

Kings Breeder 791

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“Please!” I panted, the word catching in my throat and coming out as a hoarse cry. “Please, wait—”

The masked man picked me up with his arm around my waist, hoisting me over an ice-covered boulder. We’d been doing this for what felt like hours, the masked man dragged me along behind him as I tried to match his pace, which was close to a sprint.

I hadn’t looked back, not once, not since he pulled me through that window and into the unforgiving darkness that swallowed us both whole.

He set me down and grabbed my arm as he broke into a run again, but my knees buckled, my legs so frozen I could no longer feel my feet. I fell to the ground, the wet, half-melted snow biting into my skin. I couldn’t stop the tears as I tried to rise.

I was shaking so badly from the cold that my teeth were chattering as I wrapped my arms around my middle, shielding myself from the spray of rotten snow being carried by the frigid wind. The dense forest around us groaned as if it were in pain, the wind snapping branches and whistling through the canopy above our heads.

The man’s grip loosened on my arm and he took a step away from me, dropping the worn leather backpack he’d been carrying onto the slush and ice between us.

The daggers he wore on his belt flickered in the faint light of the moon peeking from the clouds overhead as he knelt, pulling a few items from the bag.

“You can let me go—”

“You won’t survive out here by yourself, not in your condition,” he replied, cutting me off with a wave of his hand. His voice was a distorted murmur behind the thick mask he wore, but I heard him curse under his breath as he rifled through his bag.

He pulled out a pair of thick socks and a shirt, which were heavily patched from repeated mending. He grabbed the back of one of my calves, and I had to steady myself with my hands on his shoulders as he took my frozen foot in his hands and gently rolled one of the socks onto it. “I’m going to carry you.”

“Just let me go, please! I won’t... I won’t tell anyone—” I whimpered as he took me by the waist again and positioned me on a boulder so my feet weren’t touching the wet ground. He rolled the second sock on, his calloused hands warm on my skin. It was a needed comfort, one that made a fresh wave of tears roll from my eyelashes and over my cheeks before they froze to my skin.

“Arms up,” he commanded, and I shakily complied. He pulled the shirt down over my head and took a step back to inspect me. The moonlight dusted his eyes through the mask, illuminating the crimson flakes that felt so familiar.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“No,” he said firmly as he bent to gather his belongings.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Away from here—”

“But where? Why?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?” He was looking right at me now, his body rigid with frustration, maybe even annoyance.

I swallowed back my reply as he gave me a final once over, but then he looked over the top of my head, his shoulders relaxing slightly as the wind carried the sounds of frantic footsteps and the panting breaths of wolves toward us.

A wolf leaped over my head, landing only a few feet from where the masked man stood. Another followed, and I barely had time to duck before it brushed the top of my head with the thick undercoat that lined its belly.

“Took you long enough,” the masked man said to a man who jumped over one of the boulders, panting as he narrowed his eyes and nodded.

This new man wasn’t in his wolf form like the others, and he was carrying several bags and a multitude of weapons. The contents of the bags spilled out as he threw them down—clothing, lots of it, enough for many, many men.

I stole a glance at the wolves that were gathering us. How many of them were there?

“Mad you missed all the fun, Jared?” the man teased, giving his leader a wry grin.

Jared? I turned my gaze to the masked man.

So, my new captor had a name.

“What did you do with the body?” Jared asked as other wolves and men began to catch up, all of them looking grateful for a moment of rest.

I looked around, noticing only a few had superficial injuries on their faces. It was obvious they’d been fighting, however. I’d witnessed the beginning of it before Jared had forced me through the window and out into the night.

“The river,” the man said with a shrug, then patted a satchel tied to his waist. “We got what we needed for the bounty, of course.”

A gust of wind rippled over us, making the man’s tawny blond curls tremble. He was a large man, very large. He could crush me between his palms if he wanted to. I stiffened as he turned his gaze to mine, his face striped with scars and his nose slightly off-kilter, likely from multiple breaks.

“Good,” Jared said hoarsely, motioning to me. “Keep an eye on her for a moment.” He turned and began barking orders at the men and wolves who had just arrived.

The man with the satchel looked down at me, giving me a crooked smile. “How’s it going?”

“W-what?” I stammered, wrapping my arms around my chest. I fought the urge to say something cutting and sarcastic in response. How’s it going? Well, I’d been better. That was for damn sure.

“I’m Archer,” he said, extending his hand.

I clutched myself a little tighter and shot him a glare.

He raised his brows at me, thoroughly amused. “Nice to meet you, too,” he said sarcastically, then plopped down next to me on my ice-covered perch, resting one of his ankles on his opposite knee.

If the nightgown I was wearing wasn’t frozen to the boulder, I would have moved away from him in an instant. I would have shot up and run. But as I looked around at the half dozen or so men and wolves, I realized there would have been no logical solution to my situation. I had no idea where I was. I couldn’t outrun them. I was entirely at their mercy.

“Most of us are going to shift,” Jared said as he walked back over to us, tilting his head toward the men standing behind him. “I need her to ride on your back. Seamus, Odin, and Fritz are going to carry the supplies and our clothing.”

I had no idea who Seamus, Odin, and Fritz were, but I was more focused on the fact that Jared said I’d be riding on Archer’s back. I bit my lip as Jared’s eyes moved to mine. I wished I could see what he looked like. He hadn’t been the only one wearing a mask when I was taken from the auction, but he was the only one wearing a mask now. Was he just as scary as the brute of a man sitting next to me on the boulder? Were the crimson flakes I saw in his eyes the tell-tale signs that he was a rogue?

He had to be a rogue. No one had addressed him as Alpha. They called him by his given name.

I almost screamed in surprise as Archer burst into his wolf form beside me, his clothes falling away in tatters as he shook off what remained of his leathers and the belt that hung heavy with daggers around his waist.

“It’ll be warmer,” Jared coaxed, taking a cautious step toward me. “You’ll be shielded by his fur.”

“Where are you taking me?” I breathed, my voice carried away by the wind.

“Somewhere safe, if you behave.” There was something in his voice that sent a chill up my spine, but it wasn’t out of fear, no. His words were laced with a silent challenge, something I couldn’t quite wrap my head around.

I watched him closely for a moment, and he patiently held my gaze. He was waiting for me to say something. He was waiting, I realized, for me to argue with him. I felt that realization pulse through my body as I squared my shoulders and reached for Archer, my fingers grasping his warm, thick fur.

“Good girl,” Jared said coolly, then turned on his heel and walked toward the rest of the wolves that were waiting for his command.

The forest was a blur as I held onto Archer’s fur, my legs clasped around his middle. He was big and fast, but he moved in a gentle, rhythmic way that had my eyelids drooping and head lulling with fatigue. He

was putting me to sleep, and no matter how hard I tried, I was finding it impossible to keep my eyes open.

My grip slacked on his fur as my head slumped forward again, and I woke with a start, gripping him tightly once again. I felt his warning growl reverberate through his chest. If I could mind-link with him, I was sure he'd be telling me to stay awake, warning me that I was going to fall off.

But it was no use. One second I closed my eyes, just for a moment, and the next I was flat on my back, the air knocked from my lungs and my head smacking violently on the ground.

I gasped, my vision bursting with stars. Figures surrounded me, talking over each other as activity erupted nearby.

"Stop, stop! Back up—" Jared's voice rang through my ears as I fought for breath, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

Muffled conversation drifted over me, an argument of some kind. Someone mentioned leaving me behind, and Jared's refusal cut through the air like a heated blade.

My eyelashes fluttered as the man knelt beside me, his hands on either side of my face as he turned me to face him.

He was... beautiful. Dark hair drifted in the breeze against a golden-tan face. Scars were etched along his jaw and the bridge of his nose, broken up by freckles. I reached up to touch him involuntarily, my fingertips brushing against those freckles as my vision began to go dark. Those eyes were the last thing I saw—black as night, dusted with crimson.

"S**t!" I hissed, every inch of my body screaming in pain as I rolled onto my side and tucked my knees into my belly. I felt along the back of my head where pain radiated from the base of my skull, my fingers wet and bloodied as I brought them to my face.

But then I sat with a start, my breath caught in my throat as I silently screamed from pure, seering agony.

"Mornin', sunshine," came a warm male voice nearby.

I turned, blinking into the light of a small warming fire.

Archer popped a piece of roasted meat into his mouth, smiling at me as he chewed. "Hungry?"

My heart was thundering in my chest as I looked around. I'd forgotten where I was and how I'd ended up here. I looked down at the pile of furs I was covered in, shielding me from the damp snow and ice that covered the forest floor. Pale light showed through the trees, the first glimpses of morning.

"We need to stitch up that gash on the back of her head," came an unfamiliar male voice, and I followed it, meeting the eye of a handsome brown-haired man sitting next to Archer. His blue eyes were illuminated by the fire and his expression was that of marked concern, not a shred of malice or annoyance to be seen.

“Miriam will handle it,” Jared replied, poking the fire with a stick. “Now that she’s awake, we can start moving again.”

I gaped at him, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was maskless, his face in full view. My throat felt tight, every muscle in my body going painfully rigid. He was beautiful. His hair was black as night, falling in loose curls around his ears. He had sharp, well defined features that sent a rush of surprise through me. His eyes flicked to mine for a split second before he looked away, and I felt an overwhelming sense that I knew him from somewhere. Where had I seen him before?

You’re delirious, I told myself, but I couldn’t help but continue to stare at him, trying to untangle the mingled panic and sudden familiarity numbing my mind.

The men continued to chat about their plans, and their plans for me.

“I’m right here!” I snapped, and all three men turned to look at me, their faces lined with shock. I bristled, pulling the furs up over my chest. “You’re talking about me like I’m not sitting here, right next to you!”

Archer c****d his brow at me, a short laugh erupting from his lips. He turned to Jared, who was eyeing me with curiosity.

“Sorry—” Archer began, but I raised my hand, cutting him off.

“Where are you taking me? And who is Miriam?”

“A little warmth and rest did her some good, I see,” Archer mumbled under his breath, which elicited a sharp look from Jared.

Archer was right. A rest had ignited a new fire within me, my inner voice begging me to take control of my situation. Run, it seemed to say. Run. For the love of the Goddess, go!

“You’re going to my village,” Jared said as his gaze slowly turned back to mine. “For now.”

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They were talking about someone named Aeris as they tore down the small camp. I watched Jared intently, taking in every inch of him, sizing him up. He was younger than I thought he would be—better looking, too. Without that ghastly mask, he was handsome and rugged, but his eyes held nothing but ice whenever they met my gaze.

I’d been given food and drink. I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten anything. It could have been days, for all I knew. But sustenance had only melted away the shock from the breeder auction and the events of last night, leaving me burning with new-found desperation to escape, to run, to free myself from the clutches of what I could only describe as violent strangers.

These men were tough and wore their scars proudly. All of them were large, muscled, and moved with the agile grace of their wolf counterparts even in their human forms—warriors, all of them.

I was kicking myself for snubbing my nose at warrior training when I had the chance. As it was now, I was still dressed in the skimpy nightgown from the breeder auction, the fabric torn and weaving itself

around my knees as it drifted in the early spring breeze. Jared's shirt covered me, at least, hanging midhigh. Someone had found me a pair of boots to slip over the thick socks, but the boots were several sizes too large, which would make it hard to run.

What were my options now? I could slip out of the boots and make a run for it. I could find a place to hide. Hiding was my only option at the moment. I had no idea where I was. I was unfamiliar with this land, and so far its people were nothing but roughened criminals who sold women at auctions and dragged them through windows into snowstorms.

"This is the largest bounty we've ever fetched, you know," Archer said, kicking snow and rotten leaves over the warming fire, which sizzled out in a puff of smoke around his boot. "When do we retrieve our payment?"

"A week's time. The crew needs to rest before we set out again, and then—" Jared glanced at me, then rolled his eyes back to Archer as I glared at him. He was going to mention something about his plan for me, but thought better of it since he knew I was listening.

Before long the men began to move out, and I was made to follow, keeping in step with the brown-haired man with blue eyes, the only one who seemed concerned about me in the slightest. His name was Brandt, and I found that he was willing to answer any question I threw his way.

"Aeris is an Alpha who hired us to kill his brother," he said flatly as he walked a pace behind me down a narrow trail leading out of the woods. "The brother was the man who bought you."

"So, you're bounty hunters?" I asked, wincing as a piece of shale came loose beneath my feet and I slid forward. Brandt caught me by the arm, steadying me. "Thanks," I murmured.

He just smiled kindly and continued, "Among other things."

"And Jared is... your leader? Or your Alpha?"

"I mean, by definition, he would be our Alpha, yes. But don't call him that. He hates it."

I added that tidbit of information to my growing arsenal and we continued to follow the group out of the forest and into a wide valley, where another forest stretched before us in the distance.

"What did the man do to deserve to die?" I asked, wondering if it had something to do with buying women from an auction, especially those being sold against their will. I glanced over my shoulder at Brandt and he shrugged, but his eyes clouded with sudden fury.

"Ambrose was his name. He killed Aeris's sons, his own nephews. They weren't even sixteen."

I bit my lip, letting my gaze settle on the men walking before us so Brandt couldn't see my pained expression. Part of me wanted to ask why, but I also didn't want to know. This dead man, Ambrose, had bought me to use as a breeder, or worse. That should have said enough about the kind of man he was. I didn't need to know more.

We walked in contemplative silence for at least an hour before reaching the other forest. Through the trees I could see the beginnings of a settlement, where run-down cabins made of dark wood and old stone cottages wove across the forest floor, all leading up to a stone house in the distance, its windows glinting in the afternoon sun.

“We’re not going to hurt you, you know,” Brandt said softly, his voice sending a ripple of gooseflesh across my arms. “That’s not why—”

“That’s not why I’m being forced, against my will, to follow a group of bandits through the woods to Goddess knows where—” I paused, the word Goddess catching in my throat.

Jared, who was walking a few paces ahead of us, glanced at me over his shoulder. I felt color rising on my cheeks and quickly worked to stop the heated blush from spreading.

“It’s not safe for a woman alone out in these parts, okay? Jared is... he’s good. There’s more like you at his house, in his village.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Just that he... you’re not in danger, alright? And you’re not in shape to just take off running either, not with a head wound like that. So don’t even think about it.”

I reached up involuntarily and touched the base of my skull where my curls were matted and tangled with dried blood. I sighed in silent surrender. Brandt was right. Not only had I been hit with what felt like it could have been a metal bat, but I’d fallen off Archer’s back and cracked my head open a second time. I was lucky I wasn’t dead.

Some of the men walking in front of us had split from the group, walking toward cabins and small stalls selling goods and things to eat. The smell of food hung heavy in the air, thick and warm and delicious, enough to make my stomach clench with longing. A single leg of roast rabbit earlier this morning hadn’t been nearly enough, especially after Archer took a bite from it before tossing it at me, a smug grin on his face.

Bastard. And not just Archer, but all of them. Even Brandt, who had been nothing but nice to me, so far.

“Now, didn’t I say I wasn’t going to put the girls through any more mending after the last time you lot came back from a mission?” came a sweet feminine voice as we neared a large house made of stone.

I couldn’t help but look up at the house, which was decaying with age. Dead vines snaked their way all the way up to the third story, twisting over the stone and along the flaking white paint of the windowsills. It would have been a grand home when it was built—a manor, in fact.

“Miriam,” Jared said warmly, then sucked in his breath as I ran into his back, my nose crunching against the tight muscles on either side of his spine. I’d been too busy looking up in awe at the house to realize the men had stopped walking. My eyes watered as I brought my hand to my nose, and Jared glanced over his shoulder at me, eyes narrowed.

“And what is it you’re hiding behind you, Jared?” Miriam quipped as I peeked around Jared’s shoulder to face her. She was short and stout, but had a friendly face with rosy cheeks and kind hazel eyes. “Oh, my dear. What happened to you?” She pushed Archer and Jared out of the way and clasped me on the shoulders, then placed her warm hand against my cheek.

My throat tightened around a sob at the gentleness of her touch, her concerned expression so like my own mother’s.

Miriam looked at the men, waiting for an explanation as to my state. I was filthy, bruised, and half frozen. I'm sure I looked absolutely pathetic.

"You lot usually have so much to say," she clucked as she jabbed her finger at the three of them, her gaze settling on Archer with a look of motherly disapproval. "Especially you, Archer."

I glanced at Jared, whose cheeks had colored to a ruddy pink. Even Archer dropped his shoulders, his eyes downcast.

I was beginning to wonder if Jared was the one in charge, or if it was Miriam.

"We found our mark at a breeder auction. He bought her, so we took her with us. I couldn't leave her behind," Jared stated.

"She fell off my back. Hit her head a bit," Archer added with a shrug.

"A bit?" I mouthed with a scowl, which caught Miriam's attention.

She grinned at me, rolling her eyes as she wrapped an arm around my shoulder and began to lead me toward the house.

"There's food laid out in the dining room for you," she said over her shoulder to the men, then gave me a gentle squeeze. "I'll draw you a bath first and foremost my dear, and then we'll take a look at that wound on your head."

Miriam hummed to herself as she poured jug after jug of hot water over my head, washing away the last several days of trauma caught in my tresses. She'd already drained the tub and refilled it, twice. Now, I was squeaky clean and the numbness in my limbs had faded, leaving me acutely aware of the dull ache of my injuries.

I peered down at myself through the lavender-scented water, seeing the deep purple bruising lining my legs and hips, and one particularly bad bruise along my ribs that wrapped around to my back. The water was heaven, however. I knew that the second I got out of its warm embrace, I would feel every single scrape and bruise to their fullest.

"It's already beginning to heal," Miriam murmured as she gently pushed my hair away from the injury on the base of my skull. "I don't think I'll need to stitch it up after all."

"Thank you for doing this for me," I whispered, and meant it.

Miriam smiled down at me, twisting one of my curls around her fingers before rising from the stool beside the tub and reaching for one of the towels warming next to a roaring fire in a stone hearth.

"It's no bother. We take in girls like you from time to time. Jared said you're a skilled seamstress. I could use some help in the laundry, poor Scarlett is drowning in mending."

I pursed my lips, looking down at my knees in the water as Miriam wrapped my hair in a towel. A seamstress? Where had he gotten that idea? I could sew—not well, but enough to patch a pair of jeans from time to time. "Jared is over exaggerating—"

“Jared wants you to stay busy while you heal, that’s all. I told him that after a hot meal and a full night’s rest, you’d be as good as new in the morning, but he was adamant that I give you a job.”

Only so he could keep me here and make it hard for me to sneak away. I bit my lip as I rose from the water. Miriam dried me off and wrapped me in a robe as she continued.

“They’re not all that bad, you know.”

“Who is Jared?” I asked, tying the robe around my waist as Miriam gathered my discarded clothes into her arms.

She caught my meaning, her mouth pressed into a hard, but somber line.

“I’ve known him for a few years, my dear. He... well, he had a rough go of it growing up, from what I understand. But, he’s a good man. He takes care of us, all of us, and he’ll see that you’re taken care of too.”

I didn’t need to be taken care of. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get back to my family.

“Come,” she said softly, coaxing me toward the door. “I had stew and fresh bread brought up to your room. You’ll be sharing a room with Scarlett—”

She continued to talk but my mind wandered elsewhere, going over everything I remembered from the last several days. It wasn’t much—only fragments of images that formed a distorted, violent memory. But through it all, one thing stood out to me, something that had been nagging at me since the very moment Jared had burst through the window and I met his gaze for the first time.

His eyes... something about them was so familiar. And, I thought with conviction, I was going to find out why.

[Chapter 793](#)

Jared

There was a point in my life when returning from a bounty hunt was met with raucous abandonment. Parties were held for days, drinks seemed bottomless, and the celebrations were lively and unending, at least until our crew had to set off again.

It wasn’t like that now, at least not for me. I felt the strain of what had been a two-week long journey just to locate the man we’d been paid to kill as I sat down at my desk in my study, letting the fatigue inch its way up my legs.

I was young. It shouldn’t be this way. But I was on borrowed time. I’d gone too hard, done too much. Rescuing Eliza, who clearly believed she did not need saving, hadn’t made things easier, that was for damn sure.

We’d only been home for three days and already she was making a name for herself. Miriam had nothing but good things to say about her, and the other servants and maids I employed in my house seemed to love her, if not slightly fear her. I’d only seen her a few times since we’d returned, and all in passing. She was social, well-mannered, and aimed to please.

But not when it came to me.

There was something about her that made me tense with suspicion. There was something in that blue-green gaze of hers that cut me to my soul. It was a constant, silent challenge of violence if I even looked at her the wrong way. But I couldn't help myself.

I'd run into her this morning on my way to the kitchen to pick up a quick breakfast before meeting Archer and Brandt for training. She'd been leaning on the kitchen counter, chatting amiably with Giselle, a young black-haired woman who was the house gossip.

Eliza hadn't even looked in my direction when I entered the room. Her body didn't go rigid with fear. She simply went on, talking loudly about men and their "swelling egos," her eyes flicking in my direction for a fraction of a second before turning back to Giselle.

Eliza herself wasn't a threat to the safety of my people and my crew.

But that mouth was going to be a problem.

"Well, I like her," Archer mused as he flopped down on the couch in my study. He crossed his legs, his ankle resting on his opposite knee. "I've never heard a woman cuss like that before."

"She might belong on the crew," Brandt added, his eyes slowly meeting mine. I gave him a look as I brought a cup of coffee to my lips, shaking my head.

"She has the mouth for it. The personality, too. That mop of hers blends right in with the lowland heather," Archer laughed as he waved his hand over his hair, alluding to the wild, unruly mess of thick brown curls she didn't even try to keep contained. "She's a riot. I wonder who sold her—"

I clutched the coffee cup tight enough to cause a small crack to form along its base, but I hid it from the two men sitting across the room from me. I'd almost washed the memory of the breeder auction from my mind—almost. Things like that tend to linger, to fester in your soul. I detested the disgusting practice of selling and buying women. It wasn't even legal anymore in most places, not since Alpha King Alexander took the throne.

"I find it unlikely anyone sold her," I said casually. "Someone is probably looking for her. She's educated, I believe, and it's obvious she's used to being fed regularly." I hated the way the words

tasted, but there was no way around it. This conversation needed to be had.

"Her father, perhaps? But where could she even be from? What was she doing this far—"

"I don't know, Archer," I ground out, tapping my fingers on my desk. Brandt was unusually quiet tonight, so I turned my attention to him, raising my brows as I willed him to add to the conversation.

"Maybe she ran away from home," he mused, shrugging helplessly.

"That's not a bad thought, actually," Archer nodded, stretching his arms across the back of the couch. "Look, Jared. All I know is I've never met a woman like her in these parts."

"Giselle—" Brandt began, but Archer waved him away.

“Giselle is different. She’s mouthy, sure, but she’s a gossip. She doesn’t have that look in her eyes, you know? Eliza looks like she’s—like she’s—”

“Calculating... like every move we make, and everything we say,” I began, leaning back in my chair, “is being stored in some mental library for later use?”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Then she’s a spy?” Brandt scoffed, shaking his head. “If she’s a spy, then she’s a damn good actor—”

Archer and Brandt continued to speculate, their words dancing around the snug room and ricocheting off the glass panes of the display cases lining the walls, broken up by ceiling height bookshelves.

Eliza could be a spy. It was, at least based on what little I knew about her at all, the most logical explanation to her state and behavior. That, or she was an educated, high ranking member of some affluent pack overseen by the Alpha King himself, and someone would be looking for her, eventually coming here.

“I’m taking her to Aeris,” I said without much thought.

Archer turned to look at me, his mouth ajar in surprise.

I shrugged, pulling a ledger from the pile of books on my desk. “Don’t act so surprised.”

“Why would we take her with us?”

“I’m not taking her with us to retrieve our bounty prize,” I corrected, dipping a quill in a jar of ink. “I’m giving her to Aeris. His brother bought her, after all, and likely with the funds he stole from Aeris. That would make her his property.” The words tasted like acid against my tongue. It was true, however, and I was not in a position to put my entire crew at risk by keeping her here in the event Aeris found out what his brother had been spending his stolen loot on.

I could see the silent argument behind Archer’s eyes as he stared me down from across the room, that blue gaze narrowed in anger and suspicion. We’d taken in women like Eliza before. We’d given them a home, jobs, and in many cases they’d found their mates within our ranks and settled down to start families in the outlying village.

“If someone is looking for Eliza,” I continued, “I can’t have them looking here, not when half of our men have bounties on their own heads. It’s done.”

Archer crossed his arms, but nodded in reluctant agreement. Brandt, on the other hand, was staring blankly at the sheet of paper I’d been toying with without even noticing I’d been doing it. I set it down.

“And Aeris has what you need for sure?” Archer said hotly. I shrugged, tapping my fingers on the sketch I’d been erasing and redrawing for years now.

“I have his word—”

“And Aeris’s words are so trustworthy?”

Archer was fuming. I knew this situation ran a little deeper for him than most. Orphaned before his first birthday, he'd grown up in an orphanage not far from our own village. He left to join my crew when he was seventeen, but he'd left someone behind, making her a promise that in the end, he couldn't keep.

Scarlett had been one of the women who'd come to live with us, but she'd endured horrors that left her scarred. She barely spoke, and never to Archer. Scarlett had never forgiven him for leaving her behind, and he'd never forgiven himself.

But Eliza was different. This situation was different. And I didn't have time to ponder the what-ifs.

"We leave in a week's time, and just the four of us. Eliza has yet to come into her wolf by all accounts, so we'll have to make the journey on foot," I said with a resigned sigh.

Archer chewed his lower lip before shrugging, and Brandt simply blinked up into the light of the dusty chandelier above our heads.

"Well, I'm hungry. It's already past dinner," Archer said as he rose and stretched. Brandt followed suit, dipping his head to me in farewell. I stood from my desk to follow the men out, but stopped at the threshold to my study, noticing a figure standing flush with the wall across the hallway.

Archer and Brandt hadn't noticed her. They walked by without a passing glance. But I saw her, and I lingered for a moment, wondering if she was going to drop the basket of laundry she was holding in surprise if she turned and caught my gaze.

Eliza was beautiful, I gave her that. She had soft facial features and eyes that seemed a little too large for her face, fanned by dark lashes and dark brows. Her face was innocent, childlike, which was a startling contrast to her voice and personality. Her hair was just as ill-behaved as I found her to be, sticking up and springing loose from the knotted bun of curls she wore at the crown of her head. Sea-green eyes slowly moved my way as I turned my back to her and stepped back into my study.

She hadn't noticed that I'd seen her, and that was probably a good thing. I didn't want to have to explain that this area of the house was generally off-limits. Sure, she could drop off my laundry in my bedroom, but my study?

This place was strictly off-limits to even the maids. I wasn't going to risk giving her a single glimpse of what was inside in the event she was truly a spy.

I rounded my desk and sat back down, pulling the paper I'd been toying with earlier in front of me. I looked down at it for the millionth time.

I traced the outline of the amulet I'd drawn over, and over, and over again. I had no memory of it, nothing tangible. But it was all I had to go on, and unlocking its secrets was the only way I was going to save my own life.

The amulet itself would be ancient, from the time of Lycaon himself. Maybe it had only been just a piece of jewelry at one point in time. Some rich woman may have worn it around her neck. I didn't truly know its history, and it honestly didn't matter.

I had a single piece of it, locked away in a box beneath the floorboards under my desk. The two other pieces were missing, and without them, I'd lose everything in a matter of months.

[Chapter 794](#)

"Eliza* It was my third full day at the grand estate of Jared, otherwise known as "His Royal Highness the King of Murderous Criminals," who now employed me as a laundry maid.

I thought that title fit him perfectly, and felt rather clever for coming up with it.

I was used to being around men with chips on their shoulders, like the pompous, arrogant assholes who thought their presence at even the most insignificant archeological dig site was a divine gift from the Goddess herself.

Jared was a bit different, though.

Everyone here worshiped the ground that he walked on.

He wasn't boastful, or rude.

But he was standoffish, cold, and looked at me like I was a disease threatening to spread among his people.

He was suspicious of me, sure.

But I was just as suspicious of him.

That man had secrets, dark ones.

And even though I should have been focusing on my imminent escape, I couldn't help but lean into my undying curiosity about not only Jared, but his lands, and his house.

It was bizarre, really.

My first full day at his house had been spent on strict bed rest overseen by Miriam.

She was sure I'd knocked my brain right out of my skull, and she may have been right.

I definitely had a concussion, but the wound had healed nicely, and quickly, much to her surprise.

She kept me in bed regardless, feeding me warm, hearty meals and always making sure I had a hot cup of tea next to my bed as I let myself spiral into oblivion.

I'd been sure, at least during that first day, that I would be killed, or worse, by these people.

I thought I'd never see my family again, that all of my dreams would be unfulfilled, a life only half lived.

But on my second day, by then fully lucid, I began to shed that fear and the old Eliza sprung back to life, ready to be nosy, searching for answers to the mysteries that seemed to be lurking in every darkened corner of this odd house.

First, I was given clothes—an ankle-length gray homespun dress and a starched white apron.

Miriam tried in vain to tame my hair to no avail, eventually giving up after my curls ripped through the third ribbon she'd used to try to tie it in a neat bun.

The house seemed to lack electricity, had very little in terms of running water and other basic utilities, and was no doubt haunted by spirits only the early gods could name.

I felt as though I'd been thrust back through time, and had half convinced myself of it before getting my hands on several newer-looking books with the publishing date stamped in fresh ink during a brief stint in the library.

Today was my first day in what Miriam called "the laundry."

It was a large, stone room on the lowest level of the house with two wide tubs of scalding water that we were meant to stir with wooden paddles to beat the clothes senseless before wringing them out and hanging them to dry.

It was hard work, really hard, and by midday, my arms were trembling with fatigue.

Then came the mending, which was my specialty, according to Jared.

I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, and the single shirt I'd spent nearly two hours sewing back together showed that clearly.

Miriam simply clicked her tongue, shook her head, and did her best to pat down my rogue curls that were now sticking straight up due to the humidity in the room before sending me on my way to deliver the laundry instead.

And that was how I found myself with my back pressed against a wall, holding my breath as Archer and Brandt walked by.

They hadn't seen me, or at least they didn't act like they'd noticed my presence.

In my defense, this house was a maze.

I had no idea where I was or how to get back to the staircase leading down into the depths of the house where the laundry, kitchen, and communal rooms were located.

Several rooms were built directly in the center of what must have once been a wide, open foyer, an afterthought it seemed, to cram as many rooms as possible into the sprawling manor.

And now I found myself hiding in the shadow of an awkward, off-kilter commode, hugging a basket of laundry to my chest.

I found it more likely that Archer would tease me relentlessly for being lost rather than assault me.

Brandt was harmless, of course, at least I thought so.

But it was Jared I was worried about, and I watched with bated breath as he slowly turned back into the room that he'd just come out of, closing the door firmly behind him.

I sighed heavily and released my death grip on the basket, letting it rest against my stomach.

My arms were burning with the effort of lugging it through the house, searching for a room belonging to someone named Silas.

I had no earthly idea who Silas was, or if he even existed. I'd probably have better luck leaving the basket in the middle of a corridor and letting whoever walked by claim it for themselves.

"What are you doing up here?" came a whisper from down the hallway.

Scarlett, my roommate and fellow laundry maid, was standing looking somewhat shocked and pale only a few yards away.

I shrugged, pushing off the wall and hurrying toward her as she peered passed me to the door into which Jared had retreated.

"You can't be up here unless you're delivering Jared's laundry, not Silas's!"

"I have no idea who Silas is!"

I whispered back, handing her the basket. She sighed, balancing the basket on her hip in a practiced fashion as she motioned me to follow her back through the house.

Scarlett was aptly named with her thick, dark red hair. But she was quiet, shy, and a strict follower of the rules. I hadn't been able to get much information out of her at all.

"Jared doesn't allow maids in his quarters," she continued, leading me through a door and down a staircase.

"He doesn't like us touching his things."

"What things?" I asked, becoming curious.

She shrugged, making a small grunting noise in her throat that told me she hadn't gotten close enough to know for herself. She set the basket in front of a narrow door, then turned the corner into the laundry room.

Well, if Silas was so close, he could've picked up his laundry himself! "So, Jared,"

I began a while later, toying with a shirt laid out over our worktable.

Scarlett was sitting down with her back to me, her hands back to her ceaseless mending.

"What is his deal?"

"His deal?"

"Brandt said he doesn't like being called an Alpha. Why is that?"

"Because he's not one, I guess. I've never asked him."

See? She was giving me nothing.

"Who is the Alpha in this territory, then?"

"No one that I know of. There's Aeris to the south, of course. The settlement of Newcrest had an Alpha, but I think he's dead. And to the east is, well, it's just forest."

Aeris.

I sat down, crossing my legs and picking up a needle and thread as Scarlett eyed me, blinking at my attempts to guide the thread through the needle.

"So, Aeris is the Alpha of-" I began anew.

"Oh, there you are,"

Miriam chirped as she bustled through the doorway, her brow glistening with sweat.

She placed another basket of laundry in front of me, this one looking much heavier than the last.

"Run this up to Jared's room for me dear, will you?"

I exchanged a look with Scarlett before rising from my stool, nodding my agreement to Miriam, who beamed at me.

"Such a good girl. I do hope Scarlett is being nice to you. She can be a little shy, unless Archer is around, of course."

She winked at Scarlett, who had gone pink on the cheeks, her eyes slowly going back to her lap where her mending was resting.

I raised my brows at Scarlett as I grabbed the basket and turned toward the door, following Miriam out.

At least two hours had passed since I'd run into Jared and his shadows, Archer and Brandt.

I'd heard that the crew of bandits liked to drink at the village tavern in the late evenings, so I was safe.

Jared would be with them, of course.

I knew there were at least four doors in that hallway, and the one he came out of was likely his bedroom, or office.

Either way, I was likely to be successful in delivering at least one basket of laundry today.

I pushed the door open without any resistance, and had to suck in my breath out of surprise.

I nearly dropped the basket as I looked around and walked blindly toward a couch, dropping the basket there instead of the floor.

Bookshelves full of thick, leather bound novels stretched to the ceiling.

Glass cases full of...

it couldn't be.

Artifacts...

artifacts stacked on top of artifacts, with a mix of fossils and scrolls lining shelf upon shelf.

"Wow,"

I breathed, the air thick with dust and smelling sharply of pressed paper and leather.

It was... stunning, an absolute dream.

I ran my fingertips over a bookshelf, tempted to pull a copy of what I recognized as "The History of the Britanians," who were early people related to my own realm.

I couldn't believe it.

Where had he gotten this? And why was it here? I asked myself those same two questions repeatedly as I walked around the room, peering into the cases and pulling books off the shelves.

I was respectful, of course. I knew how to handle these things, especially the books.

Some of them, and of this I was sure, were first editions.

"Incredible," I said, barely able to form the word without it catching in my throat from raw emotion alone.

But then I spied the desk, which was covered in books and scrolls and paper.

Below the mess, however, was exactly what I'd been praying I'd find since the very day I ended up alone in the Dark Realm.

A map.

I rushed to the desk, then paused, my hand hovering over the books covering the map.

Jared likely knew the exact spot of every piece of scrap paper and book in this room.

What had Scarlett said? He didn't like maids touching his things? I slowly pushed a book out of the way with the tip of one finger so I could see a greater area of the map.

He marked the location of his house, just like I'd hoped he would.

Several other markers were visible, but I paid them no mind.

I slowly traced my finger over the map, making a mental note of the distance as my finger moved from the house to the sea.

Something caught my eye, snapping my vision away from the map so quickly that I lost my train of thought.

It was a piece of paper that had obviously been folded several times and smeared with lead.

I leaned over the desk, tilting my head for a better look.

It was a drawing of... an amulet.

Maybe.

But it was broken into three distant pieces, as if they were pieces to a puzzle.

The center was circular, likely open for a gem to fit snugly inside of it.

The sketch was hand drawn, with smaller sketches surrounding it as though he, I was assuming Jared, had drawn it over and over again.

"What?"

I whispered, resting my hand on the desk as I leaned down.

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

The door closed with a thud that made the glass cases rattle as I slowly straightened my back and turned to face Jared.

[Chapter 795](#)

he growled, taking a heavy step toward me, "a question."

"Your laundry," I replied casually, waving my hand toward the basket on the couch.

"You never mentioned you were a historian-"

"This room is off limits," he said, cutting me off.

Well, this wouldn't do.

I wasn't even close to finished looking through his treasure trove. He stopped short of me, crossing his arms over his chest. I did the same, mimicking his stance, even though my heart was thundering.

"If you didn't want anyone in here, you should have locked the door," I said tartly.

His steely expression didn't change, but I saw the flash behind his eyes and the way the corner of his mouth twitched with some unsaid, cutting remark.

'Try me; I thought.

'I've dealt with worse than you. He said nothing further, but I held his gaze.

"I have no idea where anything is in this house, let alone your room," I continued.

"It's a maze. Whoever built it should be ashamed of themselves."

"You have quite a mouth on you for someone allowed to stay in my house by the graciousness-"

"Like I have a choice? You brought me here against my will."

I was suddenly seething, every moment of pain, fear, and fury bursting to the surface as I stared up at Jared.

"By the graciousness of your heart? Oh, please-"

"Would you have rather been a breeder? Or left behind to be tossed into a brothel?"

I bit down on the inside of my lip.

Okay, he was right about that.

However— "What right do you have to go snooping around in my private quarters? Do you not realize how fragile-"

"Of course I do,"

I snapped, shifting my weight as I extended a finger to point at one of the glass cases.

"I've never seen the Dias of Orian before. But, that's a model, I'm sure. Likely cast in granite. Oh, and-"

I stepped past him, my shoulder brushing against his arm.

"This author's theories have been debunked repeatedly. But him-"

I pointed to a large, dust-covered book on a shelf above my head, the title barely visible because of wear and age.

"His theories about the movement of the packs through the northwestern hemisphere of Findali are legend, still to this day. No one has been able to prove him wrong. But you only have volume one in your collection. Volume two covers..."

I trailed off, meeting his gaze. His mouth was slightly ajar, his eyes narrowed into slits as I let my arms drop to my sides. He was shocked, that was Clear, and I'd stupidly given too much of myself away. I didn't know what to do, so I curtsied and started for the door.

"Wait a f*****g minute," he rasped, and I halted.

"Who are you?"

"Eliza-"

"I know your name," he said with obvious annoyance.

I knitted my fingers together, turning to face him.

He took a step toward me, his head tilting as he looked down at me.

"What are you? A spy?"

"If I were a spy,"

I said on a breath laced with impatience, "I wouldn't willingly tell you, now would I?" He arched his brows at me, and I realized he was not used to being talked to in such a way, but I was beyond caring.

"I like to read," I said, hoping this was enough.

"And you have books."

"Don't play dumb. It doesn't suit you."

"Neither does being in the laundry, but you told Miriam I was a skilled seamstress." He pursed his lips. I waited for his response, but none came. I eyed him, then turned on my heel and walked toward the door.

"If you want something to read," he said sharply, "find something in the library. I keep it stocked for the servants to use as much as they like."

I reached the door and opened it, my hand gripping the knob so tightly my knuckles were white.

"And," he said, his tone of voice giving me pause.

"If I catch you in here again, you will be punished."

"Is that a promise?" I said, my chest tightening around the words as I looked at him over my shoulder. I had no idea why I'd said it.

But I had, and I had to admit I was looking forward to his answer. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, but a spark of a challenge flashed behind his eyes.

"Get out of my study, Eliza," he said firmly, but he lingered on my name a little too long.

My blood heated, and not from anger.

"I know nothing about him,"

Giselle said as she twirled a lock of her ink-black hair around her finger.

"I just know he's the boss, you know?"

I chewed my lower lip as I settled my weight on my stool at the worktable, the air already thick with steam from the washing tubs as the water began to heat for today's laundry. I'd spent the entire night laying awake, reeling from my run-in with Jared in his precious study. I needed that map, and I was going to get it, one way or another.

"He chided me like a child," I gruffed, sticking my fingers through a gaping hole in the sleeve of one of the shirts I was supposed to mend today.

"How exactly does their clothing get so tarnished? This is madness!"

Scarlett, who was sitting across from me at the work table, said nothing in response to my question.

Giselle, who was currently hiding from her responsibilities in the kitchen, was happy to oblige.

"Fighting," she said, matter-of-factly.

"There's a sparring ring at the edge of the village. It's a rule that all members of the crew who are not on duty as a guard must practice in the ring for at least three hours a day."

"And what do they do in the ring, exactly? Other than rip their clothing to shreds?" I laughed, slipping a thread through a needle with now practiced grace.

Scarlett noticed my improvement and gave me a soft smile, which warmed my heart tremendously. I grinned back, flushing with pride. I'd take the little wins, I supposed.

"Well," Giselle started, settling herself on a stool.

"They fight with their fists most of all I believe, then daggers and swords and the like-"

"Swords and daggers?" I exclaimed.

Giselle nodded, her eyes flashing with excitement.

"Why not as wolves?"

"Oh, they do that too. But there's much more than other wolves to worry about in these parts, you know. Sometimes wolves are at a disadvantage, and battling with blades is more...effective."

"What do you mean by...much more than other wolves?"

The hair on the back of my neck prickled to attention as a rush of adrenaline coursed through my veins.

Giselle gave me a look of surprise.

"Well, you know, witches," she said plainly, "and then their hounds. But I've heard of elves and fairies being prevalent in the Dark Forest to the south. I've never seen them-"

I hadn't realized my mouth was hanging open in shock before I tried to stutter a response.

"Where did you say you were from again, Eliza?"

Giselle asks with a laugh, giving Scarlett a look.

Scarlett straightened up, waiting for my answer.

"Oh, I'm from...up north," I replied, unsure of how to answer the question without giving everything away.

It would take me days to explain my connections and pack, anyway.

Thankfully, I found that most if not all of the female servants employed by Jared kept their mouths tightly shut when it came to their origin stories, rather than air their past traumas out in the open.

Giselle and Scarlett seemed to accept my incredibly vague answer, much to my relief, and they moved on with the conversation without missing a beat.

I Was silent for a few minutes as I pulled the needle and thread through the shirt, my mind wandering.

My mom taught me how to sew when I was a little girl. I'd gotten a needlepoint kit for my sixth birthday, a little plastic board in the shape of a duck. I got bored of it within a few hours and gave up, chasing my brother down to the rocky beach outside the village in Winter Forest instead. I should have taken it more seriously, I thought.

My needle snagged on the existing seam of the sleeve and the thread snapped. I cursed under my breath.

"Jared keeps the library stocked," Giselle said over my frustrated muttering.

"He always brings new books back from his trips... romance, fantasy, you name it."

"I don't like reading fiction,"

I admitted, and Giselle and Scarlett both gasped, looking both shocked and slightly offended.

"What do you mean?"

Giselle pressed.

"What do you read, then?"

"Oh, I-uh, well-" I stuttered, unsure what to say.

I thought of the Architects Digest that was sitting on my desk back in New Dianny, untouched and still in the paper wrapping it had been sent in before my ill-fated journey to the Dark Realm.

"I like non-fiction, things related to, well, lore and history and geography-"

"Why?" Giselle said, looking thoroughly confused.

"Because I don't believe in happily ever afters," I said, a little too firmly.

My cheeks prickled with heat as Giselle's face fell a bit, her shoulders slouching.

"I'm sorry, Eliza, I didn't mean to pry-"

"You didn't," I quickly replied, giving her a soft smile.

"I'm rather boring, I'm afraid."

I was rather traumatized, more like it.

Again, I was thankful for the unspoken oath of silence between the servants of the house when it came to our pasts. I'd lived a privileged, easy life with two loving parents and a childhood filled with freedom and care.

Two years ago everything changed, and my world was thrown into chaos and bloodshed.

And my cousin Lena had been right in the middle of it, fighting an otherworldly enemy alongside her mate, Xander.

The thought of them caused my chest to tighten with unease and guilt.

They were here in the Dark Realm.

They were the Luna and Alpha King.

But they had no idea I was here.

No one did, in fact.

I'd made sure of that before setting off on this journey.

So no one was coming to rescue me.

It was up to me to get out of this situation, which brought me back to the map in Jared's study.

"What time do they train in the sparring ring everyday?" I asked.

Giselle thought about it for a moment, then shrugged, her eyes settling on the fog-covered window at the far end of the room.

"Oh, mid morning to mid afternoon most days.

Jared and the men who live within the main house come inside for dinner around six every night."

Finally, some information I could use.

"Giselle! You fiend.

Why are you not in the kitchen?"

Miriam exclaimed from the doorway, making all three of us jump.

Giselle sighed audibly before giving Miriam her best smile as she shuffled through the doorway.

"Get back to work with ya-

"I was just telling Eliza about the sparring ring,"

Giselle grinned, then waved goodbye.

I smiled up at her in farewell as Miriam came by to inspect my work.

"Much better," Miriam said softly as one of her pudgy fingers traced a somewhat jagged line of uneven stitches.

"But, maybe we leave the mending to Scarlett for a moment. I have an errand for you."

She patted my shoulder and I rose from my stool, stretching my arms and back as Miriam reached into her apron and pulled out a folded piece of Paper. She handed me the paper and the basket, then led me out of the laundry and into the hallway.

"There's a healer at the edge of the village, due south. I need a few things for the kitchen if you don't mind the walk," she said softly.

I could have screamed in relief. I hadn't been outside in days, let alone able to explore the village.

"Of course," I beamed, turning toward the door leading out into the kitchen garden.

"Thank you!"

"Don't distract the men while they're sparring now, my girl," she winked, and I noticed an odd look in her eyes that I couldn't decipher.

But it didn't matter. I was getting out of the house, which was one step closer to leaving it for good.

[Chapter 796](#)

Ah, the great outdoors!

I hadn't been outside of the house in days, not since I arrived. I took a huge breath as I hopped down the steps leading to the kitchen garden, letting the crisp, slightly chilly early spring air fill my lungs.

The first signs of the approaching warm weather were inching through the sodden earth around me. Piles of rotting snow bled into the garden, little tufts of green grass poking through the clumps of dirt-covered ice. I looked down at my reflection in a large puddle near the garden gate, tucking a few rogue curls behind my ears before I started forward, thankful I was wearing boots.

My boots squelched in the mud as I swung my basket. I smiled amiably at everyone I passed, although I didn't get a smile in return. I was a newcomer, an outlander, someone who had yet to gain the trust of those who lived in the patchwork village surrounding Jared's house.

A group of children, all boys by the looks of them, ran past me kicking a leather ball. One of them stopped to look at me, his playmates slamming into him in surprise.

"Hello," I said cheerfully, giving them a wide, genuine smile. The boy leading the fray gaped at me, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. "I'm Eliza," I continued, wondering why they were staring at me like I was some rabid beast.

One of the littlest boys stepped in front of their leader, his chin jutting to the sky as he narrowed his dark brown gaze on mine.

I pursed my lips, furrowing my brow at him. "What?"

"Are you a witch?" he asked.

I scoffed, pretending to be thoroughly offended. "No," I said slowly, taking a step toward them. They took a step back in unison. "I work in the laundry. I'm a seamstress."

"Did a witch cast a spell on you?" asked another little boy. Some of them had relaxed a bit, losing the tension in their shoulders.

"I don't believe so," I replied. "Why? Is my skin turning green? Do I look like I'm about to turn into a rabbit?"

One of the boys giggled but was quickly shushed by his companions.

"Your hair looks cursed, like you'll never be able to get a comb through it without breaking it," said the smallest boy in the bunch, the same one who had called me a witch in the first place. "My ma says if I don't brush my hair, the witches will turn it into a mess of tangled heather, and I'll be ugly for the rest of my life."

My mouth dropped open in surprise, but the response I was struggling to form was drowned out by a rush of giggles as the boys began to titter at me.

People had made fun of my hair before, so I was used to it. It was wild and unruly, but I didn't mind. Being called a witch, however....

"Move on, you demons!" came a deep but feminine voice behind me.

I turned as a young, stout woman with thick blonde hair came out of her cabin, waving a broomstick.

The boys screamed in faux terror, the sound broken up by frantic laughter as they scattered and disappeared into the woods. The woman huffed a breath, smoothing her apron over what looked to be an advanced pregnancy.

"I apologize," she said sweetly. "One of those rascals is mine, unfortunately."

I choked on a laugh, and she smiled at me in return.

“They weren’t bothering me, I swear,” I said, looking towards the woods. “It’s nice to see children running around so freely. I come from a big family myself.”

“Oh, do you now? Lots of little ones?”

I nodded, meeting her eyes again. She had a kind face with round, rosy cheeks and dark eyes. “Yes, I have a lot of cousins. I was the family babysitter for a long time—” I paused, noticing the confusion on her face. “Nanny, I mean.”

“Ah, I see. I used to do the same. Marriage felt like freedom from the job, but now I have small ones of my own,” she said in a laugh, shaking her head.

I smiled, understanding her completely. The title of “Family Babysitter” had been a right of passage, one I’d accepted eagerly.

Lena had held the position for years whenever the family would gather every Winter Solstice. Becoming the babysitter myself meant I was finally in the upper echelons of the family, allowed to stay up late into the night with my aunts while they gossiped over glasses of wine. It was like coming into my womanhood, in a way.

I felt a pang of regret and sadness at the thought of my family. I’d left New Dianny, where I’d been staying with my brother George and his mate Joy, at least a week ago, maybe longer. It wouldn’t be long until someone figured out the truth.

“You’d be the new maid, then?” the woman asked, breaking me from my musings.

I nodded, forcing my face into a smile. “Eliza,” I said, extending my hand.

“Rosemary,” she smiled, shaking my hand. She had a firm, calloused grip.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I said, shifting my empty basket to my other hip. “Do you know which cabin belongs to the healer?”

“Oh, yes. I do.” She turned, pointing into the distance. “It’s outside of the village, due south. Past the sparring ring on the right.”

Past the sparring ring. Great.

I smiled and nodded my thanks before taking off on foot again, looking at her over my shoulder. She’d gone back to sweeping her front porch, her eyes occasionally scanning the woods for the feral gaggle of boys.

I passed several more cabins and shops. The village was bustling with activity, and everyone seemed to have something to do. The number of people surprised me, and I felt a little bad for giving Jared a hard time, but only a little. He had what looked to be an entire pack under his care, regardless of the fact he refused to be known as an Alpha. For a moment, I thought that maybe I should try to be a little nicer to him.

“Hmm... No,” I said to myself, my mouth curving into a smile. Getting a rise out of Jared had been the most fun I’d had in months, and if I was being honest, I was looking forward to doing it again.

Heat blossomed in my stomach. I tried to stifle it, tried not to think about the heat burning behind his own eyes as I tried to assert my dominance in the study. Goddess, Jared was handsome—a brute who had kidnapped me and forced me to mend clothes, but still handsome.

I tripped over a log and nearly fell. I looked up, now in the shelter of the canopy of trees lining the village. Red buds dappled all of the branches, a promise of spring. I looked behind me, shocked at how far I'd walked without realizing it.

I'd walked, in fact, right past the only cabin left in the area.

"Well, this has to be it," I mused, steeling my expression as I stalked toward the cabin. It was shockingly worn down, the wood gray and splitting with age. The roof was patched in several places, and the porch was nothing more than a few boards held up by stilts. It looked rather unsafe to walk on, and I paused near the steps, which were damp, rotted, and covered in moss.

It didn't look like anyone lived here.

I looked down at the basket. Maybe this wasn't the healer's house after all. I looked past the house into the forest, which stretched on and on, growing darker as the trees thickened. The forest must be as dark as night during the height of summer, I thought, when the canopy above my head would be in full bloom.

A soft breeze blew toward me from the depths of the forest. I heard the chiming of bells in the distance, and even.... No. I couldn't have heard that. Soft whispers? A song of some kind?

I found myself stepping away from the house and moving deeper into the forest involuntarily. I dropped the basket, which bounced across the forest floor without making a sound.

"Hello?" I whispered, every downy hair along my arms standing on end as the canopy thickened, blocking out the sun. A chill ran through me, and not from the sudden cold. Something skittered past me in the distance and I froze, unease rippling through me.

More bells chimed in the wind, this time directly above my head. I looked up in surprise, noticing at least a dozen, maybe more, windchimes hanging from the branches. Other things were hanging from the trees, I noticed as I took several frantic steps backward.

Charms were hanging from the trees... made of bones.

I tripped for real this time, falling flat on my ass onto the damp, moss and ice covered forest floor. Another trickle of wind passed over me, around me, embracing me in a chill so violent it took my breath away.

"Eliza—" Jared said sternly, his voice laced with concern as he pulled me backward and then onto my feet. I didn't turn to look at him; my gaze was fixed on the darkness that seemed to be creeping from the depths of the forest, moving forward like mist. "Eliza!"

Jared shook me firmly, and I snapped back to reality. I swung at him, missing, and nearly toppled over again. He caught me by the waist and dragged me out of the woods until we reached the dilapidated cabin.

"What are you doing out here?" he hissed.

I felt his fingers on my cheek, willing me to look at him. I was still looking into the woods. I couldn't tear my gaze away as hard as I tried.

"What's out there?" I asked.

"Nothing. No one is supposed to be over here—"

"Why? Why the windchimes, and the charms?"

I looked at him then and felt the fear gripping my body dissipate completely as I met his eyes. He looked truly concerned for a split second, then steeled his expression back to his usual ice cold, expressionless gaze.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked again, ignoring my question completely.

I pointed to the basket lying a few yards away. He arched his brow, and I reached into the pocket of my apron, pulling out the shopping list Miriam had sent with me.

"Miriam sent me to the healer," I said. "She needed me to fetch a few things for her."

"Uh-huh," Jared answered, taking the folded piece of paper from my hands. He opened it, scanned it, then crumpled it in his fist and tossed it into the woods. I scoffed, glaring at him.

"That's littering!"

"Get your ass back to the house—"

"Or what?" I protested.

And there it was, that heat behind his eyes.

[Chapter 797](#)

Jared

I was watching two teenagers beat the s**t out of each other, both of them covered to their ears in mud. Archer was barking commands and encouragement as the youths sparred, working on their stealth and awareness. It didn't feel that long ago that I had stepped into the ring for the first time, just as scrawny and full of confidence as these two boys were.

Now I leaned against the railing, watching my second-in-command lead the training sessions that used to be solely my responsibility. I flexed my hands, drawing them into fists. How much time did I have now, four months? Five, at the most.

Archer called the match to a halt, stepping between the two youths as they swayed and tried to steady themselves. He showed one of them how to strike without breaking his knuckles against his opponent's flesh, which was something I wish I'd known before getting into my first real fight.

It was a tough world out there for young, packless men. It was especially harder for those who hadn't yet come into their powers. Fighting with swords, daggers, and fists was their only option.

In two short years, the teens sparring in the ring would turn twenty-one and feel their wolves for the first time. There would be a celebration for them. The entire village would gather and shift and run into

the woods beside them. These boys would be ready. They'd be strong and capable. And, if they were smart, they'd survive.

I wouldn't be there to witness it.

I ran my fingers through my hair, squinting into the bright, midday sun. Archer appeared at my side, mud-soaked and sweating. He took a swig of water from a large clay jug, one finger outstretched.

"What is she doing?" he asked through a mouthful of water.

I followed his gaze and saw Eliza walking through the village, her eyes downcast. She was swinging a large basket, her steps somewhat uneven on the mud and ice. I squinted at her, seeing her mouth curved into a playful, somewhat mischievous smile.

"She's daydreaming," I said softly, chuckling to myself as she stubbed her booted toe on a rock. She grimaced, muttering to herself before starting forward again.

"Who let her out of the house?" Brandt asked as he came up beside us.

"Maybe she's making a run for it—" Archer began, but I shook my head, still watching her with interest.

"She's not," I said under my breath. I found it highly likely she was coming to the sparring ring to fight with me again. I'd spent the entire night lying awake in bed, staring at the ceiling and going over every single word she'd said in my study.

I was more suspicious of her now than I had been when I rescued her from the breeder auction. She was far more educated than I'd realized, and in history, of all things.

I leaned against the railing as she continued toward the sparring ring, swinging her basket.

I wondered what she was going to fight with me about this time. She was going to flaunt the fact that she'd escaped the house—I was sure of that at least.

But she walked, and walked, and walked... right past the ring.

"Where—" Archer began, but I didn't hear the rest of his question.

I leaped over the railing, landing in the snow melt and mud with a splat that soaked through my boots and into my socks.

Eliza was walking straight out of the village, toward the Dark Forest.

"Get your ass back to the house!" I growled, grabbing her by the forearm.

She swatted at me, but I dodged her blow, tugging her toward me and away from the darkness that seemed to be creeping toward us.

"Or what?" she hissed, digging her fingernails into my hand.

I let out my breath, not in the mood to deal with her aggression, not today... not right now, and definitely not here. The windchimes in the distance danced and trembled, sending a chorus of bells

through the air. My skin prickled with adrenaline as the wind ebbed around us before flowing back in the direction it came, like the forest itself was breathing.

“This place is dangerous,” I said firmly, shoving her toward the village.

She dug in her heels, glaring at me.

“Well, Miriam sent me here!”

Miriam hadn’t sent her here, not to the forest, or the healer for that matter. Our healer, an ancient gentleman named Ramus, had been on a journey up north for weeks, on an errand for me pertaining to my condition.

The note Miriam had sent with Eliza, which Eliza hadn’t read, was to me. “Be nice to her,” it read. “You could use some company of equal intelligence and—”. I hadn’t bothered to read the rest before I had crushed the note in my fist and tossed it into the woods.

Miriam sent her in this direction because she knew Eliza would have to walk past the sparring ring. Eliza would see us here and be curious, no doubt. But she hadn’t accounted for Eliza being totally distracted by her own internal thoughts to pay attention to where she was going.

And now the forest was whispering Eliza’s name, trying to draw her in.

“Look,” I said bluntly, taking her by the shoulders. She glowered at me, but stood still, which was an improvement from trying to hit me. “There are things in those woods that are extremely dangerous.”

“Like fairies and elves?”

I blinked down at her, furrowing my brow.

“Who told you there are fairies—never mind. No. That’s what we tell children to keep them out of the woods and so that they mind their parents—”

“But I saw a group of boys going into the woods on the other side of the village!”

I turned her toward the village, pointing into the distance where the trees were sparse and backed by rolling hills. “This place is sheltered by two forests. The forest of Ortiz to the south, which leads to the sea,” I breathed, reluctantly giving this directional information away, “and to the north, the Dark Forest. There’s one place where they touch, but it’s far from here.”

“Why build your village here if it’s so dangerous?”

“Because no one would risk the trials of the Dark Forest. My village is safe here. My people are sheltered,” I said, and to my relief she nodded, the tension in her shoulders loosen as she took a shuddering breath.

Eliza looked behind us at the Dark Forest once more before looking up at me, meeting my eyes.

“I didn’t know—”

“I know,” I said softly. I was fighting off a smile, and not a smile meant for her, but one for me. Eliza was surrendering.

Eliza didn't break from my gaze. She was searching my eyes, a look crossing her face that made me want to take a step away from her.

"What?" I asked, tucking my hands behind my back.

"You have strange eyes," she said casually, tilting her head to inspect me from a new angle.

"Uh, thanks—"

"Not in a bad way," she corrected, taking a step toward me, effectively closing the distance between us. "In a familiar way, actually."

Something roiled within my chest, a silent warning. Familiar? No one outside of my family had eyes like mine that I knew of. And, well, it was likely those family members had no idea I existed.

A chill ran through me as clouds began to gather overhead, blocking the sun.

"It's going to rain," I said, my eyes still locked on hers. "You should go back to the house."

"I wasn't trying to escape, just so you know."

"I—I know," I huffed, giving her an annoyed glare. "I said, you should go back to the house before—"

"Before it rains, I heard you," she sighed, tucking her hands in the pockets of her apron. She looked... disappointed, maybe even bored.

I felt a pang of regret at the look on her face and almost offered my study to her, but quickly banished the thought from my mind. What was wrong with me? One sad look from the girl had me practically giving her whatever she wanted.

"The library," I began, but she shook her head and turned to the village, walking away. I was the one who was a little disappointed now. "Eliza," I said, and she turned her head to look at me over her shoulder. Her eyes shone like gems in the deepening gray light, her hair a soft brown halo around her delicate face. I found myself at a loss for words for a moment. I hadn't noticed the streaks of honey blonde and deep cherry that ran through her hair, brought out now by the overcast sky. She was striking.

"Yes, Jared?"

"Thank you for not fighting with me on this," I said, then gritted my teeth as I realized my mistake. Her eyes seemed to gleam with mischief, and maybe even a flicker of heat.

"Some other time," she replied, and it was a promise.

I let out my breath as she walked away. I stood still, watching her until her figure became blurred by an onslaught of rain.

I picked up the basket she'd left behind, carrying it to the sparring ring, which was now empty save for Brandt and Archer, who'd been waiting for me.

"What was that all about?" Archer laughed, blinking into the downpour.

"Miriam is up to her old tricks," I mused, wiping rain from my face.

Archer raised his brows but said nothing further as he climbed over the railing, the two of us walking toward the house. Brandt didn't follow. I wasn't sure what Brandt got up to most days. I'd never asked.

After a moment I paused to look over my shoulder toward the forest, which was nothing but all-encompassing darkness now.

"What?" Archer said, following my gaze with a hand on the dagger he always kept along his belt.

"There's a witch nearby," I replied. "Close. Possibly on the same trail we need to take to get to Aeris if the southern trail is impassable."

"Great. I f*****g love witches," Archer said sarcastically, tapping his fingers on his dagger.

I made a noise of agreement low in my throat. Archer went into the house, leaving me standing in the kitchen garden, my eyes still locked on the darkness in the distance.

I'd felt the power radiating toward Eliza while I stood with her on the outskirts of the Dark Forest. I'd felt her lost to it for a moment, not even aware that I'd been calling her name when I first approached.

"Like calls to like," I whispered into the rain, trying to make sense of the thoughts rushing through my mind.

I doubted Eliza was a witch.

But she was something. And maybe, just maybe, she was something I needed, in more ways than one.

I turned into the house, shutting the door firmly behind me, and then went to my study.

[Chapter 798](#)

Eliza

Rain thundered against the house for the rest of the day.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon in the laundry stirring the vats of scalding water and mending alongside Scarlett, the two of us enjoying several hours of contemplative silence.

The quiet and steady manual labor was a welcome break, and gave me the time I needed to mull over not only my situation, but the conflicting feelings that were creeping in and out of my mind since my strange run-in with Jared near the edge of what he called the Dark Forest.

He'd given me some insight into the layout of the land. The Dark Forest was north and filled with danger, that was clear. But to the south?

He'd said something about the sea, and where there was a sea, there was a boat.

A boat that could, potentially, take me home.

But no matter how hard I tried to make a plan of escape, my mind continually drifted back to Jared. His touch had heated my skin. His voice, dripping with concern, had made my breath catch in my throat. And his eyes? Well, I'd found myself fixed on them, lost in the inky depths of what I honestly believed to be his soul. I saw darkness there, but I also saw fire, the same fire I felt within myself.

I was curious about him. I was... starting to want him, or wanting to know more about him. I wasn't totally sure. But I knew my body and my mind were at odds over the matter.

Wringing out several baskets worth of wet laundry was my only respite from my internal conflicts. Scarlett and I carried the sodden clothes and hung them on racks in the communal sitting room before a roaring fire to dry.

Our work finally complete, we walked into the dining room, taking a seat on either side of the long, wooden table as other servants began to trickle in to convene over plates of roast chicken and mashed potatoes.

I was starving, and barely noticed that Jared and Archer had come in and were sitting at the opposite end of the table until I lifted my gaze from my plate to reach for seconds.

Jared looked entirely at ease, wearing a fresh shirt and trousers, free of his leather vest and belt heavy with weapons. I held my gaze on him for a moment, taking in the sharp line of his jaw and his softly curling black hair that brushed against the tops of his ears. He had his sleeves rolled up, and I noticed with a start the tattoos that roped around his forearms, lines of deep black and gray that moved in a rhythmic pattern back under the sleeves of his shirt. He turned before I could tear my eyes away, and our eyes met for a fraction of a second before I looked back down at my plate, stifling a blush.

"Get yourself together," I whispered to myself, toying with my food.

Miriam brought out dessert, which was met by applause. Even Jared was smiling, beaming up at her as she set the cake in the center of the long table, blushing with pride. My stomach was in knots as I stole another glance at Jared before rising from my seat and carrying my plate to the kitchen, feeling slightly overwhelmed.

There was a name for this, I was sure. I was out of my mind to even be considering feelings for Jared. He'd taken me here against my will, and had refused to give me the option to leave.

I slid my empty plate into the sink, watching it disappear beneath the soapy water.

The attic was where the women of the house slept. "Attic" wasn't really the right word for it. It was cozy and clean, and several rooms took up a space that covered both the length and width of the entire house. The room I shared with Scarlett was at the very end of a long, snug hallway. I walked inside, finding myself alone.

I took off my soiled apron and hung it on a hook before turning around and heading toward my bed, but then stopped midstep.

There was a large, leather-bound book resting at the foot of my bed.

I didn't need to go any closer to know what it was. I'd read it before... suffered through it, more like.

And I knew who had left it for me, and why.

I fumbled with the clasps of my dress, glaring down at the book as I changed into a thick flannel nightgown. I continued to stare at the book in the reflection of the vanity as I brushed my hair. I didn't

touch the book until I'd returned from brushing my teeth, and even then I had little interest in accepting what Jared must have meant to be a peace offering between us.

This book was from his study—the same study he wouldn't let me access, in the same house I where was being held captive.

With nothing left to do other than try to sleep, I pulled the book into my lap and looked down at the worn cover. It was an old retelling of the story of Lycaon; while the book itself wasn't ancient, the story itself was.

Inside, I would find the fable of his tomb, and his race through my realm to the safety of what was once the great city Dianny. I'd had to look at this book everyday for an entire semester during my last year of college, pouring over every page and comparing it to the scripts donated to the University by the Alpha King of Egoren himself. The purpose was so that our realm would be better educated in the true history of Lycaon, if the story was to be believed as fact, and not myth.

I closed the book, finding the text and the room I was sitting in suddenly claustrophobic. Scarlett came into the room, silent as a ghost, her eyes lined with fatigue.

"Hi," I smiled.

She gave me a soft smile in return before removing her apron and dress, changing into a nearly identical pair of pajamas.

"You're mending is making progress," she yawned. "You did a great job today."

"Thanks," I said, and meant it.

That was the most Scarlett had ever spoken to me, and I felt incredibly proud of myself as I slipped out of bed and fetched one of the thick robes hanging on hooks along the wall.

"I'm going to go sit on the porch for a while," I said, but Scarlett was already asleep, her eyelashes fluttering against her pale cheeks.

I slipped from the room and walked down the stairs into the depths of the house until I reached the first floor. There was a wide front porch attached to the house, and it was covered to protect it from the elements. I could sit on one of the benches and listen to the rain while I pondered over my next move.

The fact that Jared had given me this book to read meant he was thinking about me and my welfare. He trusted me with this book, a prized possession from his study.

Did this mean I was slowly gaining his trust? And if so, could I potentially ask for access to his sacred study, and eventually, the map?

"I didn't know anyone else was out here," Brandt said shyly, rising from one of the benches on the other side of the porch. I nearly jumped out of my skin, my hand flying over my heart.

"You scared me!" I breathed.

He stepped into the porch light, looking apologetic.

"It's cold out here," he said, tilting his head toward my robe and nightgown.

"I like it outside, especially when it rains. It calms my mind," I said, tapping a finger against my temple as I slumped against a bench, resting the book on my lap.

"Yeah, I get that." He made a move like he was going to sit down beside me, but hesitated, leaning against one of the columns holding up the roof of the covered porch instead. His eyes glowed a deep blue in the amber light of the porch.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I'm meeting up with Jared and Archer in the village in a little while. I thought I'd take a minute just to—uh, breathe, I guess."

"Oh? What are you all doing in the village?"

"Making plans for our journey south to Aeris's kingdom. It's been a wet spring," he began, motioning to the steady downpour, "and our usual trail was washed out, from what we've heard from our scouts."

"That's too bad," I said softly. I wondered why he was telling me this. "When do you leave?"

"A few days from now. There's a party for one of the younger crew members. He's turning twenty-one, so he'll come into his wolf. We're leaving the morning after."

So, I had a few days with Jared and his crew before I was left to my own devices. I had a few days to gather the supplies I needed to make the journey to safety.

A silence passed between us, broken only by the thundering rain. Finally, he said, "How are you doing? I mean, with all that's happened—"

"Just fine," I replied, giving my best smile. "I like it here." I wondered if he could see right through me, but he smiled nonetheless.

"That's good to hear. Miriam and Jared think highly of you."

I couldn't help but scoff at the mention of Jared thinking highly of me. Brandt gave me a crooked smile, shaking his head.

"He's a hardass, sure, but he's mentioned a few times that he thinks you're incredibly intelligent."

"Because I am," I teased. "But seriously, what is Jared's problem? Is he so—so—" I could not find the words to describe him. Ice cold? Brooding? A total jackass who I might now have a crush on?

"Yeah, uh, he didn't used to be like this. He's been going through... something." Brandt pursed his lips, realizing he was getting into dangerous territory.

"Does it have to do with the sketch of that amulet on his desk?"

Brandt snapped his eyes toward me, looking thoroughly taken aback.

I shrugged, opening the book on my lap. "I got lost while delivering laundry and ended up in his study."

Brandt eyed me suspiciously for a moment, but then relaxed, obviously not thinking me a threat to his lord and keeper if I was still alive after setting foot in his precious study.

“I’d better go,” he said, his expression losing its skepticism and softening into a smile. “I’ll see you later.”

“See ya,” I said cheerfully, waving as he walked out into the rain. My heart began to quicken as I watched his darkened form grow smaller and smaller, almost disappearing completely before two other figures appeared, then the three shadows walked away and out of sight.

I sprung to my feet, tucking the book under my arm as I tried to steady my breath.

Jared wasn’t in the house.

I could go get the map, or at least study it, without the risk of getting caught.

I turned into the house and shut the door firmly behind me.

[Chapter 799](#)

I had to wait to sneak into his study. I still didn’t know how many people lived in the house and occupied the dozens of rooms within its walls. Someone would snitch on me if I was seen creeping around in his wing of the house, that was for sure. So, I sat in the common room, warming my toes by the fire and pretending to read a book until the last of the people lingering around the dining room table retreated to their rooms.

I waited a while longer, listening to creaking pipes and faint voices until total silence fell, broken only by the dying fire in the hearth. The wait had been excruciating, but I knew I had at least a few minutes to view the map before having to sprint back to my room.

Jared’s quarters were on the third story and accessed by a tight, walled-in staircase that creaked with each step. I winced every time I put my foot down. Someone had said that Jared and his crew gathered in a tavern nearby most nights. I was safe. Right?

The corridor outside of his study was dark, especially with no moonlight coming through the single window that lit the hallway. I fumbled around, one hand on the wall as I felt my way down the hallway, blinking frantically to try to adjust my vision to the darkness.

I found a doorknob and pushed it open, stepping into a room, but it didn’t smell like dust and parchment. It was pitch black, and I felt along the wall for a light switch. I’d come to find out that some parts of the house were wired for electricity, all thanks to a single crude windmill at the far end of the village. I figured Jared, being their fearless leader, would have electricity in his wing of the house at least.

I took a blind step into the room, reaching along the wall in my search for light, but was met by the sharp scent of the laundry soap and the feeling of fabric against my cheek. I reared back, swinging my arms against what I believed to be an assailant, and dropped the book with a sharp thud on the floorboards.

“s**t!” I whispered, fumbling as I reached forward, my fingers grazing what felt like shirts and coats hung on a rod. “Just a closet,” I breathed, bending down to retrieve the book. It wasn’t where I thought

it'd landed, and I stepped further into the closet, Jared's clothing brushing against my head as I finally located the book and stood swiftly upright.

But my movement had sent a tremor through the clothing, and something above my head slid from what I believe was a shelf, and knocked me cleanly in the skull.

"Ouch! Damnit!"

I backed out of the closet, holding my forehead as I felt along the wall for another door. My hands brushed against a doorknob and I gripped it, pushing my way into what I knew was his study.

I sighed with relief, pulling a cord along the wall that set the study in a warm amber glow. An antique clock was ticking away in the corner of the snug room, and the light of the dusty, cobweb-covered chandelier reflected off bottles of fine scotch and whiskey sitting on a bar cart.

I felt oddly comfortable in the room despite the fact that I wasn't supposed to be there. It was dusty and smelled of leather and... manly things. It smelled like Jared.

I looked around the room, finding the space where he'd pulled the book from the shelves along the wall. I put the book back as gently as possible, then turned to the desk.

I tucked my hands behind my back in an attempt to stop myself from touching anything and leaned over the desk, scanning the map.

"You really have no sense of boundaries," Jared said behind me.

I jumped, then quickly composed myself, but my body was heating rapidly as adrenaline began to course through my blood. He walked across the room, soundless, and poured himself a drink.

I glanced at him, then looked back at the map. I couldn't focus anymore, not with Jared making himself comfortable on the old leather sofa directly behind me.

"I never met someone so light on their feet," I said through gritted teeth. "Are you sure you're not a dancer instead of a warrior?"

"I'm not a warrior," he replied. "And I'm a great dancer, if you care to know."

I turned my head to look at him fully. He was sitting on the sofa in a casual manner, his ankle resting on his opposite knee and one arm extended along the back of the couch. He looked ruffled, and the top buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing smooth, carefully crafted muscles that gleamed in the soft light.

He was comfortable, maybe even vulnerable, and he was waiting for my next move.

"Can I help you find anything?" he asked sarcastically, swirling the dark liquor in his glass.

"I was returning the book."

"Why?"

"Because I've read it already, several times. I could recite it front to back."

We stared at each other for a moment, a tense silence passing between us.

"I know you're after the map," he said. "You could've just asked to see it."

"You would've said no."

"I would have warned you that planning what you believe is an escape from this house is futile at best. My crew and I would be the least of your worries if you tried to go off on your own."

I let his words settle between us for a moment as I pondered my next move.

"We're not the only crew of bounty hunters. We're not the only packless rogues, either. It's not safe out there for a woman traveling alone—"

"You know nothing about me," I cut in, my voice trembling with frustration.

"You're right, I don't. But I assume you're not from here. You're not from... this realm, are you?"

I didn't answer, but I held his gaze. He nodded, his eyes boring into mine.

"Who are you?" he asked, and not for the first time.

"It doesn't matter."

"If you're in danger, I need to know." I squared my shoulders, preparing my next cutting remark but he beat me to it. "And don't say that I am the one putting you in danger, Eliza."

"Aren't you, though? How am I supposed to just trust that you mean well when I am a practical prisoner?" I asked.

"You're not a prisoner."

"Then what am I?"

Jared flexed his jaw, looking more than annoyed by my questioning. When he said nothing more, I turned back to look down at his desk, seeing the sketch of what I believed to be an amulet of some kind sticking out of a book. I reached for it, not caring that Jared was watching me, and unfolded the paper.

"What do you think it is?" he asked from behind me, his voice dropping an octave.

I glanced at him over my shoulder, noticing his abrupt change in demeanor. He wasn't sitting comfortably anymore. He was rigid, and he was genuinely waiting for my opinion.

"Are you designing a necklace for your sweetheart?" I teased, but he continued to stare, his gaze shifting to the paper as he rose from the sofa with a soft grunt.

"It's an artifact from Lycaon's time," he said, taking the paper from my hands. He was leaning on the desk next to me, close enough his thigh brushed against mine. "I've been looking for it for years."

"Why?"

He didn't answer right away, but he had a distant look in his eyes. For a moment I thought... I thought maybe he was going to open up to me a bit, to tell me why he had a study like this and about his interests in history and academia. We were obviously alike in that way, and maybe in other ways, too.

"I just want to find it," he said simply.

He looked up from the paper and met my eyes. We were incredibly close to each other now. I could reach out and run the back of my knuckles over the dark stubble along his jaw if I wanted to. My fingers flexed at the thought, but I curled them into a fist.

What was wrong with me?

"I told you this room was off limits," he breathed, folding the sketch back into a square.

"I know." It was all I could think to say.

"I also said there would be a punishment for this," he continued. The air was heavy between us, rippling with what I can only describe as electricity.

"And I asked you if that was a promise," I replied, my voice trembling slightly, and not out of fear. I wanted to... kiss him. I wanted him to throw me against the desk and have his way with me. My mind and body were at odds as he leaned forward, his breath tickling my cheek. I closed my eyes involuntarily, totally and completely under his spell.

"Get out," he said hoarsely, as if, at least for a moment, he'd been under the same spell as well and had realized it, just like I had.

The spell broke against his words, shattering to the ground at my feet. I stepped away from him, noticing the cold look in his eyes. Fury ripped through me, drowning out the heat burning through my core.

"What is your problem?" I asked, my voice dripping with disdain.

"My problem?" he growled. "My problem is your blatant disregard for authority. You're fearless, and you shouldn't be. You have no right to be sneaking around."

"But you think it's perfectly appropriate to have access to my room and—"

"I was trying to do something nice for you," he interrupted in a cutting tone. "I brought you that book because I thought it would be something you'd be interested in!"

"You were testing me," I bit out. "I see that now. It's almost like you were waiting for me to come in here."

"I need to be able to trust you," he snapped. "I have no idea who you are or where you came from."

"You brought ME here," I argued. "You didn't have—"

"I wasn't going to leave you behind." His voice echoed through the room, and I went still, catching the faint tremor of raw emotion in his tone, something I was sure he'd meant to keep hidden.

I didn't know what it was about Jared that kept me on edge. I didn't know why I'd secretly been wanting this confrontation, maybe more than I wanted the map. I looked up into his eyes and held his gaze. I couldn't make sense of the look in his eyes or the expression on his face. He was angry, that was clear. Frustrated? Sure. But there was something else, something deeper, something we shared.

“Why,” he said with effort, “are you so mean to me?”

I was surprised by this question. I opened my mouth, but had nothing to say. The tension between us seemed to be lifting, however. I cleared my throat, and offered him something other than the apology I owed him.

“I think,” I said, slowly reaching forward to take the paper out of his hands. I unfolded it, turning it so he could see it from my angle. “These pieces are backwards. It shouldn’t fit together like a puzzle. This center area looks like it could be a key hole, or a place where a gem would go. That’s why I thought it was an amulet. But the more I look at it, the more I think...” I traced a finger along one of the sketches, imagining what this thing, this icon of some kind, would look and feel like in my hand. “I think it’s a clock.”

He touched the paper, following the same line I’d traced, until our fingers touched. A spark lit between us, literally.

“Ouch!” I hissed, curling my hand into a fist. He’d shocked me with static electricity.

“Sorry,” he murmured, totally unbothered as he continued to look down at the paper. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

He met my eyes again, and to my surprise, I saw the threat of a smile touch the corner of his mouth.

“I think you might be right,” he said. “It might be a clock.”

“I’m usually right,” I breathed, then gave him a soft, apologetic smile.

“Goodnight,” he said, tilting his head toward the door.

I frowned. Hadn’t I just helped him?

“I’m not sorry for coming in here,” I said as I moved toward the door. Why did I always feel the need to have the last word?

“I know,” he sighed, and as I exited the room, I heard him fold the sketch back up and tuck it away.

I’d forgotten all about the map.

Next time.

[Chapter 800](#)

I wasn’t sure what I was thinking. My conversation with Jared had left me furious, then guilty, and overall... wanting.

I wasn’t able to sleep at all that night. I tossed and turned, going over every word that had passed between us.

On top of my severely conflicting emotions, I’d entirely forgotten about the reason I’d gone to his study again in the first place—the map.

He'd seen right through me, of course. He'd warned me of the dangers I'd face on my own. Maybe it was the fact that I'd been mulling all of this over at close to three in the morning, but I'd started to feel like maybe he was right. I was safer here than I was on my own, at least for now.

But Jared's words continued to plague me well into the next morning. "Why are you so mean to me?" he'd asked.

Because I'm scared as hell, and too much of a coward to admit I'd bit off more than I could chew.

I slouched on my usual stool in the laundry, a cup of now-tepid tea sitting untouched in front of me. I owed him an apology, a real one.

Luckily for me, a cart had arrived in the village earlier in the morning, filled to the brim with groceries. Giselle had screamed in delight when a box of cherries was carried in, and now the entire house smelled of baking.

I was planning on bringing a basket of freshly baked cherry pastries to the sparring ring as a peace offering. It was the best I could do, other than behave myself and wiggle into his good graces. If he trusted me and didn't find me a threat, I could eventually ask him to release me, and maybe even help me get home.

But when I thought about going home, I... well, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to go home, not yet. Despite everything, I'd made it this far, hadn't I?

Exploring the Dark Realm, finding and touching actual artifacts here had been my dream, and while it'd had a rocky start... I was here. I found it unlikely Jared was going to kill me, especially if I stayed on my best behavior. I was safe.

I'd won the race to explore the secrets of the Dark Realm just by making it here. None of my colleagues had the guts. It was mine to discover, if I played my cards right. "Where is all of yesterday's laundry?" Scarlett muttered to herself, looking around the room. It was nearly ten in the morning and our usual onslaught of dirty, tattered clothing from yesterday's sparring and chores hadn't been delivered the night before. The laundry room was empty.

"Maybe no one ruined their clothing?" I offered.

Scarlett gave me a look, obviously panicking about not having anything to do with her hands. She was picking her nails and fidgeting.

I turned my tea cup in a circle, wondering what I was going to do with the rest of my day if we didn't have anything to wash and mend. Giving Jared a basket of cherry pastries, a beaming smile, an apology, and if he was lucky, a promise of good behavior going forward were the only things on my list.

I heard whistling in the hallway and Scarlett abruptly turned on her stool, facing away from the doorway. I arched my brow at her and straightened up just as Archer walked into the room holding a basket of the muddiest, most tarnished clothes I'd ever seen.

He dropped the basket at my feet, giving me a wink.

"What the hell is this?" I scoffed, gingerly picking up a shirt that fell to pieces in my hands.

“A special gift from Jared,” Archer grinned, his eyes narrowed and full of mischief.

“What? Why?”

“To keep you busy and out of his personal space,” he replied with a smug smile. Scarlett was off her stool in an instant, rounding the table with desperate, outstretched hands as she reached toward the basket. “No, these aren’t for you, Lettie. You have the day off.”

Scarlett slowly looked up at Archer, who towered over her by more than a foot.

“I thought we could take a walk, maybe. If you’d be okay with that,” Archer continued, the mischief draining from behind his eyes and replaced by... hope.

If I wasn’t so livid, I would have felt incredibly sad for him.

“Oh, I—okay—” Scarlett stammered, glancing at me before turning toward the doorway, her face flushed from shock.

Archer gave me another wink, then turned on his heel and followed Scarlett out of the room, leaving me alone.

I sucked on my lower lip as I looked down at the basket. Scarlett and I usually tossed clothing this ragged into the fire, or cut them into rags.

“You bastard. I was going to apologize to you,” I said beneath my breath as I picked up the basket and dumped the contents into one of the large vats of hot water.

This was the punishment he’d threatened me with, and it was going to take me all day.

But then I had a thought.

It was well past midnight. Everyone who lived in the house had gone to bed, but I was still awake, and still sitting on my stool with the very last piece of mending laid out in front of me on my worktable. I flexed my hands, which were cramped and raw from hours and hours of sewing.

But I’d done it. I folded up the last shirt in a neat square and set it on top of the basket, taking a moment to catch my breath. My fingertips were raw and covered in bandages. My back felt broken, and my legs were tingling from lack of use. I was afraid that if I stood up too quickly, my knees would buckle and all of the blood would rush from my head.

I took it easy and slowly stretched my aching body until I was standing straight, then I clutched the basket and carried it out into the darkened house.

Archer had checked in on me only once during the tortuous day. He’d peeked his head into the laundry, giving me a smile and nod, then told me to deliver the laundry to Jared’s room when I was done.

So, an arduous climb to the third floor of the house would be my final punishment, it seemed.

I climbed the stairs, too tired to care that every step creaked loudly throughout the house. I paused on the last few stairs leading to the third floor, out of breath, my legs shaking with fatigue. I was exhausted.

Maybe Jared was right. A day full of mending had been enough to keep me out of his business. I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my bed and sleep for days.

When I finally reached the third floor I noticed the snug hallway was filled with muted light coming from an open door at the very end of the hall. I heard papers rustling, and the sound of a drawer opening, then shutting again.

I lifted the basket a little higher, which took an incredible amount of what strength I had left, and walked toward the door, making out what looked like a four-poster bed and thick red curtains.

Jared appeared in the doorway as I approached. He was shirtless, his tattoos on full display. He was disheveled, his hair still wet from a bath.

He leaned on the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest, smirking as I neared and set the basket down a few feet away from the door.

"Here," I panted, unable to form any other words. I nudged the basket forward, giving it a little kick with my foot. I was expecting him to inspect the laundry to make sure it was up to snuff, but he just looked at me, his gaze trailing over my face. That smug grin faded when he saw how worn down I was.

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry," I exhaled, "For snooping around. I won't do it again."

Sudden guilt flashed behind his eyes. I doubled over, my hands on my knees as my head began to spin. I heard him take a quick step in my direction, but I waved him away. "I'm fine," I said. "I just haven't eaten all day."

"I can make you something."

I looked up at him, quirking my brow. "You can cook?"

"I'm not totally useless in the kitchen, no," he said, retreating a step as I straightened up.

"I'm just going to go to bed," I yawned, and gave him a soft smile. He looked like he was on the verge of apologizing to me, but I turned and walked down the hallway before he could say anything further. Better to let him stew on his idea of a punishment for a while, anyway.

"Wait," he said softly.

I halted, but didn't turn around right away. I heard him retreat into his room for a moment, then in a flash he was behind me, touching me lightly on the back of my arm. He gently placed a thin leather book in my hands.

"What is it?"

"A journal, actually." He took a pen from his pocket and set it on top of the journal. I met his eyes, and the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile. "I figured since you've already read all of the books in my study you could... write something of your own."

“Oh.” I looked down at the journal, my throat tightening with sudden emotion. The gesture was incredibly kind. I didn’t really know how to voice just how much it meant. I’d lost my journal just before I was captured, a journal I’d had for many years and taken on several expeditions.

I ran a finger over the cover, tracing the uneven surface of the leather. It was hand-sewn, and as I opened it, I noticed the rough, hand-pressed paper that was dappled with dried flower petals.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered, and looked up to find him looking exceedingly pleased.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I haven’t read every book in your study, you know. If you’d only give me access—”

“Don’t ruin this for me,” he said, and I felt my heart squeeze around the playful smile that twitched across his face.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Goodnight, Jared.”

“Goodnight,” he replied, and with that I turned and walked away, clutching the journal to my chest as I made my way to my bed in the attic.

I didn’t sleep right away. I thumbed through the journal in the light of a single candle, listening to Scarlett’s rhythmic breathing across the room. I tapped the pen against the paper, thinking it was a ballpoint. It took me a few minutes to figure out how to use it, and I noticed it was basically a quill with refillable space for ink.

“Interesting,” I murmured, then yawned hugely as I scribbled a little flower on the corner of the page. Scarlett murmured to herself, turning over to face the wall.

I dated the page, enjoying how easily the ink flowed. Then, I wrote down everything that had happened to me so far.

An hour passed, and my eyes were heavy with fatigue when I finally set the pen down and looked over the last entry I’d made.

“The journal was a very nice gift, but I feel a little guilty about accepting it, especially after Jared sees what I did to his clothes,” I read aloud in a whisper, smiling sleepily to myself.

I’d be in trouble tomorrow.

I put the journal on my bedside table and blew out the candle, the smell of smoke thick and acrid for a breath as I settled against the pillow. It was quiet for several minutes, the only sounds were the creaking of the house and a gentle breeze dusting the window above my head.

But then Scarlett took a deep, shuddering breath and began to whimper.

I shot out of bed and launched myself on Scarlett, taking her face between my hands.

“Shhh... Shhh...” I coaxed, her tears seeping between my fingers.

She was choking on silent sobs, her entire body trembling. She wasn't even awake, and hadn't noticed I was leaning over her, holding her face in my hands as whatever nightmare she was stuck in passed.

I'd only been staying at the house for four or five days, but this was the third time I'd held Scarlett in my arms while she fought some demon in her sleep. I didn't think she even knew I'd been doing this for her, with her. The first night it happened I thought she was being attacked. I'd rolled out of bed ready to fight off whoever was assaulting her, my weapon of choice a single shoe, because I didn't have time to find the other one.

These afflictions were called night terrors. I'd witnessed plenty of them during my time living in the dorms at the University of Mirage. Mine had been one of the first classes to attend the university after the war against the vampires, a war in which many, many young people had fought against horrors I couldn't fathom.

They relived those horrors night after night in their dreams.

All I knew about Scarlett was that she knew Archer from her youth, and that something had happened to her after Archer left the orphanage they grew up in to join Jared's crew.

Whatever that trauma had been, well, she was living it now, and I could do little to help her.

She quieted, sniffing lightly as the last of her tears spilled into my hands. I laid down next to her and laid my arm over her chest while I curved my body around hers. My weight helped ease her back into sleep, but I waited to return to my own bed until her heartbeat slowed.

Poor girl, I thought, reaching up to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear.

I wondered if Jared knew this was happening, and if so, if there was anything he could do to stop it.