nearby to seek us, it would take them months to find us, let alone there shouldn't be any reason for the king to believe we'd made it out alive.

I nodded my agreement and moved inside, laying Soren's body down gently.

Then, behind me, there was a horrible clatter.

Whipping around, I saw Helen in a heap on the ground. Her plant limbs were scattered around her and she looked like she'd aged even more.

She was just as injured and worn out as she'd been when I found her in the dungeon.

"Aunt Helen!" I ran to her, dropping to my knees beside her. "What happened to you?"

"Oh, Mila, I'm okay," she smiled. "Listen to me."

But my recently dried eyes opened up again and more tears spilled out. She obviously was not okay and I wasn't sure whether I wanted to hear what she was about to say.

"I took Devil's Claw. It is... a powerful potion. For a short time, it allowed me to gather the peak of my strength and power and restored my youth and vitality, but it only works for 12 hours, or until it uses up the remainder of my life force. Whichever comes first," she explained, "And it looks like...my time is up."

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I shook my head and cradled Helen's tortured body in my lap. "Why? It can't be true! Please, tell me it isn't true... I can't lose you...not when I just lost Soren. I can't lose you again!"

Helen smiled wryly. "Listen to me, before my energy fades completely. Years ago, I thought I did something that was righteous and important. I did everything I could to stop an unwanted future. Yet... everything in my prophecy came true..."

"It's okay, it's all in the past now! Don't waste your energy," I whispered.

“Please... for many years, I wondered what would have been different if I’d never acted. But there’s no going back in life.”

I sniffled and leaned down, kissing her forehead. I still couldn’t believe she’d sacrificed herself with a powerful potion like that! She’d just come back into my life and now she was leaving.

“Ever since then, I’ve been waiting for this day, Mila. To be able to meet you, and bring all this to an end. Those were the only purposes I had left in life and I accomplished both in one day. It is a good day.”

“You’re dying... How is that good?”

“Because I’ve lived my life and accomplished my goals. I started this, and now I’ve ended it. I’ve fulfilled my purpose and now I am going to be reunited with my beloved sister. Don’t weep for me, Mila, be happy for me.”

Whatever words I wanted to say died on my lips. I kept shaking my head over and over again. This couldn’t be happening!

Helen’s lips strained to smile. “My dear, sweet Mila. You are strong and you have to be strong for your child.”

“I don’t know how,” I whispered. “Aunt Helen, you can’t leave me alone.”

“You’ll figure it out, Mila, on your own. I promise.” Helen winced slightly and closed her eyes. “Now, there is just one more thing I need to do.

In a whisper, Helen chanted something so low I couldn’t hear it.

Suddenly, my fingers tingled and I felt as if a refreshing gust swept through my body, lifting a thin layer of fog from my brain and invisible weights off my limbs. Whatever had been blocking the rest of my power was gone. All my witch ability and strength coursed through me at full force.

I gasped, feeling the last traces of the Blackfire poison leaving my body.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes and I leaned down, hugging Helen. My face was right against hers.

Helen turned toward me and kissed my cheek. “Goodbye, my dear niece... may the Goddess look after you.” She spoke in a content, peaceful tone.

I felt her life leave her in a final gasp. The sheath of protection, which I’d tossed on the ground, seemed to also exhaust all its power and vanished into ashes at the same time.

“No!” I cried, sobbing as more tears poured from my eyes. I looked up at the roof of the cave, imagining the night sky and kneeling on my knees.

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

Again and again, I chanted, “Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat...”

I felt my newly unblocked energy draining from me, but I didn't care. I just needed to do something, anything, in order to hold on to a faint hint of hope.

"Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat..."

What was the point of having magic if I couldn't use it to save the ones I loved?

Ignoring Helen's warnings, I poured my magical energy into Helen and Soren and the cave around me.

I knew it was useless, but I continued, and it was like all my energy was sucked into the endless bowels of the earth. My baby was strong and it would understand. My mother's instinct told me it would be fine.

My body finally became exhausted. The whole world spun around me in a blur, and I started to lose my senses. I thought it was better to just pass out this way rather than stay awake and face the cruel agony of reality.

"Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat..."

As the spell drained my strength, the world started to fade away from me. Time started to blur. I didn't know how long it had been. I wasn't even sure whether I was awake or unconscious.

And I didn't care.

"Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat..." was all I could remember saying whenever I regained consciousness.

Until I felt the tiniest, smallest tug deep inside my womb.

Was it the baby?

I felt the tug again and put a hand over my stomach. It must have been the baby.

"That's right, Mila, you've got to eat... The baby needs food."

My voice was hoarse and raw. I licked my dry lips. They cracked and I tasted coppery blood. I needed water...

It was already bright outside. I'd spent an entire night in the cave already.

I glanced down at Helen's body and stopped chanting. It wasn't doing anything, anyway.

Grrrrrggg.

...and I also need food. I hadn't realized how starving I was.

Then I felt another gentle tug. The little one finally started to protest against my reckless actions and demanded its mother's proper attention.

I couldn't think about Helen and Soren right now. I needed to focus on what was most important, and right now, that was taking care of my baby.

Reaching for the nearest cave wall, I pulled myself into a standing position. My legs shook a little.

I looped an arm around my stomach.

“You’re alright, little one,” I said. Talking to the baby helped me keep my focus. “I won’t die yet. Your father might be gone but I’m not going to let anything happen to you... I’d never survive losing you too.”

Outside the cave, it was quiet. It appeared the Alpha King had given up on trying to find us. I couldn’t hear any more explosions and the fires were gone or had been put out. After a quick peek, I decided that there was nothing around but the forest.

Ducking into the bushes, I stayed hidden as I collected some berries. I stuffed them into my mouth, licking the juice off my fingers as I kept searching for water.

Luckily, there was a stream nearby. Dropping on my knees, I scooped water into my palms and sucked it down. I refilled my palms and drank again and again, washing down the remaining berries and satiating my thirst.

After about half an hour, my legs stopped trembling and I felt life and energy return to my body. I couldn’t feel any more tugs, so the little life inside me must be satisfied now that it had gotten some nutrition.

Above me, golden sunshine seeped through layers of leaves and landed on the green grass, making the forest look colorful and vibrant. It brought me a brief moment of peacefulness. But soon, I started to wonder what I was supposed to do next.

Payne and Thomas were on their way to Pomeni and there was no way for me to get in touch with them. Even if I could, I should probably stay away for their own sake.

The king would surely keep his blood oath and leave Pomeni pack alone. As for me...it would be best for him to believe that I was dead and burned to ashes.

In fact, Helen and Soren were...I shook my head and stopped my own thoughts before I was overwhelmed by anguish again.

I sighed and stood up, letting my leg carry me back to the cave.

Helen and Soren were lying still on the ground. I swallowed into my tight throat and forced back the tears, but I also knew I couldn’t just leave the two of them lying there forever.

Soren was perfectly still and hadn’t moved at all. He didn’t look dead. The color hadn’t left his cheeks. He could have been sleeping.

I looked at his face and moved some of his hair out of the way. I half expected to see him wince the way he did when I tickled him.

He remained motionless and tears stung my eyes. How could I let him go?

I forced my head to turn to Helen.

Bending down, I scooped Helen’s fragile, broken body into my arms. She was so light, like her bones and muscles had already blown away in the wind. Carrying her was easy.

I took her out of the cave and looked for the most peaceful, beautiful place I could find to lay her to rest.

On the other side of the cave was a small meadow. The grass was lush and green and there were little white and purple wildflowers in bloom.

A soft breeze rippled through the grass and rustled leaves in the trees that surrounded the meadow. The sun shone down warmly, making the meadow glow with an ethereal halo.

It was a perfect place.

I laid Helen down at the base of a large willow tree. Its branches swayed in the breeze, reaching out like they were ready to carry Helen home.

It took a while, but I dug a hole in the soft ground and buried Helen under the willow.

“Aunt Helen, I’m so sorry that I can’t bring you back to Miltern, your home. I hope you like this meadow.” I said, sitting on my knees beside the fresh grave, laying some flowers on the upturned dirt.

I stayed by the side of her grave all afternoon until the warmth of the day faded and my stomach tugged again. Sighing, I pressed my hand to my belly and placed my other hand on Helen’s grave.

“I’ve got to go. I need to feed the baby. Also, Soren is still waiting for me...”

I found some stones to mark the place. If I ever got the chance to come back here, I’d know where to pay my respects.

Before it got too dark, I went out into the forest again and found some edible mushrooms and some more berries. When passing the stream, I also got some more water and headed back to the cave for the night.

However, I froze and my heart leaped into my throat as soon as I saw the entrance of the cave.

To keep Soren and my hideout safe, I’d grown roots over the cave. Down the center of my protective wall, there was a giant split in the roots. Someone had gotten in!

Quietly, I slinked toward the cave.

I heard snarling and heavy breathing coming from inside the cave. No longer caring what danger might be ahead of me, I shifted and charged into the cave without thinking, and came face to face with a giant bear!

The bear sniffed at Soren’s body, its big, wet, black nose poking at his arms and his clothes.

Immediately, my wolf responded aggressively. How dare another animal approach our mate?

“Awoooo!” my wolf howled.

The bear growled and whipped around, staring me right in the eyes.

I snarled and pawed the ground, showing my sharp teeth.

The bear stared back for several moments. If he even made one move close to Soren, I would shred him into pieces!

Suddenly, the bear whimpered and lumbered out of the cave, running deeper into the forest.

I shifted back. My knees trembled and my heart hammered as I went to check on my mate.

Heart still racing, I ran to Soren. I dropped to my knees and patted him down to make sure the bear hadn't damaged him. Of course, I knew he had passed... in reality, whatever the bear had done wouldn't make a difference. But I just couldn't allow anything to happen to him.

Peeling back the tatters of Soren's ripped shirt, I was surprised to see the dried blood around his wounds but the crossbow bolt holes were completely healed.

Then I noticed some new scratches on his arms from the bear and the cuts were bleeding!

Tears escaped the corners of my eyes and I gasped. I ran to what supplies I had and found some gauze. Running back to Soren, I started to clean his wounds.

Sniffing, I wiped my tears with the back of my hand.

"I'm sorry... this is all my fault," I whimpered. "Had I not gone to the palace... had I not been so stubborn... none of this would have happened. And now, I can't even keep your body safe..."

Tears streamed down my cheeks and clung to my chin. They dripped onto Soren's face. I folded the gauze over and wiped my tears off of him too.

"Wait..." I froze and looked at Soren's arms again.

He was bleeding blood! Fresh blood! His body felt like it was getting warmer, not colder!

How was that possible? How was any of this possible?

My stomach tugged again and a swell of hope rose in me like the rising tide. I tried to shove it back down, too afraid to hope.

Was this really happening? Was I imagining things? Had I lost my mind after losing Soren and Helen? Maybe I was just going insane...

My heart raced and I started breathing faster, hyperventilating.

"Goddess, Great Goddess, please help us...please let him return to us!"

My hand trembled as I brought it over his nose and mouth, feeling for his breath...

[Chapter 778](#)

Three Months Later

I walked through the busy town square, grocery bags in my arms. Some of the other pedestrians recognized me. They nodded and smiled in greeting.

I'd been in Marno pack for a while now.

The square was always busy. There was a large trade center and they liked their fairs. Travelers came and went and it was a good place to stay under the radar.

I could easily blend in.

The massive trade center allowed me to have access to many rare herbs I would otherwise have to gather in the wild. It would take months, maybe years, to travel the world collecting those precious ingredients.

“Dr. Way, it is nice to see you,” one of the locals said, tipping his hat to me.

Some people called me Heather, some referred to me as Dr. Way. Even those that recognized me only did because they saw me regularly. They didn’t know my real name.

“Good morning.” I smiled back.

“Did you see the new healing herbs that came in this week? We haven’t had those herbs in years. The temperatures haven’t been right for their growth in the south.”

“Oh, please show me,” I said.

The vendor reached under his table and pulled out bundles of three small plants I had been wanting to get.

“I’ll take half of each bundle,” I said. I would take more, but I also need to watch my spending, to a degree. Luckily, the formulas I was studying only require small amounts of those ingredients.

“Wonderful. I’ll wrap them for you. How are you liking this weather?”

The vendor made small talk as he wrapped up the herbs.

I took my bundles and moved on to another vendor selling fresh fruits and vegetables.

“Ahh, Heather, I have something I know you’ll love,” the fruit vendor was a pleasant middle-aged woman. She smiled sweetly and pulled out a crate of fresh fruits I hadn’t seen before.

I picked one up and examined it. “What is this?”

“It’s called a Prickly Apple. You know, these are very nutritious, especially for expecting mothers.” She winked and motioned to my baby bump.

“Alright, I’ll take three.”

I greeted a few more of the vendors. They all knew me as Doctor Heather Way.

Once I was done with my shopping, I headed to Hill’s Clinic down the street.

The nurse, Piper, came up to me as I set the bags down.

“Heather, good morning. A patient you helped a few days ago has been waiting for you.”

“Oh, is something wrong?” I pulled my jacket off and hung it on the coat rack behind the front desk.

Piper was just a year younger than me and we were more friends than coworkers.

“No. Nothing is wrong! In fact... he made a full recovery. I don’t know how you did it!” Piper grinned excitedly.

“Magic,” I winked.

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, right! Keep bullshitting me.”

I chuckled, wondering what her reaction would be if she knew it was partially true.

“Ahh, Dr. Way, good morning,” a tall blond man said, appearing beside Piper. He was in his mid-twenties, a little older than me, with a bright smile and smoky eyes. “Thank you so much for helping me! My allergies... ugh, they were going to kill me. And somehow, you cured me just like that! After years of suffering.”

I smiled professionally at him. “You’re welcome, Peter. I’m glad it worked. You know, you paid me far more than the bill asked for. Is there anything else I can help you with, to make up the difference?”

Peter grinned, his face flushed a little. “No... no... I’m feeling fine. It’s just that...” He scratched the back of his head. “I was wondering if I could ask you out on a date.”

My jaw dropped slightly and I looked at Piper.

She gave me an ‘I knew it’ look.

I rolled my eyes at her and then smiled at Peter. “I appreciate the offer. However, I’m not looking to date anyone right now.”

In order to make it more convincing, I even popped up my belly a bit more. “My baby is demanding all my attention.”

“But... I can wait until you’re free... you know, and we can figure it out—”

“I believe Doctor Way has made herself clear,” a deep, masculine voice boomed from the hallway.

A brown-haired man walked in. He was as tall as Peter and a few years older. But he was much stronger, his chest broader and more filled out.

“This place is for patients only. If you are feeling better today, I suggest you allow Dr. Way to get back to her work.”

Though his words were professional and polite, there was definitely a warning in them.

I let out a sigh of relief. Sometimes, it was nice having someone to step in during an awkward situation.

“Good morning, Dr. Hill,” I greeted.

Peter cleared his throat quickly. “Well, in that case, I should go. Dr. Way... if you ever change your mind... Please let me know.”

He waved and left quickly, seemingly not willing to displease Dr. Hill.

I didn’t blame him. Dr. Victor Hill wasn’t just the best healer in town. He was also an accomplished warrior.

“Heather, this is the third time this month!” Piper said, nudging me. “You’re really popular. And you know, Peter is quite handsome. Maybe a little silly, but a good guy. And, he’s rich. Why don’t you want to date him?”

"If you like him so much, why don't you date him?" I nudged Piper back, teasing her.

Piper pouted. "Well, he didn't ask me. But even if he did..." she sighed and glanced at Dr. Hill. "My brother would have to approve. Isn't that right BIG BROTHER?" she stuck her tongue out at the back of Victor's head.

Dr. Hill turned to arch an eyebrow at her and cleared his throat. "Piper, you're still too young. Wait until 21 when you can sense your mate."

"See?" Piper shrugged, and we giggled.

Victor turned to me. "Heather, didn't I tell you to leave those male patients to me so you could save yourself the hassle?"

"I have been. But you went to a patient's house last Wednesday and Peter was suffering. I couldn't tell him to wait. Anyway, I'm ready for my checkup."

"Follow me."

Victor led me to his desk. Piper followed along. She got me hooked up with the different monitors and wrapped my arm with the cuff of the blood pressure gauge.

Victor checked my vitals and drew some blood.

After spending time with Charles in Norwind and Pomeni, I'd honed my healing skills enough to get a job at the Hill's Clinic of Marno. Between that and the spell book, I'd been able to handle patients.

It was a good way to make a living for the past few months, but I still preferred having an experienced doctor check on my baby.

Victor made notes in my chart and looked over his previous notations about my pregnancy and vitals.

"The baby is growing at a strong, healthy rate. There's nothing to worry about. Your vitals are normal and your blood looks good. You've got nothing to worry about."

He set my chart aside and grinned at me.

"Keep doing what you're doing. But since your due date is about three months away... I'd recommend getting in touch with a midwife."

"Thank you, Victor. Do you have anyone you can refer me to?"

He nodded. "Sure. Mrs. Martin is the best in town."

Piper ripped the blood pressure cuff off my arm, the velcro screaming.

"Heather, I can get you in touch with Mrs. Martin. She's been a family friend for a long time. I'll be right back!" Piper danced off.

"Thank you, both of you." I nodded to Piper as she exited the room.

"You know, my offer still stands," Victor said casually, turning to his other patient charts. "Piper and I have plenty of space in the apartment above the clinic. You could move in and we could look after you."

“I appreciate that but...”

“You know being a single mom isn’t exactly easy. And at the rate, you turn down dates...”

He smirked and winked at me.

“Victor, I appreciate your thoughtfulness and all the help you’ve given me. But you and Piper have already done too much.”

“You know we don’t mind.” He leaned back in his chair and gazed at me with half-lidded eyes. His warm gaze fixed on me, and I didn’t need telepathy to know what he was implying. This was not at all what I expected to happen this morning.

“Heather, since the first day I saw you, I wanted to tell yo—“

“I’ve got to get these groceries home,” I interrupted.

Having Victor confess to me was the last thing I needed. I appreciated the job and how he had been keeping a professional distance between us in addition to helping keep the other he-wolves away from me.

It didn’t make any sense, either. He had all the young women in town head over heels for him. Why would he want to be with a pregnant woman over any of them?

I grabbed my grocery bags and smiled at Victor.

“You and Piper have helped me so much. I am very grateful. I didn’t realize I’d been causing unnecessary trouble for you... and I apologize. But I won’t let it continue. This will be my last day working here.”

“Heather... you don’t need to do that! I didn’t mean any harm.”

“I know,” I nodded. “You and Piper are like family, but because of that, I can’t watch you get hurt by me. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have said anything. Please, come back to work tomorrow. I won’t bring it up ever again. Your patients adore you and the clinic is far too busy for just Piper and me to handle.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. From the beginning, he’d been respectful and kind. He’d always kept things professional.

“Why don’t you take the rest of today off? Come back tomorrow or the day after, whenever you’re comfortable, okay?”

I sighed and nodded slowly. I did need a job and I felt like I could trust Victor to keep things professional like before.

He sighed with relief, obviously happy I was staying.

“I think I will take a few days off, though.”

“Of course.”

Victor walked me to the clinic door. Just as I stepped out, he called after me.

“Heather!”

“Hmm?” I asked, stopping in my tracks.

“Can I ask... why?”

I froze in place for a moment. Finally, I spoke. “Because I have loved, and will only love one man, whether he’s alive or dead.”

“Then where is he now?”

I didn’t answer and walked out of the door.

[Chapter 779](#)

When I first got to Marno, I wasn’t able to afford to live in the lap of luxury.

I kept a small apartment on the edge of the packland. The building was pretty beat up, the shingles slipping off and the siding had big chunks taken out of it.

Now, on a clinic salary, I could move to a nicer place, but I had grown fond of the neighborhood.

Despite Marno’s active trading business and tourist industry, its wealth wasn’t evenly distributed among the pack members. For example, most people that lived in this area of the packland were in a rough place financially. Life wasn’t easy for them, and thus, they weren’t exactly friendly to begin with.

At first, people in my building had given me the cold shoulder or even cursed for no reason under their breath as I walked by. However, they didn’t do anything to hurt me. After I’d ignored their harmless provocation for a while and helped one elderly with his rheumatic disorder, their attitude had changed 180 degrees.

Now, I knew they’d look out for me. After all, those were good people with rough shells.

I walked up the steps to my apartment and ran into one of my neighbors who was heading down.

“Heather, you’re home early today. Slow day at the clinic?”

“Honey, she’s a doctor,” my neighbor’s wife jumped in, poking her head out their door. “Call her Dr. Way! Oh, she shouldn’t be carrying those grocery bags. Too heavy for pregnant women. Honey, help her up the stairs with those!”

She stepped out into the hall, her own seven-month-old baby on her hip.

“Oh, right, Dr. Way,” the young husband took the groceries from me. “And, yes, let me help you.”

He walked me down the hall and set my groceries in front of my apartment door. “There you are, Dr. Heather Way!”

To make his wife happy, he raised his voice so that his wife could hear him “properly” pronounce my “full name”.

“You can call me Heather outside the clinic,” I said, smiling. “Thank you for the help.”

“No problem! Really, it should be us thanking you. You did cure our son. We had no idea he was sick... just thought he was throwing a tantrum and refusing to eat.” He sighed and shook his head.

“Well, if you want to carry my groceries more often, that could make up for it,” I suggested jokingly.

The young husband grinned and nodded. Then he frowned.

“Oh, by the way...”

“Yes?” I asked.

“You should be careful the next few days. Maybe even better to stay home. The trading season has started. A pretty, single young woman like you will attract a lot of unwanted attention from strangers.”

“Trading...” I muttered. He was referring to the slave trade that rolled through. “Thank you. I will keep that in mind.”

After that, he left me alone in the hall.

I let myself into my apartment and pulled the groceries inside. I chopped up all the veggies and threw them into a pot for soup. Once it was simmering, I put my herbs away and put some fresh flowers in a vase.

Going to the nearest wall, I pressed my hand against it.

“Anno hitho aтем.”

A doorknob appeared.

When I first arrived here, I had to keep this room hidden so that random visitors wouldn't know my secret. I had no interest in knowing what people would think of me if they knew I'd been living with a “dead” body.

The first few days, Soren was barely breathing and that was why even Helen thought he was dead. Until that one night, the bear almost attacked him. He bled and I felt the slightest breathing from him.

After that, I promised myself I would never give up on him. The spell I'd used was helping him heal. Maybe he hadn't been fully dead when I started it and it kept Soren from slipping to his demise completely.

I brought him fresh flowers and repeated the healing chant. Then, I'd pray to the Moon Goddess that he'd come back to me.

Even though he was still unconscious and not fully there, I made this part of my daily routine.

So far, he was making steady progress.

Soren's breathing was steadier and more consistent. His heartbeat was getting stronger, too. I could feel it now. Before... it had been so faint I didn't think it was there.

I still had no idea when he'd wake up. Maybe he'd wake tomorrow, maybe in 10 years, maybe...never. I didn't care. He was still with me and I would care for him forever and that was what mattered.

For the first time, I felt like I could actually understand Chandler's motives with his Luna.

How many times had I told him to just let her go? It was easy to tell him that when I hadn't experienced the loss of the love of my life.

"Soren, I'm back. I'm right here," I greeted, squeezing his hand.

I set the vase beside his bed and opened the curtain on the window.

The bright, morning sunlight streamed in, covering his face. His eyes might have been closed but I still wanted him to feel the sunshine. It would keep his skin healthy.

The glow of the sun brought color to his cheeks and made his hair shimmer. His face was a bit pale, but not too bad. He was still the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

I knelt down beside the bed and took his hand. The chant came easily to me now. "Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat. Amina hasteth corro sinat, amina hasteth corro sinat."

Soren's skin lightened a little and he looked a lot healthier suddenly. The hollows of his cheeks filled out some and his muscles tensed a little.

My own body had weakened, like some of my vitality had transferred to him.

I laid down on the bed beside Soren and rested my head on his shoulder. I started telling him about my day. For some reason, it made me feel better to think that he was listening and that he'd follow my voice home.

"Today, I got some Prickly Apples because it is good for the baby," I started. I laced my fingers through his. "I also got some new herbs. They are really rare and have unique properties. I might keep them here instead of taking them to the clinic."

Sighing, I nuzzled against him. Every moment I lay like this, I longed for him to take me into his arms.

"I'm making soup now. You know, one of those herbs I got, it might be a good healing herb but it makes an even better soup! You'll have to try it. I know you don't eat much, but this will blow your mind."

By this point, I wasn't sure if I talked to Soren for him or for myself. I grabbed his hand and put it on my growing belly.

"I had a routine checkup today. The baby and I are both doing really, really well. No concerns at all. It has been nice and easy..." I sighed, my cheeriness fading slightly. "Work was... well, a patient I helped last week decided to ask me out!"

I giggled and looked at Soren's face, imagining how angry he'd be if he was awake and conscious. Maybe, part of me thought he'd wake up from protectiveness and kick Peter's ass.

"Don't worry. I turned him down." I ran a finger down his cheek.

His head bobbed slightly and I imagined that cocky smirk on his lips.

I heard his voice in my head, or imagined his voice in my head, telling me that Peter could try all he wants in that smug way he did, reminding me that he was the only man for me.

I scoffed and shook my head. “You know, just imagining your taunts is... I can’t believe you’re still mocking me when you’re in a coma!”

Had anyone walked in and watched me having a conversation with Soren’s unconscious body, they’d think I was completely insane. I couldn’t really blame them.

Some days, I almost felt insane. Then again, talking to him also felt like the only thing keeping me sane.

But as Soren’s body recovered, I sensed something growing inside me. Not just the baby. It was something I hadn’t fully felt before. Something so powerful and deep.

With each passing day, I felt more connected to Soren, more devoted to him. It made me more certain that I would only be complete if I was around him.

There was no doubt what that connection was.

The matebond.

After Helen healed me of the last of the Blackfire poison, I hadn’t sensed it because Soren was “dead”.

But he was recovering now, which meant the matebond was awakening in me too. It meant that he was still alive—at least that was what I chose to believe.

There was one day about a month ago when I’d been talking to Soren and I clearly felt an emotion that didn’t belong to me.

It was familiar because I’d felt his feelings before during the few times the mindlink between us worked.

After that, I kept talking to him because sometimes I’d get glimmers of his feelings and I could sense his responses.

It didn’t come in words or fully formed thoughts. Just emotions.

The moments I felt him were brief and then it would take days before I got another reaction out of him.

The first time, I thought I’d just imagined it. But then it happened again. And again!

I was beyond ecstatic and I had to keep trying!

The more I talked to him, the more frequent the responses became. Now, I could practically imagine having full conversations with him.

I chuckled and rested my head on his shoulder again. “Alright. I know Peter is not a threat to you. You know that too. What about Victor? He almost confessed to me too! And you know, he’s a really successful, good-looking doctor.”

Giggling, I lifted my head to look at his face.

“He’s kind and strong. Many of the girls in town like him...”

I gasped, feeling a sweeping wave of jealousy. That definitely came from Soren!

This time, he wasn’t just mocking me!

I countered, "If you don't wake up soon, who knows what will happen... I have been awfully lonely. Maybe Victor would make a good boyfriend."

For a moment, I lost the feeling of Soren's emotions. Frowning, I wondered if I'd pissed him off. I draped an arm across his chest and hugged him.

"Alright, don't be mad," I pleaded. "It was just a joke, okay? The only thing is... well work is going to feel a little awkward for a bit. But I need the money. Not just for you but for our baby..."

I heard the pot on the stove hiss.

"Crap. I've got to check on the soup. I'll be right back!"

I ran to the kitchen and took the top off the pot, stirring with a ladle. I added some salt and pepper and tasted it.

"Mmm. Delicious!"

I ladled some into a bowl and patted myself on the back.

With my job, it was rare to be able to talk to Soren for so long. I wasn't going to miss a second of it on this day off. Hopefully, I could get some more reactions out of him when I had him try out my new recipe.

I went back to the room and stopped dead. The bowl slipped from my hands, clattering to the floor and splashing soup everywhere.

The delicious, savory scent flooded the room. My heart galloped in my chest.

I stared at the bed, straight into a pair of familiar gray-blue orbs that I had dreamt to see again every minute of the day, wondering if this was real or just my imagination.

My mind prickled with the mindlink.

'I really wanted to taste that soup...' He couldn't move, but that didn't stop him from forming a smug smirk. 'Now, tell me again, who's your boyfriend?'

—End of Main Story—

Dear all, this is the end of the main story of Soren's Blackfire Luna. I hoped you enjoyed the journey.

Soren/Mila's story is one of the more difficult ones for me to write as there are quite a lot of details to tie back to previous seasons. I appreciate you all staying with me and being so supportive! Please leave me comments so I know your thoughts.

[Chapter 780](#)

"Heather, you're going to be missed!" Piper gave me a tight hug. It was my last day working at the Hill's Clinic.

"I'll miss you too, Piper." I hugged her back. "Thanks for everything, and sorry that I kinda bailed on you and your brother. It's just—"

Piper shook her head. "No, not at all! I totally understand that you want to focus on getting your place ready for the baby. Your due day is less than two months away, and you've got to do what's best for you and your family."

Victor came around the corner, joining us in our goodbyes. "Piper, why don't you close down the clinic? I'll walk Heather out."

"Yes, sir!" Piper playfully saluted her brother and left us.

"Victor, please, there's no need," I argued, shaking my head.

"Actually, there is, Heather. You've helped out so much and with it being so close to your due date, I want to make sure you're safe as long as you're around. It is sort of my responsibility as your doctor."

"Well, in that case, thanks a lot."

He walked me toward my new home. As much as I didn't want to take up any more of his time, as a pregnant woman, I was a lot safer with a former elite warrior walking me home.

It was almost dinner time now, and the sun was getting ready to set. Still, the streets seemed busier than ever with everyone heading home after a long day at work.

"Heather..."

I paused and glanced at Victor. "Yes?"

"Did you resign because of what I said a few weeks ago?" he looked at me with deep concern.

I took a half-step back. "No. Victor, no. That's not the reason at all. It's just time for me to move on."

Victor sighed and nodded. I could see the relief on his face.

"Well, in that case... you know you're always welcome back. Any time. Even after you have the baby. You're family, alright?"

"Thank you, Victor. That means a lot." I nodded to him.

"Hopefully, Heather, our paths will cross again." Victor grinned at me.

"I hope so, too," I said honestly. Piper and Victor had taken good care of me. I wished that life would treat them well. "You know, you don't need to walk me all the way back. This is far enough. My new neighborhood is very nice and safe."

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent!" Smiling, I stepped closer and gave him a friendly hug. "May the Goddess Bless you, Victor. You take care, too."

Victor nodded as I released him. I left him on the sidewalk as I headed home.

About a month ago, we moved to a much nicer neighborhood. We even got ourselves a cottage for more space. A small one-bedroom apartment wasn't big enough for Soren's recovery, nor would it be enough for a baby.

When Soren had first woken up, he was barely able to wiggle a finger. The most he could do was turn his head and wink at me. It took him two days before he finally was able to lift his wrist and form a fist.

And then he put himself on a rigorous schedule to re-train his body bit by bit.

According to him, he felt his soul had detached from him at some point, like a driver had left his vehicle. When the driver was back, although the vehicle was in perfect condition, unfortunately, the driver lost all his driving skills and he had to learn how to control his car again.

In addition to that, three months in bed naturally weakened his muscles to a degree regardless of whatever blessing he received from the White Queen or the healing spell I'd been pouring into him. Physical therapy to rebuild his strength and range of motion was still needed.

In the new house, we had a whole exercise room where he could work on his muscles and flexibility.

I remembered watching Soren push himself so hard that he was almost hurting his body. I asked him to slow things down. Seeing how worried I was, he agreed, but I soon found out that he wasn't taking it easy at all. Instead, when I was asleep, he'd ramp up his training.

I should've known that he wasn't the type to give up, and his pride wouldn't allow him to just sit in bed and wait for me to take care of him.

Therefore, I chose to go back to work and give him some space so he didn't have to wait until I was asleep to train. It was better so he could rest at night and recover his strength.

A few weeks had passed, and he had made great progress on his upper body. However, standing was still a challenge, and he hadn't been able to walk, let alone run or shift.

Suddenly, I stopped in my tracks. The back of my neck prickled and I was pulled out from my thoughts about Soren. Someone was watching me...or following me!

However, looking around, nothing seemed threatening in this lovely neighborhood. Warm street lights were already turned on even though the sun hadn't fully set yet. There were a couple of people rushing back home. I also heard kids laughing from a distance.

I shook my head.

What was I thinking? This was the most secure neighborhood in Marno packland. Patrols went by frequently. In fact, I'd just seen a few after Victor left me alone.

There was no reason for a pregnant woman on the edge of her own lawn to worry about anything. I must be overreacting due to my hormones.

Scoffing at my unnecessary panic, I picked up my pace as I turned the corner. A cottage with white picket fences and a well manicured front yard came into view.

The cobblestone walkway led to the front door of the two-story, three bedroom bungalow. The lights in the house were on and the soft yellow glow through the window made it look so warm and welcoming. I also loved that the backyard extended into a small woods, which eventually led to a cliff overlooking the ocean.

The house was so cute. We paid decent money for the rent, but luckily, I'd saved enough to afford it for at least another year.

I loved staring at our new home when I got back from my job, almost as much as I loved seeing Soren after work every day. Absence does make the heart grow fonder!

Hurrying up, I pushed the front door open.

"I'm back," I announced.

Normally, Soren would be greeting me back. But He wasn't there today.

"Soren?" I called, going through the house, but he didn't respond.

My stomach sank and my heart started beating faster.

Clutching my round, melon belly, I hurried faster through the rooms.

Where could he be? Was my fear from earlier justified? He hadn't left the house on his own since waking up! He couldn't get very far with his limited mobility.

Suddenly, I paused.

What if something horrible had happened? The king could have sent men to get him and take him away from me. With Soren in his current state, there was no way he could win a fight against intruders!

Or... he could have left on his own...

No, definitely not. He wouldn't leave me without telling me. Something must have happened!

All manner of horrible thoughts ran through my head. Soren was attacked, abducted, or...killed. My mind was in a mess and tears started to well.

Why would this happen to us now? Why would this happen right as things were finally getting good again?

I hurried to the back of the house and out into the backyard and then stopped dead.

A familiar figure was standing in the garden with his back toward me, staring off into space. The red-orange glow of the setting sun painted the sky and outlined his graceful and upright stance in vibrant gold.

I rubbed my eyes and stared at Soren and all the amazing colors that surrounded him.

"Soren...?"

"Mila, you're back!" He snapped out of whatever daze he was in and immediately turned around to walk toward me.

He glided like a bird, a golden halo of light around him, as he approached. The flaming sky burst around him and made him look like a phoenix reborn from the ashes.

"You...you're walking!"

I rushed toward him as fast as I could, arms out. Just before I reached him, I slowed down. He might have been walking but I doubted he was up to his full strength yet.

Smirking, he closed the distance between us and took me into his arms. "Yes, I am. And I haven't fallen down once!"

His warm embrace....I'd missed it for the entire day that I was away.

He inhaled my scent and buried his nose in my hair, then pulled back and kissed me hard on the lips. I melted into him, sighing and putting my arms around him, responding to him passionately.

When I was almost out of breath, I pulled away.

"I can't believe it... I'm so happy!" I gushed.

I tipped my head back, looking deeply into his gorgeous, deep, gray-blue eyes. I saw the reflection of the sun setting in them as he smiled at me, warmly and lovingly. His eyes, his smile, and the sunset were all so breathtaking that I was completely lost in his gaze.

His lips covered mine again, and his alluring scent of amber and cedar filled my senses, lighting a fire within me.

Grrrg.

"Oh!" My cheeks reddened as I looked down at my stomach. It was gurgling from hunger. Our romantic moment passed. I was a little upset that it had to end like that.

"Perfect timing!" Soren laughed. "The food should be ready shortly. I've made dinner..."

"You did what?" I gasped.

"Trust me, you'll love it. It is heavy on carbs and absolutely delicious. Perfect for a pregnant she-wolf."

"Yeah, that sounds perfect," I muttered, rubbing my belly.

At that moment, anything felt perfect. I was starving!

Soren slipped his arm around my shoulder and we walked back into the house. His strikes were fluid and strong, I couldn't believe it—Just yesterday he could barely stand!

We went straight to the kitchen. There was a dinette table, but also a bar. I wanted to pull myself up onto the stool so that I could watch him, but he gracefully pulled out a chair by the table and picked up my hand to walk me over.

After I took my seat, he left a kiss on the back of my hand and laid a napkin across my lap before going to the stove.

"Just a moment please, my lady." He winked, and I couldn't stop grinning ear to ear.

He lifted one of the lids on the pots on the stove and the entire kitchen was filled with a mouthwatering, savory scent.

"Stuffing with chicken," he announced, and my stomach growled again.

“Heh. I guess I made the right choice,” Soren chuckled. He grabbed two plates and started dishing up dinner.

On the center of the plate was the golden stuffing still steaming, with two beautiful booming red lotus flowers next to it. It took me a few seconds to realize that those were actually tomatoes!

“Oh, my Goddess, this smells and looks amazing!” I reached for my fork.

After pouring me some juice and himself some wine, he sat down at the other side of the table. “Carbs, proteins, and vegetables. Hopefully nutritious enough for you and the baby,” he smiled, “Enjoy it.”

I couldn’t wait any longer and was just about to stuff a forkful into my mouth when...

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Ack!” I jumped and almost dropped my fork on the floor.

Soren had already stood up and came to my side, a hand on my shoulder, giving me a comforting look.

“Mila, it’s alright,” he smiled and rubbed my back a couple of times before getting to the door.

Because he seemed so relaxed, I felt assured that everything was going to be okay.

“Well, I guess we’ll have an angry guest to take care of.” Soren chuckled as he opened the door. Maybe I did have a reason to be concerned, but he was still smiling, not at all like he was about to attack the uninvited visitor.

“Thomas, come in.”