

Kings Breeder 801

[Chapter 801](#)

Jared

Early morning sunlight drifted through the curtains in my bedroom as I slowly laid out the final piece of clothing Eliza had mended on my bed, staring down at what she'd done.

I was at a loss for words. I'd noticed the bandages covering her fingers, and her fatigue had been obvious. I'd even felt guilty about what I'd hardly considered a punishment being so physically grueling.

But then I found out why it had taken her the entire day and well into the night to complete the job.

I picked up a shirt she'd tactfully mended and turned it into the sun. Little needlepoint flowers stitched in pale pink thread adorned the sleeves and surrounded the patches she'd sown across the chest.

I looked down at the bed where the rest of the clothing had been laid out, all of it mended, all of it clean, all of it decorated with flowers.

She'd bested me.

"Damn," I breathed, more impressed with her tenacity than annoyed that she'd ruined nearly all of the clothes I wore to the ring and on hunts.

Even the socks I'd thrown into the basket were decorated with flowers. I pulled the socks onto my feet, wiggling my toes.

I knew Archer and Brandt would tear me to shreds if I wore any of it to the ring. I'd never hear the end of it. But, that was the point. I'd punished her for sneaking around and stepping over my boundaries, and now she was punishing me... for punishing her.

I gathered up the clothes and dumped them back in the basket before pulling a fresh shirt and pants from my dresser. I'd get her back for this—how, I didn't know. But I would, that was a promise.

Archer would be waiting for me in the ring by now. I'd been sleeping in much later than usual. I didn't know if it was the thought of Eliza and her schemes keeping me up at night, or if my body was starting to succumb to the ticking clock within my soul that was inching closer to midnight with each passing day. But I was tired.

I left the room, passing a few maids on my way to the kitchen for a quick bite to take with me to the ring. I stopped in the hallway outside of the laundry and listened to a soft conversation between what sounded like Giselle and Eliza.

"I'm afraid she'll hurt herself in her sleep," Eliza whispered.

Giselle sighed, and I heard a stool creak as one of the women sat down, shifting their weight.

"I don't know what happened to her, but it was bad. I think... there was a rumor there was a baby—"

I backed away from the doorway, my chest tightening with unease. I knew what had happened to Scarlett. So did Archer. So did Brandt. And now, so would Eliza.

I ran my fingers through my hair, ruffling it with frustration as I turned back the way I'd come and chose to forgo eating breakfast and go immediately to the ring.

Archer was already training a few young members of our crew when I walked up to the ring, shielding the bright glare of the sun from my eyes.

"Mornin' darlin'," Archer teased, then he grunted with effort as he threw a practice jab toward one of the youths, who flinched and covered his face with his arms. "Ah, see? Now your belly is exposed. Dead!"

Archer knocked the teen in the stomach with his fist, not enough to hurt the kid, but enough to show him that had Archer had a knife, his life would have been over.

"Good morning," I gruffed, leaning on the railing and looking over the group who had assembled for the morning session.

Brandt was on the far end of the ring, talking to a group of men. I watched Brandt for a moment until he caught my eye and I was able to motion him over. Archer clapped his trainees on the shoulders and muttered something about them calling it a day, and to rest up for tonight's debauchery.

"You just gave them an invitation to get piss drunk without repercussions," I said coolly as Archer approached.

He shrugged, giving the teens a final glance over his shoulder before settling against the railing next to me. "Eh, they'll drink more than they should and spend tomorrow paying for it. Everyone has to learn that lesson the hard way. They need to learn their limits before we can take them out on the road."

"You're not wrong about that."

I exhaled, turning my head to look out over the village. Everyone was slowly getting ready for the celebration tonight. Tommy, once a scrawny, fresh-faced teenager when he started training under Archer, was turning twenty-one. He'd come into his wolf at midnight.

Everyone, including the employees of my house, would be roaming around the village enjoying the merriment.

I also planned to enact my revenge on Eliza tonight.

"Tomorrow, then?" Brandt asked.

"We'll leave at dawn, as the sun comes up." I turned to Archer, who gave me a grim nod.

"The southern trail is washed out for sure, the scout came back with the news this morning. The river is too high to cross safely," Archer confirmed, which wasn't the news I was hoping for, but it was the news I was expecting.

I ran my hand over my face. "Northern trail it is. We'll reach the trail from Elmorn to Saboreef in three days." We'd spend three days in the Dark Forest, which meant two nights in the Dark Forest.

"And we're bringing Eliza for sure?"

"Eliza, but not our crew."

“What?” Brandt said, his eyes flashing with concern.

“I’m not risking any men to the forest. We’ll travel quicker, and quieter, just the four of us.” It was the truth, but traveling in the Dark Forest also meant traveling exclusively on foot in our usual forms—no shifting unless totally necessary. The nightmares that called the forest home were more powerful than even the stealthiest, most highly trained wolf.

This was an incredible risk, but I didn’t have much of a choice if I was going to pay my men for their help fetching the bounty and retrieving the scroll Aeris had promised me for killing his brother.

“And you’re sure Aeris will keep Eliza?” Archer asked, and for a reason I wasn’t yet willing to admit, the question made my blood boil.

“He’s not keeping her because we’re not going to offer her to him,” I said flatly, turning to look at both men.

“Then why are we taking her with us?” Brandt asked, his concerned expression melting into confusion.

“I think she could be of some use to us there. I’d like to see what she’s capable of.”

“But she’s feral—” Archer started, but I waved my hand in dismissal.

“She’ll behave. She won’t have a choice.” The forest was capable of humbling anyone, including the most hot-headed and overconfident woman I’d ever come across in my life.

“And if she takes the opportunity to run?” Brandt inquired testily.

I gave him a look, then shrugged as I left his gaze and blinked into the sun.

“She won’t,” I said, because it was true. I’d seen a glimmer of marked curiosity in her eyes two nights ago in my study when she’d scanned the sketch of the artifact. I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, she’d seen something like it before. That was the only explanation.

She could help me.

“What exactly is the reason for taking her—to Aeris’s territory, no less?”

“One of you mentioned she was a spy. I don’t think she is, but she sure as hell could be with enough incentive. I plan to let her loose in his castle.”

“This is Aeris we’re talking about,” Brandt said firmly, crossing his arms over his chest. “He’ll take one look at her and want her—”

“She belongs to him based on the old laws. His pack still follows them, the Alpha King be damned,” Archer added.

I nodded, taking this into consideration. “As long as Aeris is unaware his brother bought Eliza at the auction, it won’t matter. If he has heard, then we will deal with it then. As of right now, Eliza is part of our crew.”

Archer raised his brows, a devilish smile spreading across his face. I gave him a look, narrowing my eyes on him.

“And no hazing—” I said, but Brandt shifted his weight and exhaled deeply, catching my attention.

“Are you sure she can handle this?” Brandt asked.

I mulled his question over for a moment as the three of us watched the preparations for the party taking place in the village.

“Yes,” I said, and I meant it. “She can.”

“Then I’ll guard her with my life—” Brandt replied, which was interrupted by a grunt from Archer, who was giving Brandt a look dripping with mirth.

“I bet you will, you lovesick puppy.”

“That’s enough,” I interjected, looking from one man to the other. “Eliza is off limits.”

Archer pursed his lips, obviously uninterested in Eliza in that way. Brandt, on the other hand, looked somewhat disappointed. Speaking of “eating alive,” that was exactly what she’d do to Brandt. He looked tough, but deep down he was a romantic at heart, and Eliza would ruin him. He’d never be the same.

A contemplative silence passed between the three of us for a long moment.

“Has there been any word about Scarlett’s boy?” I asked, doing my best to keep my voice level. Archer went rigid beside me, not looking at me. Brandt let out his breath, shaking his head. “We’ll ask Aeris to keep a lookout—”

“He’d be in the capital,” Archer said, his tone riding the edge of fury and grief.

Archer had spent nearly a year looking for that kid, who couldn’t have been more than three years old now. We still sent regular scouts through the pack lands in search of any clues to his location. Archer was often gone for weeks at a time following any lead that came our way. “Why?” he bit out after a moment.

“Scarlett is having nightmares again,” I breathed. “I overheard Eliza talking to Giselle about it this morning.”

Archer pushed off from the railing and stalked away, his shoulders rigid with tension. I swallowed past the lump in my throat, my hands flexing into fists at my sides.

“So, Eliza knows?” Brandt asked.

I nodded, then shrugged. “Giselle likely told her.”

“Maybe she can help.”

“His father has him hidden well,” I said firmly.

There was nothing left to say. None of us liked talking about it. I’d known Archer for years, seen him in situations that would break even the toughest of men, but he didn’t bat an eyelash at any of it.

Finding out his childhood sweetheart had been sold as a breeder at nineteen, and then had her baby ripped from her arms before she was dragged into woods during a frigid, unforgiving winter and left to

die, had nearly killed Archer. Scarlett had been rescued and brought to us, but she'd never fully recovered.

Archer vowed to her that he'd find her son. That was three years ago, and we were still looking.

I shook the vow from my mind, tucking it away for later, when I had a clearer head to mull it over.

"What time does the celebration for Tommy start?" I asked with a sigh.

Brandt shrugged as we watched two men rolling a barrel of what looked to be whisky across the village square.

"Whenever people start drinking," he mused.

I nodded, then clapped him on the shoulder and left the ring, walking toward the house. I could see Eliza in the kitchen garden, her hair tied in a bun on the top of her head, which made her look several inches taller than she actually was. She had an effect on me I couldn't really explain. Fighting with her was like battling a brick wall. I'd never met a woman so sure of herself.

But when I got a rare smile out of her?

It had me questioning everything.

She straightened up, shielding her eyes from the sun as I approached. I was thrilled to see her expression twist with concern as I neared the gate. She may have bested me this time, but I had another punishment in mind, one that might benefit both of us.

"You think you're so clever," I laughed as I walked into the garden.

She squared her shoulders, preparing for a fight.

"You owe me new sparring clothes."

"Why? I mended everything for you yesterday," she replied in clipped sarcasm.

I walked past her, giving her a sharp look over my shoulder as I reached the door leading into the kitchen.

"I'll see you tonight. I have something for you."

"Another punishment?" she quipped. "Or have you learned your lesson?"

"Never," I said, then I went into the house.

[Chapter 802](#)

Eliza

I'd spent the majority of the day in the garden off the kitchen, knee-deep in mud as I helped two other maids turn the soil to make room for a spring crop.

It was hard work, and messy too. But it was surprisingly therapeutic, and I found that the hours ticked by in relative peace. There was no laundry to be done today. Most of the household staff had the day off, save for the kitchen staff. There would be a huge party tonight for a young man who was turning

twenty-one and coming into his wolf, and Miriam had made it clear that unless you were cooking, you had to be out of the house and enjoying yourself.

I did try to help in the kitchen. I'd met up with Giselle in the early morning to ask her about Scarlett, and whether she knew about her nightmares. After I found out the rumors behind Scarlett's situation, sitting around doing nothing all day was impossible. I needed to be busy to keep my mind off it.

It turned out I couldn't stand the heat, so to speak, in Miriam's exceedingly busy kitchen, which was in full swing in preparation for the party. Poor Giselle was up to her elbows in pie dough and Miriam was in a frantic mood, barking commands at everyone. I asked for a job, and she breathlessly told me to go out to the garden and find something to do, so I did.

And that's when I ran into Jared for the first time after I'd littered his clothing with cross-stitched flowers.

I was under the impression he'd react in one of two ways. He'd either be incredibly pissed, or he'd say nothing at all.

To my surprise, he'd been somewhat playful about the entire thing but made it clear that another one of his so-called punishments would follow, tonight.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to it, or at least the aftermath.

After soaking myself to the bones in the garden, I retreated to the washroom to bathe and ready myself for an evening of debauchery.

"They do get pretty rowdy," Giselle mused as she scrunched a thick conditioner into my hair. I sighed deeply as her nails dug into my scalp. It felt rather good. "But you'd better come back to the house by midnight."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, then she paused to dump a pitcher of warm water over my head. "Some of the younger men who aren't as experienced in their wolves tend to, well, go a little wild. Jared won't let them hurt anyone, but I've been chased through the village a time or two."

I swiveled in the bath to face her, giving her a shocked look.

"You've been chased?" I said, but she gave me a brilliant grin.

"I never said I didn't like it!"

I splashed her with water as the two of us fell into a fit of girlish giggles. It felt good to have another young woman to talk to.

"I'm going to set your curls, get up!"

"I honestly just let them dry however--"

"I know," she scolded as I rose from the bathtub and wrapped myself in a towel. "That's what's wrong with them." She patted the stool she'd been sitting on in front of a vanity and I obliged, letting her run a comb through my hair.

Another maid walked into the communal washroom, looking for a compact of blush. All of the women who worked in the house had shed their gray dresses and aprons, and I realized I had nothing else to wear, other than my nightgown.

Giselle started coiling my curls around her fingers, casting them in something that smelled like lavender and daffodil.

“My mother had hair just like yours,” she smiled, stepping back to examine her work. “Once you’re dressed, I’ll have you sit in front of the fireplace so your hair dries faster.”

“Thank you for forcing me to allow you to do this,” I teased, and she swatted me playfully. “What am I supposed to wear to this thing, anyway? I only have the dress I wear to work.”

“I have some clothes. Don’t you worry.” She motioned for me to follow her into her room, which was a few doors down from the room I shared with Scarlett.

I glanced at my door, noticing it slightly ajar.

“Leggings—” she said, bending over to rummage through a dresser. “And... a sweater. Oh, leg warmers, of course. It’s going to be chilly when it gets dark. You have boots, right?”

I nodded, trying to balance the clothing she’d tossed at me while trying not to drop the towel that was currently the only thing stopping me from exposing myself.

“There are some jackets downstairs in the storage room in the foyer. Come on, get dressed! I don’t want to miss anything.” Giselle was already dressed in an ankle-length skirt and sweater, her hair loose around her shoulders. She shrugged on a wool jacket as I dressed, thanking her for letting me borrow the clothes.

“Now, let’s go get Scarlett,” she said with a mischievous grin as she clapped her hands.

“Wait—” I protested, but Giselle was already walking out of the room and across the hall. I rushed after her, not wanting to push Scarlett into joining us in the village.

“Come on, girl! Let’s go!” Giselle said as I followed her through the threshold of the room I shared with Scarlett.

Scarlett was sitting on her bed, a book open on her lap. She blinked up at us, furrowing her brow.

“You don’t have to come—” I said quickly, but Giselle nudged me in the ribs.

“Scarlett, you’ve skipped the last two parties.”

“I know,” Scarlett replied, shrugging a shoulder and tapping her dainty fingers against the cover of her book.

“Archer is going to be there,” Giselle coaxed. “Don’t you want to see him before he leaves tomorrow?”

“Where is he going?” I asked, but Giselle was solely focused on rousing Scarlett out of bed.

“Fine, but only if you promise to keep me out of whatever schemes you’re planning tonight,” Scarlett replied sharply, narrowing her eyes at Giselle.

It was the most I'd ever heard Scarlett say, and I was shocked she'd actually agreed to come out to the village with us with so little prodding. Giselle and I stepped out of the room while Scarlett dressed, and soon the three of us walked out of the house and into the village.

"Damn, I forgot to have you sit by the fire so your hair dries," Giselle murmured as she reached up and tried to adjust the frizzy curls now springing from the top of my head.

"My hair dries fast," I assured her, smiling as I turned to look out over the village, which was cast in a deep golden glow as the sun began to set over the forest in the distance.

Lanterns had been lit in a wide circle around several warming fires. We passed tables lined with food and drink on our way to one of the fires, and lively string music filled the air.

"Rhubarb wine or cider?" Giselle beamed, spinning a reluctant Scarlett in a circle.

Scarlett pinkened at the attention, and I saved her by telling Giselle to fetch me a glass of wine, and she skipped away, disappearing into the growing crowd.

"Thanks," Scarlett said softly, adjusting her scarf.

"It's okay," I smiled, and Scarlett gave me a soft, shy smile in response.

We stood in silence for a few minutes, watching the crowd. Men of all ages were congregating around the fires, all of them jolly and loose with drink. I scanned the crowd and saw Jared standing with Archer and a few other men I recognized from the group I'd traveled with through the woods when they'd taken me from the breeder auction. As if he could feel my gaze, Jared turned his head, meeting my eyes for a moment.

He winked at me, then turned back to his conversation.

I furrowed my brow, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Did he just f*****g wink at me?" I muttered to myself.

"What?" Scarlett said, totally oblivious.

"I have secured the wine!" Giselle sang, turning in a circle with an entire glass jug of wine clasped in her hands. "Don't tell Miriam I took the whole thing!"

"Well, you just announced it to the entire village," I teased as she handed me the jug. I took a small sip, then a larger one, surprised at how good it was.

I passed the jug to Scarlett. She gingerly took it from me and sniffed.

"There you are," said a boisterous young man who appeared out of nowhere, grabbing Giselle around the waist.

Giselle squealed in delight, but Scarlett and I jumped, startled by his abrupt appearance in our tight circle. I didn't realize I'd gripped Scarlett's arm and pulled her closer to me until she nearly dropped the wine and I had to catch it before it hit the ground.

“Come dance with me,” the young man purred into Giselle’s ear. “It’s my party, and dancing with you is all I want.”

“Go play with the other pups, Tommy. I’ll dance with you when you’re a wolf, not a boy,” Giselle teased, then she kissed him soundly.

I felt myself blushing a bit at the intimacy of the kiss, and with absolutely no regard to Scarlett and me standing right there, not even two feet away.

He pulled her into the crowd, the two of them laughing and twirling with the music. Through the crowd of dancers I caught Jared’s eye again, his gaze fixed firmly on mine. His expression was slightly concerned, like he’d witnessed what had just happened and was checking in on me, and on Scarlett as well. I nodded at him, watching from afar as his dark eyes reflected the flames of the fires burning between us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Archer stepping closer to Jared, whispering into his ear. Scarlett took the jug of wine from my hands and took a long, deliberate swig.

“Does Archer bother you?” I asked, taking the wine back from her.

She contemplated this for a moment, then shook her head, struggling to swallow the wine. “No, he doesn’t.”

“He seems to really like you—”

“He’s my mate,” she breathed. She wasn’t looking at me, and didn’t notice my obvious shock. Her eyes were fixed on the crowd, her expression distant and unreadable.

“Oh,” I said stupidly. “But—”

“We haven’t, uhm... we haven’t done anything about it,” she continued, stealing a glance at me.

“Did you reject him?”

“No,” she replied firmly, but then she reached for the jug of wine but hesitated before drinking from it again.

I felt the sudden urge to ask her to confirm what Giselle had told me about her past. I’d been told Scarlett had been sold by the orphanage she grew up in as a breeder when she aged out of their care, and that the baby had been taken from her.

I couldn’t even begin to imagine that kind of pain. The revelation had been shocking, and it explained her almost nightly nightmares. But finding out Archer was her mate was also a huge shock.

“It’s my fault,” she said, a little sadly. I blinked at her, furrowing my brow.

“How so?”

“I—he tried to... help me, and I refused to let him even... touch me, to come near me. When he left for the war in the Realm of Light two years ago—”

“What?” I said sharply, straightening up.

“The war,” she repeated. “The Alpha King gathered an army—”

“I know,” I whispered, mostly to myself. I looked back across the crowd to where Archer and Jared were standing. They noticed me looking at them and must have noticed my stunned expression because Jared started moving toward me.

“Archer’s good,” Scarlett whispered, heartbreak lining each word. “I’m just a used-up breeder. He deserves better for a mate—”

“Scarlett!” I cried, turning to face her. I took her by the shoulders, shaking her. The jug of wine she was holding trembled with the movement. “Don’t say that!”

“Are you two alright?” Jared asked, leaning down to speak discreetly to us.

“Lettie,” Archer said, appearing at Scarlett’s side.

Scarlett had tears in her eyes, and Archer turned his gaze on me, fire burning behind his eyes. “What did you do to her?” he snapped at me.

“What? Me?”

“That’s enough, Archer. Take her inside,” Jared commanded, sounding every bit the Alpha he was, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

Archer glared at me as he turned Scarlett toward the house and walked away.

“They’re mates?” I hissed, just as Jared opened his mouth to say something.

He gritted his teeth, looking down at me with a sigh. “Yes—”

“And Archer fought in the war against the vampire king? Did you, as well?”

Jared eyed me, his hand coming to rest on my lower back.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” he exhaled.

[Chapter 803](#)

Jared led me through the village away from the party going on in the background. I stopped walking when we reached the kitchen garden, then had to hustle to keep up with him as he walked right past the house and toward the sparse woods beyond.

The “good” woods, I noted, not the scary forest to the north, void of light and filled with beasts, according to the man himself.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we started down a slow descent, the lights of the village fading until we were blanketed in pale violet light, the sun all but set.

“It’s a full moon tonight,” Jared said, not looking back at me.

“Oh,” I said with a hint of annoyance. His answer had given me absolutely nothing. “Are you going to shift and eat me, then?”

He glanced at me over his shoulder, looking me up and down.

“You wouldn’t be much of a meal.”

I pursed my lips and followed him further into the woods for several minutes. Was this another one of his punishments?

“Jared?” I panted, trying my best to keep in step with him. He didn’t answer, so I reached out and grabbed his shirt sleeve.

He whirled on me so swiftly that I had to dig in my heels to stop myself from running right into his chest. “What?”

“Archer and Scarlett. I didn’t say or do anything—”

“I know,” he breathed, giving me a sympathetic look. “He’s defensive of her.”

“Because they’re mates,” I added, and he nodded, but his face was cast in shadow. “And after her baby was taken from her—”

“He fought in the war in the Realm of Light, yes.”

I found it a little hard to breathe. Archer? He fought... he would have fought alongside my cousins and uncles. Had Jared as well?

“I didn’t,” he said as if reading my mind. I was sure the question was clear on my face. “But I heard it was brutal.” He turned and began walking again, but he’d slowed his pace so I could keep up. “I had responsibilities that kept me home,” he added after a moment.

“I did too,” I said softly, my heart stuck in my throat.

Jared glanced back at me, and to my surprise he gave me the softest, most knowing smile. It caught me off guard, and I hastily looked away from him as we continued along a well-beaten trail leading away from the village.

He got ahead of me again after a while. Night was falling, and he carried no lantern. We were blanketed in nothing but moonlight now. I fell even further behind when I eventually looked up, letting the light of the full moon dust my cheeks.

Tommy was a lucky man to have his twenty-first birthday fall on a full moon.

“Keep up,” Jared said several yards ahead of me.

I pursed my lips and took a few quick steps to catch up to him so we were walking side by side again. He was very tall, and keeping up with his long stride had me panting with effort by the time we walked out of the woods and onto a bluff. I gasped, looking out onto a wide, sweeping plain broken only by a distant river.

“Woah,” I breathed, taken aback by the view. I hadn’t realized something like this was so close to Jared’s house.

“Come on,” he said hoarsely.

I heard the briefest hint of excitement in his voice, which made me excited as well. He took my hand and led me down a step trail that wove down the bluff. Water dripped on our heads as we ducked into the trees at the bottom of the bluff, the last of the snow and ice melting from the branches. Jared kept a firm grip on my hand, his almost feverish warmth thawing my chilled, ungloved fingers.

“Really though, where are you taking me?”

“Patience,” he replied, pausing to help me over a large rock blocking the trail.

I could just make out a clearing in the distance, moonlight illuminating what looked like ruins of some kind.

“Jared—” I began, but then gasped, unable to move.

A circle of standing stones lay before us. I almost dropped to my knees in shock.

“This is what I wanted to show you—”

He turned me to face him, and I hastily wiped away the tears from my eyes.

“Are you crying?”

“No,” I choked, then glared at him, my vision blurred by fresh tears.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing!” I turned from his gaze and walked to the circle, but I stopped at the edge, examining the ancient markings etched into the outer faces of each stone that towered several feet above my head.

I knew better than to walk between them, especially on the full moon. But that was only based on the story my aunt Maeve had told me about her experience with a circle in what was once Dianny.

The circle in Dianny was suspected to have been the only one of its kind in my realm. Dianny was long gone now, buried under miles of stone. I never thought I’d ever see one.

“I can’t believe it,” I said to myself.

“Do you like it?” Jared asked, coming up beside me. He reached out to lean his weight against the rock I was examining. I swatted his hand away.

“Don’t touch it! Not right now, not with a full moon. Do you even know—”

“How powerful these things are? Yes. Maybe at some point in time they were, but not anymore.”

I turned to him, somewhat surprised he knew anything about these places and their significance.

“I do read the books I have in my study, you know,” he continued, giving me a wry smile.

I looked up at him skeptically then turned back to the circle, slowly tracing a finger over one of the etchings that had softened with time. I felt no jolt of mystical electricity. I felt nothing, actually, but the cool touch of the stone against my fingertip, and then Jared’s hand against my lower back.

He reached into his pocket, leaning into me so the top of my head briefly brushed against his shoulder. He held out his fist, and I instinctively opened my palm to accept whatever he'd just taken from his pocket.

"Do you really think it's supposed to be a clock?" he asked in a near whisper, as if we were at risk of being overheard.

I looked down at the artifact, the feel of it heavy in my hand despite its size. It was small, and pie shaped, but the edges on one side were rough and uneven. I turned it over, admiring the somewhat crude craftsmanship. It was very, very old. That was obvious. At first, I thought it might have been forcefully removed from its other pieces because of the jagged edge on one side, but the thought slipped from my mind and I found it entirely impossible to focus.

I felt a sudden, an all-encompassing feeling of dread wash over me. I nearly dropped the artifact out of shock, but instead, I closed my fingers around it as I fought for breath. Jared made no moves to take it from me when he sensed my body going rigid. He was looking right at me, watching a torrent of emotions play across my face.

"You feel it too?"

"What the f**k is this thing? Why does it—"

Bewitched. Cursed. Whatever it was, well, it was harboring something within its golden surface that threatened to suck every ounce of happiness right out of me. If a single piece of this artifact, or amulet, or clock—whatever the hell it was, possessed this kind of power....

What could all the pieces do when brought together?

"You should get rid of it," I said, looking up into his eyes.

"I can't," he said levelly. "But you think it's a clock?"

"Something that can tell the time, yes." But the more I held it in my grasp, the more I felt it wasn't so much as telling the time as it was timing me, seeing how long I could hold it, how long I could last with my heartbeat spinning out of control. "Or... to relay a message—"

"I have two pieces but I can't figure out how to bring them together," he admitted as I opened my palm to look down at it once more. Whether it was sheer instinct or some deeply rooted memory from my years studying ancient artifacts such as this one, I ran my finger over the face of it, then along the smooth edge. I pressed into that edge until the metal gave way, and a piece of gold in the shape of an F slid free. Jared was shocked. "How did you—"

"It's a Cryptex," I said in a voice that sounded very little like my own. I ran my finger over the jagged end, slowly pressing until another piece slid free. This new piece was sharpened to a fine point and sliced through my finger, but I barely noticed the pain. "It's meant to fit into the other pieces like a puzzle. Together—" I turned it over, then held it up to the moonlight to peek into the now visible inner compartments on either edge. I could see faint shadows inside the artifact as I twisted it from side to side, holding my breath as I listened for the sound of gears, or other mechanisms of movement.

"Eliza—"

“You said you have another piece,” I said, almost to myself. “Then you’re missing two pieces, not just one.”

“Eliza!”

“A key would go... here, in the center. It’ll open like a flower and inside—” I closed my eyes as I ran a finger over the face of the artifact, feeling the tiny, square-shaped ridges that I knew were meant to open up to reveal something, but I didn’t know what the something was. A code, maybe... a secret message... whatever it was, I knew it was bad. It was a Cipher Wheel, a Cryptex, a puzzle... something meant to carry a secret message or item within, or keep something locked inside.

Another wave of dread ripped through me. I could almost hear it taunting me.

What was happening?

“Get rid of it,” I repeated, handing it back to him.

The spell was broken in an instant, leaving me chilled and slightly dizzy. In the moonlight, I could see the dark smears of blood on the artifact as I dropped it into his waiting hands. A shiver ran up my spine as I tucked my bloodied hand into the jacket of my pocket. I looked up at him, meeting his eyes.

“I can’t.”

“You should. Whatever it was used for, whatever message it was meant to carry, it’s not worth it. I would get rid of it immediately,” I said.

It was impossible to read his expression. I was sure I saw pain behind his eyes—pain, but not panic. He wasn’t afraid. He was stunned, and as he slowly returned the cursed artifact to his pocket, I saw a sliver of raw, brutal acceptance flash behind his eyes.

I felt a weight settle against my chest, something I couldn’t shake free no matter how hard I would try. He was hiding something, something incredibly dark.

“You’re hurt,” he said, his voice steady, but full of sudden ice. “It’s time to go back.”

“It’s Lycaonic, isn’t it? I thought it might be from his time but it felt—I felt—”

“It belonged to him, yes.”

“Why do you have it?”

“It was given to me,” he said, then hesitated. “I need to find the other pieces.”

“No, you don’t. This should be taken to a temple or university and vaulted—”

“Eliza,” he interrupted.

I stiffened at the nearly silent plea in his voice.

“Who are you?”

“An archeologist,” I admitted, and that was all I said.

asked me nothing further, apparently accepting my answer.

He placed his hand on my back again, his way of leading me wherever he wanted me to go. I realized at the moment that I hadn't ever resisted his touch, not once. I let him lead me away from the stones. He took my hand and led me back up the bluff, wordlessly walking beside me as we made our way back to his house.

I heard wolves howling in the distance, their calls mingling with the music coming from the village. The party was still in full swing, the liquor flowing freely.

I was numb. Whatever was hidden in the Cryptex had burned through to my core.

"I need to bandage your hand," Jared breathed, leading me toward the house.

I didn't protest as he led me through the kitchen door and into the quiet, empty manor. I didn't hesitate when he led me up the stairs, story after story, until we reached the third floor.

I didn't feel a surge of excitement or suspicion as he opened the door to his study and took me inside, guiding me onto the couch. My body felt numb, but my mind was moving at a million miles an hour.

"I had it in mind to punish you tonight for that stunt you pulled with my clothes," Jared said, taking my injured hand in his.

He met my gaze and smiled softly, but mischief danced behind his eyes. Something in his smile snapped me back to reality, the strange events of the night fading into the background as Jared examined the gash running from the tip of my thumb to the meat of my palm.

I didn't even notice the pain, not anymore.

"What exactly did you have in mind this time?" I asked, then I hissed out a breath as he touched the tender skin near the base of the wound.

"I'll make you a deal," he replied, then reached he behind the couch.

[Chapter 804](#)

"This is ridiculous," I bit out, then I sucked in my breath as I steadied myself on the footstool Jared had so graciously provided. One of the legs was shorter than the other, which meant I was using all of my weight to keep myself steady as I ran a feather duster over the bookshelves. They still towered above my head. There was no way I was going to reach the highest shelves, even with a stool.

And there was no way I was standing on my tip-toes, either. I wasn't going to give Jared the satisfaction. I'd done stupid things for my own selfish gain, sure, but this was by far the dumbest, most degrading thing I'd ever done.

And all for access to his study, whenever I wanted.

When I'd stitched those flowers into his sparring clothes, I'd assumed he'd have nothing else to wear into the ring the next day. He would've been forced to wear them, and he would have been laughed at by his crew. It was why I'd spent hours upon hours stitching until my fingers were raw and bleeding.

But now I was wearing them—a shirt, at least. His pants didn't fit me, even with a belt.

So, in order to access his study whenever the hell I wanted with no recourse, I was wearing a flower-covered shirt, my bare thighs on full display as I moved from shelf to shelf, cleaning.

I glanced at Jared, my face twisted in a scowl.

"You could have said no," he said flatly, turning a page of the book he had resting on his lap. He had one arm resting over the back of the couch, a tall glass of whiskey clutched in his hand. He didn't look up at me as I cursed under my breath and climbed down to move the stool to the next shelf.

"You could have had the maids come in and clean this place," I retorted.

His eyes flicked to mine, a half-cocked smile touching the corner of his mouth.

"No one—"

"No one is allowed in your study," I mimicked, then grunted with frustration as I climbed back up the rickety stool. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four," he replied, uninterested.

"I thought you were much older than that," I replied, trying to get a rise out of him. "You have the office of an old man who can't find anything unless it's an absolute mess."

"Thank you," he said, and he obviously meant it.

I pursed my lips and turned back to the bookshelves, muttering curses under my breath.

"Since we're playing twenty questions," he began, pausing to take a drink, "was it your father who was the archeologist?"

"I'm the archeologist."

"There are no programs for that here in Egoren, which would mean you're self trained." His eyes flicked to mine. He was baiting me, I knew that. He'd been trying to get me to admit to being from the Realm of Light for days now. "So?"

"My father stayed home with us and my mother is a—" I paused, unsure how to describe my mother's position without giving my connections away. Gemma, my mother, was in all regards the Beta of my aunt Maeve, the current White Queen. "She's a secretary."

"Hm," Jared said, his gaze trailing from my eyes down to my legs.

I threw the feather duster at him, but it missed, landing in a puff of dust next to him on the couch. "Was your father a bounty hunter too?" I said mockingly.

"My parents were dead before I knew them," he said casually.

"Oh," I murmured, feeling a little guilty. "I'm sorry—"

"How did you know the artifact opened up like that?" he interrupted, derailing the subject.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I really didn't want to talk about the Cryptex. The thought of it alone was enough to send a shiver of ice-cold dread up my spine.

"I've seen some like it, that's all. But yours is... cursed, for sure. I don't like it, and I don't want to talk about it."

"Well we're going to talk about it—"

"No," I said firmly. "We're not going to talk about it, Jared. You're just going to ask me questions but not answer any of my questions about why you have it and why you need to find the rest. This is very one-sided—"

"Who do you work for?" The tone of his voice had changed abruptly, and a blanket of tension descended over the room.

"You, in the laundry," I replied tartly.

He glared. "I'm serious, Eliza—"

"So am I! Quit asking me questions if you're going to be just as vague."

"We're leaving tomorrow, both of us. We'll be traveling through the Dark Forest to the territory belonging to Aeris." He closed his book and rose from the couch, his eyes darkening on mine as he drained his glass of whiskey.

"Why do you need me to go?"

"Because you technically belong to him. You were bought using funds his brother stole—"

I stepped down from the stool, my body trembling with a mix of fear and fury.

"I belong to no one," I said as steadily as possible. "You can't—"

"Are you working for him?" he asked.

I furrowed my brow. "What?"

"For Aeris. Are you working for him?"

"I don't know Aeris—"

"Do you know what I saw when I entered that tavern, for the breeder auction?" he seethed. "I saw you, up on that stage. And you—you weren't scared. You were f*****g curious. Why?"

"What?" I snapped.

"Are you a spy?"

"No!" Rage ripped through me as I took a step toward him, pointing an accusatory finger. "The stones were a test, weren't they? You brought me down there to show me the Cryptex because you thought I was after it, didn't you?"

"Are you?"

"I never want to see it again," I cried, my voice breaking with emotion. "That thing is evil, Jared. It made me feel—" I held my hands out, my palms facing the ceiling. I could still feel the weight of the Cryptex in

my hands, far too heavy for its size. Whatever it was carrying... whatever all of its pieces contained once brought together... "No one should have it. It should be destroyed."

Silence fell. My blood was rushing through my veins, my heart hammering in my chest. Something had to give. Jared and I had been dancing around each other since the moment he brought me to this place.

"I am not a spy. I'm not here to take anything from you."

"How did you end up at the breeder auction?"

"I was taken there. I don't remember—" I paused, my eyes downcast on my bare toes.

His shirt hit me almost to the knee when my feet were flat, like a dress, but I felt incredibly exposed. Should I tell him the truth? "You've asked if you can trust me," I whispered. "I need to know if I can trust you."

"I've told you time after time that I'm not going to hurt you—"

"That's not what I'm asking," I replied, meeting his eyes. "I need to know what you want with the other pieces of the Cryptex."

"I can't tell you that."

"Then I can't tell you anything about myself," I said.

He'd made a deal with me only an hour ago—clean his study and he'd grant me access. There was a catch, of course, which was doing so in his clothing. This was a game to him. I could play, too. "I can't trust anyone with something like that in their possession."

"I assure you..."

"Assure me of what? That you're not going to set loose whatever is hidden inside? I felt that darkness within it, the same darkness I see in your eyes everytime I look at you! What is it to you? What—"

"How dare you—"

"How dare I what? Call you out on this? You obviously need my help, and this is the deal. You tell me what it is and I tell you—"

"Tell me you're not just some w***e masquerading as a f*****g archeologist to get close to me, to steal it, or hurt me or my men?"

"f**k you!" I raged, taking several steps toward him.

He didn't move, but he squared his shoulders as I poked him accusingly in the chest.

"All of that coming from a man who murders people for a living! If I wanted the Cryptex, I would've taken it already!"

"I know!"

"Then why are you accusing me of being something I'm not!"

"Because I have no f*****g idea who you are!"

He took a step toward me, closing the distance between us. I backed up, the back of my thighs hitting his desk.

“When I saw you at the auction I knew you were different. Seeing the curiosity and then relief when Ambrose bit his bid on you, I—” He leaned forward, resting his hands on the desk on either side of me.

“I took you because I thought you worked for him. I meant to give you to Aeris as part of the bounty, but then... when you first came to my study and started talking...”

He looked into my eyes.

“You should have been scared of me, and you weren’t.”

“Is that what this is all about? My f*****g attitude? That me not bending to your will and being blindly obedient is somehow a threat?”

“Yes!”

“Did you want me to cower and tremble at your feet? To say yes, sir and bow my head like a good little maid and not question why the hell you’re keeping me in this house against my will? And because I didn’t, you think that I’m a spy, that I’m trying to steal something from you—”

“Eliza—”

“What do you want from me? You’re obviously enjoying these games you’ve been playing with me since I got here. Do you want me to get on my knees and beg your forgiveness and thank you for rescuing me? I bet you’d like that, you f*****g brute, you ruthless, sadistic savage!”

We were nose to nose now, his breath tickling my cheek. His hands curled into fists on the desk behind me, his body going rigid.

“Say that again,” he growled, the words sending a rush of... heat, straight to my core.

I looked up at him and found it hard to breathe, let alone move. Being this close to him was doing something to my body that I had little control over. Had I wanted this fight just to see the heat blazing behind his own eyes?

Yeah, I believe I had.

“You’re a savage,” I hissed the words onto his lips, our faces barely an inch apart.

His hand shot up, tangling in my hair so I was forced to look up into his face.

“And you’re a f*****g pain in the ass.”

I tried to slap him, but he caught my wrist.

“Let me go,” I whispered, but I wasn’t all that convinced it was what I actually wanted.

“No.”

He leaned in, his forehead resting against mine for the space of a breath. Then he brushed his lips against my cheek, and then my neck. I trembled involuntarily as he gently nipped the rim of my ear. He'd let go of my hand and for whatever reason I laid it on his chest, scrunching his shirt as I made a fist.

"Jared," I breathed, an audible plea lacing his name.

He kissed me so fully it took my breath away. I opened my mouth to him and he groaned low in his throat in answer.

"I can show you savage," he growled against my mouth, then in a shower of parchment and books hitting the ground, he threw me onto his desk, resting his body between my knees as his mouth met mine again with fervor.

I gasped, out of shock or pleasure, I wasn't sure, as he swiped his arm across the desk to send the rest of the contents crashing to the ground, one hand still tangled in my hair, the other gripped my thigh, his hand moving upward beneath my shirt.

Every movement we made was something built out of sheer, frantic desperation. His mouth left mine to trail kisses down my neck as his fingers curled around my underwear, pulling them down over my waist.

"Jared?" came Archer's voice from outside the study.

We froze.

"What?" Jared growled, his eyes meeting mine as he ran his fingertips over the heated skin just below my hip bone.

I trembled, still holding his gaze as I brushed a desperately soft kiss against his lips.

"There's a situation outside. One of the boys has a broken leg--"

"f**k," Jared growled, releasing his hold on me.

He looked me over, his expression unreadable, then stalked to the door and threw it open without giving me much time to right myself. His footsteps thundered in the hallway as I turned to the door, seeing Archer staring at me, a smug grin on his face.

"See you bright and early," he chuckled to himself as he closed the door behind them.

[Chapter 805](#)

I'd never felt that kind of magnetic heat. It'd been like my body wasn't my own anymore, begging to be claimed.

I wasn't a total novice. I'd gone to the University of Mirage, for Goddess's sake, the party capital of the pack lands. There had been times when a drunken kiss had gone further than I'd expected but... I'd never felt what I'd felt with Jared. Even the guy I thought I'd been in love with couldn't hold a flame to what I was feeling now. A single kiss from Jared had sent me spiraling into a haze where my mind had no control over my actions, and if I let it happen again, it would ruin me. He would ruin me.

This wasn't the usual run-of-the-mill attraction.

It was safe to say I hadn't slept at all after I'd peeled myself from his desk and reluctantly left his study.

I woke the next morning to Archer coming through my bedroom door carrying a pile of clothing and outdoor wear. He tossed it in a heap on top of me, telling me I had ten minutes to get dressed.

My heart was in my throat the entire time I struggled into the clothing. Flexible thermal leggings and a matching shirt were paired with thick wool socks and an even thicker wool jacket that brushed against my knees, several sizes too big. The boots I'd been given were new, and exactly my size.

I felt like I was dressing for an execution. I looked around the room, my eyes resting on a still-sleeping Scarlett curled up in her bed.

If Jared was serious about taking me to Aeris, well, I'd never see her again... or Miriam, or Giselle, or any of the other friends I'd made during my time at his house.

I didn't know where I stood with Jared now, not after what happened.

But that kiss had kept me up all night. I bleakly wondered if he'd been thinking about it, too.

"Come on, we're burning daylight," Archer said as I stepped out into the darkened hallway.

"The sun hasn't even come up," I murmured, shifting the weight of the heavy backpack he'd given me. I wasn't sure what was inside, but it was enough to strain against my shoulders as I followed him outside and into the mist-covered village.

The remnants of the party last night were visible in the gray morning light. Fog snaked around choked-out warming fires where the embers were still burning, sputtering under a blanket of moisture. There were even a few people curled up in their wolf forms, asleep where they'd fallen.

I could make out two figures standing in the distance, but that was it. Brandt and Jared were talking amongst themselves, decked out for our journey.

"Where's everyone else?" I asked, a little hesitant as the four of us caught up to each other. Jared didn't look down at me as Brandt turned to greet us.

"It's just going to be us," Brandt replied, giving me a soft smile in greeting.

"Let's get going, then," Archer said, pulling a thermos from his backpack and tossing it to me. "You're carrying the coffee."

"Okay," I murmured, a jolt of apprehension shooting up my spine as the three men started to turn toward the still-dark forest ahead of me. I wanted to ask why we were going this way, but in truth, I had no idea where Aeris lived. I found it easier to just keep my mouth shut.

"Keep up," Jared said to us as we crossed the healer's cottage.

glanced back at me, his eyes grazing my face. He looked to be checking on me, and I gave him a soft smile in response. But he didn't smile back. He simply turned his gaze back to the forest and put a few paces worth of distance between us.

Ouch.

Archer and Jared took the lead as we crossed beneath the windchimes and charms, which were silent and still. Brandt ended up walking next to me, keeping in step with me as the village fell away behind us.

We'd make camp eventually. The men would rest.

Would I finally take the opportunity to run?

Hours had passed, of that I was sure. I was getting tired, and hadn't eaten anything since the morning before. I didn't have the nerve to ask to stop, not after what had happened between me and Jared. The usual fire in my soul was nothing but a dying ember. I spent several hours passing the thermos of coffee back and forth between the three men. That was my job, apparently—coffee girl. But when it came time for me to take a swig, I found the coffee to be laced with a heavy dose of whiskey that had me seeing stars for several minutes.

"Usually we'd take the whole crew," Brandt mused. He'd been talking at me for some time, but I hadn't had much to say in response so far. "It's strange having only a crew of four."

"Three," I corrected, a little hotly. "I'm just goods."

He gave me an odd look, then laughed lightly, "What're you talking about? You're part of our crew now."

"Jared said he's taking me to Aeris—"

"Taking you with us, not to him. You're part of our crew now. A bandit, a bounty hunter—"

"A brute, or sadistic savage. Whatever floats your boat, Eliza," Archer chimed in, walking several paces in front of us with Jared.

I gaped at him, my cheeks going red. Brandt looked thoroughly confused, but Jared nearly stopped walking altogether.

He turned to Archer, whispering something under his breath that sounded like, "What did you hear?"

Archer was a little too smug for my liking. I felt that internal flame ignite as he looked over his shoulder at me, his cheek dimpling with mischief. Jared looked at me for the first time in several hours, but I couldn't tell if his expression was apologetic or just willing me to keep my mouth shut.

Anyway, f**k him.

"You're a piece of work, Archer," I bit out.

"A piece of work that will save your ass if anything comes bounding out of the woods to try to make a meal of you," he retorted, winking at me.

"That's enough," Jared said sharply.

We'd stopped walking and were now in a small clearing surrounded by towering trees. The forest was so dense that I couldn't see more than a quarter mile in any direction.

"Everyone is obviously tired and hungry. It's getting dark—"

“It’s been dark,” I corrected.

Jared exhaled, looking annoyed. “As I was saying,” he ground out, narrowing his eyes at me, and then Archer, “we’re going to camp here. Brandt, Archer, find a spot nearby, something sheltered.” Archer grunted in response, following Brandt into the trees. Jared gave me a level look.

“What?” I asked.

“Have you eaten today?”

“Of course not. Archer got me up before breakfast,” I said as I took off the backpack I’d been carrying for the entire day. I sighed deeply, closing my eyes for a moment as I rolled my shoulders.

“Here—” Jared took the backpack from me and extended his hand.

“I can walk just fine on my own,” I said, but he grabbed my hand anyway and pulled me after him into the forest.

His touch was just as warm as it had been the night before, and I felt a rush of longing course through me. I tried to remove my hand from his grip but he noticed and squeezed, then turned to look at me over his shoulder.

“We’ll talk later.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking what exactly we had to talk about in the company of his comrades.

“Brandt said I’m part of the crew. Does that mean you’re not giving me to Aeris?”

“That depends on how much he wants for you,” Jared replied.

I scoffed, but then softened as I caught the briefest hint of a teasing smile touching Jared’s lips. He led me through a tangle of heather and alder bushes. On the other side, Archer and Brandt were making camp. There would be no fire, I realized.

Jared tossed my backpack to Brandt, who made quick work of pulling out the contents. I’d been carrying all the food, apparently.

“Sit down,” Jared said to me, motioning to a mossy area at the edge of camp.

I didn’t hesitate, but I wondered if I’d be able to get up again as fatigue immediately began to set into my muscles. Food and water were passed around as the men sat down nearby, and an hour passed in near silence.

“Why didn’t you shift and do this trip as wolves?” I asked, glancing from man to man.

Brandt shifted his weight and looked at Archer, who shrugged.

“We needed to be able to carry weapons and supplies,” Archer replied. “In case we run into anything our wolves can’t handle.”

“Like what?” I asked as I lay down on my side, using my backpack as a pillow. It was full dark now, and I couldn’t see much beyond the subtle glow of Archer’s eyes in the faint moonlight.

“Witches, of course... fairies and the like, goblins and trolls—”

“Don’t listen to him,” Jared cut in, and I thought I heard the hint of a smile in his voice.

“Dragons,” Archer continued, chuckling to himself.

“You’re lying,” I yawned. “There’s no such thing!”

“But there is. I’ve seen one,” Archer argued.

Brandt, who was sitting closest to me, shifted his weight uneasily.

“When have you seen a dragon?” Brandt asked, his voice tangled with nerves.

“You were with me, Brandt. Do you not remember? At that tavern near Elmor. She served me a pint and then you took her upstairs—”

Brandt grumbled to himself as Archer hissed with what sounded like giggles. But then Jared laughed, a rich sound that I hadn’t yet heard from him. I smiled, not from the stupid joke that Archer was still gabbering about. I wish I could see his face, or any of their faces.

I began to drift into sleep, lulled by the sound of the men conversing like the old friends they were.

I heard Jared as if from far away telling Archer he was taking first watch. I heard Brandt talking in a low whisper to Jared as they moved into a defensive position around the camp. But then I felt Jared’s presence next to me, his thigh brushing against the top of my head. He was sitting next to me, his back against the tree behind us.

I might have been dreaming about it, but I was almost sure he’d pulled the jacket I’d been using as a blanket over my shoulders, tucking me in. Had his knuckles slowly grazed the curve of my jaw, or was I only imagining the fevered warmth of his touch against my skin again?

Somewhere in my dreamland, I heard the soft whisper of wind chimes dancing in a soft breeze.

I dreamt of sweeping plains and stone circles. I dreamt of castles made of ivory and people dressed in riches beyond belief. I dreamt of Jared, shirtless, my fingers tracing his tattoos as we sprawled out in a tangle of sheets on a four-poster bed.

And then I drifted into the deepest kind of sleep, where there was nothing but darkness.

“Don’t make a sound,” Jared commanded, his hand coming over my mouth as he pulled me against his chest.

I tried to scream out of the pure shock of being woken up so roughly, but he held his hand over my mouth tight enough I found it hard to breathe. I opened my eyes to pale blue light drifting through the canopy of the forest, the first inklings of morning.

He was holding me upright, my back pressed against his chest as he slowly crept behind the tree he'd been sitting against.

He paused, holding his breath as a rustling burst through the trees only a few yards away from the clearing. A large, tawny-colored wolf eyed us both, his snout twitching. Jared nodded, and the wolf took off again.

He released his hand from my mouth and I sucked in a desperate breath.

"What the hell is going on!"

"Shut up!" Jared hissed, continuing to back us deeper into the woods.

Suddenly he stopped, his body going rigid. I heard a piercing screech that sounded like a woman screaming in the distance, followed by the howling and snarling of two wolves. The forest around us groaned, a rush of wind hurtling toward us as Jared turned me into his chest and ducked his head from the onslaught of twigs and dried leaves that showered over us.

I lifted my head just in time to see a large creature rush out of the woods, and right toward our camp.

[Chapter 806](#)

Jared

I could smell the Hellhound before I saw it. Every hair on my body stood on end as I backed Eliza into the forest, her body trembling against my chest. She'd listened to me for once, which was a nice change of pace, but I'd still forced her out of sleep with little explanation as to what the hell was going on. Still, she didn't make a sound as we moved deeper into the trees, putting distance between us and every single supply that was meant to see us through our three day journey.

We'd covered almost thirty miles in a single day on foot. It sounded like a great feat, and in ordinary circumstances, it would have been. But the knowledge that a wayward witch and her bloodthirsty familiar had been this close to my village rocked me to my core.

Brandt and Archer were screaming at each other over mindlink, relaying their coordinates to me as they dashed through the woods after the creature that had circled back and was now inspecting our camp. They were trying to wear it down. That was the only way a wolf could attempt to fight a hellhound.

"Eliza," I breathed against her hair, holding her a little tighter than was necessary. "I'm going to hide you—"

"What is it?" she replied, her voice a whisper against the wind whipping in a frenzy around us.

I felt the fear in her voice, but she wasn't trembling. She was pressed against me in a way that made me feel as though she were sheltering me as much as I was doing my damndest to shelter her.

"A witch," I whispered, backing slowly into the forest. "Her hound is what Archer and Brandt are after."

I didn't need to explain what a Hellhound was. She knew, of that I was certain. Someone with the depth of knowledge Eliza possessed in the antiquities would know what a Hellhound was, and why they were dangerous.

But if she was from the Realm of Light like I assumed, she might never have seen one. They may have just been a myth to her people.

“Listen,” I whispered, coming to stop in a thicket of towering birches. “You need to stay hidden, no matter what you hear—”

“I heard the wind chimes in my dream,” she whispered, looking up at me. “Like in the village.”

I looked down at her, tempted to brush a rogue curl from her face but hesitated. Her eyes were shining the light of dawn like sea glass. Every time I looked at her I felt a little lost—it was hard to explain. Something about her had me questioning everything I’d told myself to be true over the years.

I didn’t tolerate willful disobedience, not from my crew or the workers in my house.

But Eliza didn’t give a s**t. And if I was being honest, it was what I liked about her the most.

I’d pushed and pushed her two nights ago in my study. I’d been trying to break her and bend her to my will only because I needed her to prove to me with finality that it wasn’t possible. She matched my energy with a fire so intense it had burned through me, igniting something no one else had ever been able to access.

I’d met my match, and now I was standing in the Dark Forest on the edge of losing the only person who’d given me anything to work with in terms of the artifact... to a f*****g witch.

“It’s hunting you,” I said as we came to a stop in a thicket of low-lying trees. The branches scraped against the top of my head as I ducked and pulled her deeper into the woods. I knelt, pulling her beside me. “Look, I need to go—”

“What am I supposed to do? Fight off a f*****g Hellhound with my bare hands?”

I fought the urge to smile and kept my expression as level as possible.

“No, you’re going to hide. You’re going to run if it comes down to it. I’ll find you. One of us will find you.”

“Give me a knife, at least,” she protested, reaching for the belt slung along my waist. I caught her by the wrist, shaking my head. “If the hellhound is hunting me, then I need a way to defend myself. Give me a knife! You have at least six on your belt. Between the three of you men, there are at least a dozen daggers, and Brandt and Archer shifted, so what use—”

I unsheathed a dagger and held it by the blade, pressing the hilt in her open palm.

“Don’t f*****g lose it—”

“Go save your friends. I’m fine.”

I found it unlikely Archer and Brandt would take kindly to the idea that they needed saving. In the end, if it came to it, it would likely be me who needed to be scraped off the forest floor.

The thought hit me like a ton of bricks as I quieted my breathing and listened to the forest around me. Not even the birds were making noise. It was silent.

“It looked like a mountain lion,” Eliza whispered as she examined the blade. “The hellhound.”

"It probably was a mountain lion at one point, yes. Do you have much experience with witches?" I shrugged off my vest and draped it over her shoulders.

"So much experience," she said sarcastically, but I felt like there was something else in her tone, something I couldn't decipher. Something, I realized a moment too late, told me she did have experience with witches. I doubted it was one like this, though.

I looked down at her for a moment, examining her like I found myself doing every time she was in my presence. She was a rather short woman, the top of her head barely reaching my chest. But she was strong and willful, and sharply intelligent.

I'd debated showing her the artifact for several days before I took her to the stones. Watching her hold it... watching her feel what I felt every time I touched it—I hadn't been expecting that. Archer and Brandt had inspected it before and thought it was nothing more than a chunk of gold that would fetch a high price.

Eliza had not only felt its darkness, but it had reacted to her touch, opening for her. I hadn't known it could do that, and I'd been carrying it around since the day I was born.

There was no way in hell I was letting Aeris have her now. I needed her, especially if I wanted to live to see another day after my twenty-fifth birthday.

"Stay here," I commanded as I pulled my shirt over my head, the chill of the early spring morning sending a ripple of gooseflesh over my bare skin.

I doubted she could see me fully in the dim light, but I noticed she was eyeing the tattoos along my forearms and chest as I stood to remove the rest of my clothes, save for my boxers, of course. She was still a lady, even if she refused to act like one. I wasn't going to scandalize her, regardless of the circumstances.

"If," I began, crouching so I was looking into her eyes, "you're captured... don't eat the food she offers you."

"What?" she choked, shaking her head. "What do you—"

"Don't eat the food," I repeated. I held her gaze for a moment, noticing the sudden apprehension in her eyes, then rose to my full height and backed out of the shelter of the low-lying trees and called to my wolf, praying silently that the transformation would be easy, if not totally painless.

"Jared," she whispered, her voice lifted in what sounded like panic.

"I'm coming back for you," I said hoarsely, hiding the pain now ebbing through my body. "And... I'm not sorry for what happened in my study."

"Neither am I," she said, and her eyes were the last thing I saw before it all went dark, and I let the beast within me take hold, ripping me to shreds.

Archer was on his back, his mouth open and teeth on full display as a large creature loomed over him, jaw clacking and spit flying with each shuddering breath it took. I caught up to him within minutes of leaving Eliza alone in the woods against my better judgment, but it was the only option I had. Hellhounds were often extremely powerful animals in their own right, but possessed by a witch's powers? They were practically unstoppable.

Eliza was right about it being a mountain lion. Archer was back on his feet by the time I darted back into our camp, the lion stalking a wide circle around him. It was tired, tongue lolling as it moved without the usual grace of its uncursed kind.

'Where the f**k is Brandt?' I said down the mindlink.

'I have no f*****g idea. He went after the witch.'

Great, f*****g great... Brandt was likely dead, and this thing was going to kill us if it got its strength back. It was injured, its muscled left shoulder oozing with blood the color of ink. I padded slowly after it, following its slow, deadly circle while Archer regained his composure.

I'd never killed a Hellhound. I wasn't sure it was possible. Running from one, yes. That could be done while in the form of a wolf, but we had Eliza to consider. The beast was walking all over our supplies, and Eliza was out there in the woods with nothing but a dagger to protect her. We had to do something.

'Where's your girlfriend?' Archer said down the mindlink, walking in a painfully slow circle around the camp as we herded the creature to the center of the clearing.

'She's not,' I replied hotly.

'Well... something was going on in that study—'

'Shut up,' I growled. 'Focus.'

I couldn't think about Eliza, not now, not when I was trying to focus all that remained of my dwindling powers on the task at hand. Witches used Hellhounds, or familiars, as scouts. The witch could be anywhere, using her link with her beast to keep an eye on us while she tried to locate what she was really after.

And for whatever reason, she had her sights on Eliza. We didn't have time to do this dance with her Hellhound any longer.

The beast wavered, tripping over its own feet. Its shoulder was bleeding profusely as we continued our slow walk. We were closing in on it, having worn it down significantly.

'Now!' I commanded down the mindlink, and Archer leaped for the beast, his jaws clamping down on the back of its neck.

I went for its throat, and the two of us brought the beast down onto its side. Despite its fatigue and injury, it fought back, thick claws running down the length of my side as I thrashed my jaws, breaking open its throat.

A screech that was shrill enough to burst my eardrums pierced the air as the creature died. I staggered backward, my black coat wet and matted with blood. Pain ripped through me but I held firm in my stance, growling low as the eyes of the beast went glassy.

'Go, go!' Brandt's voice screamed through the mindlink.

Archer and I barely had a moment to process his words before his wolf was upon us, bounding into the blood-soaked clearing. He was covered in mud and sticks, his golden-brown fur unrecognizable. 'She's coming--'

A scream of pure agony erupted through the clearing as a bright light fell over us. A woman was standing in the distance, her body distorted by the trees as she walked slowly forward, her arm outstretched. Her mouth was open, teeth bared.

This was an exceptionally powerful witch... a dark one. She was the kind that the local witches didn't accept within their ranks--wayward, banished, hungry.

'Eliza,' I said to the men, my eyes on the witch's mouth.

Rows and rows of short, sharpened teeth could be seen as she opened her mouth wide and screamed again, the sound shaking the trees so violently the entire forest seemed to shiver.

'Where is she?' Archer replied, but I was already bounding through the woods toward where I'd hidden her.

[Chapter 807](#)

Eliza

I ran. I didn't know what else to do. The forest passed in a blur as I worked my way through the dense underbrush, trying to put as much distance as I could from the battle taking place in the clearing that had once been our camp.

I couldn't hear anything taking place at our camp from my hiding spot beneath the trees, but then a scream had ripped through the forest... then another, then another. After the third scream, I jumped to my feet and ran like my life depended on it.

If Jared was still alive, which seemed unlikely, he'd find me.

Right?

Jared's wolf had been a shock, almost as shocking as the situation I found myself in now... Black as night with crimson eyes, large and agile.

But that shadow he cast as he sprinted away from me was what had stunned me. It was a part of him, something tethered to his soul that he couldn't shake. It was... power, a dark power... something he couldn't control.

I braced myself on a tree, panting as I struggled to catch my breath. I couldn't hear the chaos taking place anymore. I'd run far enough now, I believed. Jared had told me to run if it came down to it, but

where? I looked up into the trees, then back down along the forest floor. There were no fallen logs or large rocks to hide behind. The forest was nothing but an endless, moss-covered maze.

I walked in no particular direction, trying to catch my breath. I felt it was better to keep moving than cower in the open. The men would find me soon enough, I was sure. But in the event they didn't come for me... if they were dead, and I was out here alone....

"Keep moving," I said to myself, and I did.

I was chilled and aching when light started to trickle in through the canopy above me, the trees growing more sparse and allowing sunlight to flood into the forest. I looked up, noticing the forest seemed to fall away in the distance, a large grassy area dusted with golden morning light spreading out in front of me.

I'd reached the edge of the Dark Forest, and beyond lay a wide river valley.

I allowed myself to stop and rest, falling to my knees in the grass just outside of the forest.

"I'm not sorry," Jared had said to me before he shifted.

"Neither am I," I'd replied.

What if he was dead?

I blinked into the sunrise, letting the sun warm my skin. I shivered against the sudden warmth, having spent what felt like hours running through the forest in nothing but the thermals I'd worn beneath my coat.

I'd left everything in the clearing. I had no food, no water.

I looked down at the dagger in my hand. In the light I could see markings etched into the handle, long, swirling divots that wrapped completely around it. The handle was made of ivory and was worn and discolored from use. Upon closer inspection, I noticed the markings were the same as the tattoos that ran up the length of Jared's arms, tattoos I'd yet to have the opportunity to really examine.

I lay down in the grass, tucking my knees into my belly with a firm grip on the dagger. I was exhausted and hungry. My eyes were heavy with fatigue, and after a few minutes of laying in the sun, I fell into a shallow sleep.

"Eliza," came a lilted, feminine voice.

I opened my eyes, noticing the morning had shifted into midday. I sat up, rubbing my eyes and blinking into an incredibly warm sun. "Eliza," the voice said again, followed by the soft echo of windchimes as I turned to look into the forest at my back.

There was a woman standing at the edge of the forest, dressed in a pale gray dress and billowed out from her lean waist. Golden hair reached her knees and hung loose around a remarkably exquisite face.

"They're gone, girl," the woman said, extending a hand to me. "You're safe."

I was a good distance from where she stood. Her body was cast in the shadow of the forest, as if she wasn't able to cross the threshold into the light outside of the forest's grasp.

“Come, child.”

“No,” I said, a chill running up my spine as she took another step toward me, but she hesitated as the sunlight brushed against the hem of her dress.

“You’ve come so far from home,” she said, her voice a lullaby to my ears.

I felt a little weak all of the sudden, my body relaxing involuntarily.

She tilted her head to the side, smiling brilliantly. “You must be hungry. Come.”

I opened my mouth to speak but found it impossible to make a sound. My body was up and moving against my will and soon she had her hand wrapping lightly around mine, pulling me back into the forest. I willed my body to take my hand from her gentle grasp, but it refused.

“What’s happening? Where are the men?” I tried to say, but I no longer had a voice.

I tasted something metallic. A tingling sensation snaked up my arm as she led me through the forest, the light of day disappearing behind us.

The witch’s house was very grand and seemed out of place within the forest. It was three stories tall and made of stone the color of gold. Fruit trees grew out front, thick with fat, ripe apples and pomegranates.

But it was spring... I glanced up at the fruit as she led me through the front garden, which was in full bloom. None of it made sense. I hadn’t even seen the house until we were upon it.

She brought me inside, and I was instantly overwhelmed by the smell of food.

Before us was a long table filled to the brim with every food I could imagine... platters of roast beef, broiled chicken, a whole hog... fruits and pastries, and bowls of potatoes and green beans. I hadn’t realized she’d led me to a chair until she took a seat at the other end of the table.

The spell that had bound me to her lifted, leaving me breathless and dazed.

“Don’t eat the food,” Jared had said.

My stomach pitched and growled in protest.

“Please, help yourself,” she said cheerfully, serving herself.

I found it hard to swallow as I looked over the spread. Everything looked... incredible. It smelled incredible. It was a feast even my royal aunts and uncles couldn’t have served.

“Don’t eat the food.” The memory of Jared’s words filled my mind again. He hadn’t said why, but it was enough to fill me with apprehension as I looked down at my empty plate.

I was fighting my hunger, my body continuing to revolt against my mind. My fingers twitched towards the fork next to the plate.

“No,” I breathed, closing my eyes for a moment.

“I won’t be able to finish all of this myself,” the witch said sweetly.

I opened my eyes, meeting her gaze. Her eyes were pure silver, fanned by golden lashes the same color as her hair.

But then I saw a cake at the very center of the table, sitting on a tall cake stand that towered over the rest of the food. I hadn't seen it there before. I knew it was covered in butter frosting. I knew the inside had layers of chocolate sponge separated by chocolate icing, and on top... fresh raspberries.

I'd picked those raspberries on the bush that grew alongside our house near the inlet in Winter Forest. My mom had chided me from the kitchen window for eating more than I was picking. My fingers had been stained red for days.

It was my birthday cake.

My eyes flicked to the witch, a feeling of dread washing over me. None of this was real.

"Eat," she said sharply, noticing my sudden change in demeanor.

"I'm not hungry," I said levelly, curling my hands into fists under the table. I froze, noticing the cool weight in my right hand. I was still holding Jared's dagger. I'd forgotten.

"Eat," she repeated, rising from her seat. Her teeth were bared, and I noticed how sharp they were as she hissed at me... like fish teeth, I realized with a start.

"No," I growled.

She pounded a fist on the table and the room shattered around me, replaced by ruin. I looked down at the table that had once been filled with a feast. Now it was nothing but decay—mold and bones and putrid meat buzzing with flies. I fell backward out of my seat in my haste to get away, my ankle twisting around the chair leg. I was going to throw up; I couldn't help it. The smell was like nothing I'd ever experienced before.

I was dizzy. It was hard to breathe.

I saw a flash of pale gray and looked up through tears as the witch stopped before me. She was no longer beautiful. Her golden hair was gone, replaced by thin strands of gray and bald spots. Her face was hollow, and sunken. Her thin lips were stretched into a cruel, almost delirious smile.

She still had all her fish teeth though, which only added to my terror.

"Stupid girl," she purred, the sound like boots walking over loose gravel. She reached down, tangling her long, gnarled fingers in my hair and pulled so I was forced to look up at her.

There was a crash on the other side of the room. Glass shards shot across the room as something large and black launched itself through the window. The witch screamed, letting go of me just in time to be tackled to the ground by a large wolf the color of a starless night.

Two more wolves followed.

They ripped the witch to shreds only feet from where I lay.

I slowly sat up and crawled back to the chair I'd fallen out of. I climbed into the chair and sat down, my back to the c*****e. I looked over the table, at the bones sticking up from the mold and rotting meat. I

swallowed back the bile rising in my throat as I saw what was left of a hand sticking up from the decay, maggots crawling between the fingers. I almost fainted, my head bobbing as I tried not to vomit.

“Eliza,” said Jared from behind me. His hand wrapped around my shoulder and I flinched, then swayed out of his grip as I fell to my hands and knees on the floor. I crawled to the corner of the room and sat against the wall, panting.

But then I turned my head and saw what was left of the witch.

This time I really did throw up.

“f*****g witches,” Archer said, tying what looked like a silk robe around his body. I blinked up at him as he looked around the room. The robe obviously belonged to the witch, and it barely covered his thighs. “You okay?” he asked, meeting my eyes. I didn’t know what to say.

“She’s fine, just stunned,” Jared answered.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him and Brandt on the other side of the room, their nakedness obstructed by an overturned armoire. I heard the sound of clothing hitting the floor, and the two men talked amongst themselves as they got dressed.

Archer was the closest to me at the moment. He drove his fist through the glass face of a cabinet, pulling out several bottles of what looked like wine.

I was slowly coming back to my senses. My heart began to beat at a normal rhythm as Jared tossed a shirt and pants at Archer, saying something about covering himself. Archer teased him, saying something in return about Jared being jealous of his new robe. He even did a little dance, swaying his hips.

Their voices were still somewhat distorted by the blood thrumming in my ears.

Archer turned to me, two bottles of wine in his hands.

“You look ridiculous,” I panted, my mouth curving into a smile.

“Well, you look like s**t, so...” he retorted, flashing me a charming smile.

“Are you okay?” Jared asked from across the room. He was dressed now, but in clothes that weren’t his own... men’s clothes, and it seemed like there were plenty to choose from.

“She had my birthday cake on the table,” I said, leaning my head against the wall. I choked on the words, tears welling in my eyes. “My mom makes it for me every year.”

Jared stared at me, then glanced at Archer, who was watching me just as closely.

“I didn’t eat it,” I whispered. “I didn’t eat anything.”

“Good, because she would’ve eaten you,” Archer said.

“Archer, shut up,” Jared commanded, walking toward me.

He crouched in front of me, looking into my eyes. His hand resting on my ankle, turning it slowly from side to side. It hurt a bit, but I could still walk on it, I was sure.

“Thank you for listening to me, for once.”

[Chapter 808](#)

Our camp for our second, and hopefully uneventful, night in the Dark Forest was situated on a cliff overlooking the forest below. We’d walked for the remainder of the day, none of us speaking as Jared led us further and further into the forest and away from the witch’s house.

I’d looked back at it only once, noticing the toppled stones covered in moss and ivy. It was not the grand house I’d seen upon my arrival. The garden had been overgrown and littered with fallen leaves, not flowers and fruit trees.

Brandt told me I’d been bewitched, which seemed a reasonable explanation for the events that led me to the house and my stupor in the hours that followed. I could still taste the metallic remnants of whatever magic she’d used on me as the day passed in a blur of trees and darkness.

But our new camp was bursting with the light of the coming sunset. The trees here were more sparse, the forest floor open and easy to navigate. Jared was even allowing a fire tonight, and getting the fire started was my job while the three men were bathing in a creek in a nearby glen. They’d felt comfortable enough to leave me up here alone, and if I was being honest, I was grateful for it.

I sat down on the ground in front of the fire, watching the bark I’d pulled from the surrounding trees start to catch. My throat began to tighten, my hands trembling as I slowly fed dry sticks to the fire.

A single tear rolled down my cheek. I wiped it away, biting down on my lip to stop myself from bursting into tears.

“Stupid girl,” the witch had said to me.

She was right. I’d never been so scared in my life.

“You okay?” Brandt’s voice cut through my emotional downward spiral.

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and tried to smile up at him, but my mouth wouldn’t move past a firm, expressionless line.

“Yes,” I replied, sniffing. “I’m fine.”

“We found you some clothes in the witch’s house,” he said as he crouched on the other side of the fire, laying out three good-sized fish. “A shirt and some pants, new socks—”

“Who did they belong to before?” I asked, but my voice broke over the words.

Brandt’s sapphire eyes met mine, looking incredibly sympathetic.

“Someone she took in. Someone who ate her food, you know. I—I wish there was a better way to explain it.”

"It's okay," I said hurriedly, glancing up as Jared and Archer walked into the camp, both of them sporting fresh clothing and wet hair. "I'm going to go wash up."

I was on my feet before Jared could meet my eyes. I didn't want anyone else asking me if I was okay. I walked in the direction Jared and Archer had come and found a gentle creek after a few minutes, which was hidden by rows of alder bushes covered in bright green buds.

The sun in this part of the forest was warm, and spring was in full swing here. I noticed a stack of clothing and a fresh pair of socks sitting on a sunbathed rock beside a shallow pool of water the creek fed into. There was even a very worn towel for my use.

I undressed quickly and sucked in a breath as I stepped into the water. It was frigid enough for me to gasp in reflex, but the shock did something to my brain, ripping the mental fog away in an instant.

"s**t, that's cold," I hissed, wading into the pool until I was nearly shoulder deep.

I shivered, but my skin numbed to the bite of the water and it felt rather refreshing after a moment. I dunked my head under water, scrubbing my scalp with my fingernails.

I wanted nothing more than to scrub myself clean of the events of the last day, and I did so, scooping gritty sand from the bottom of the pool and rubbing it into my skin until my arms and legs were raw. Brandt had told me there wasn't much they'd been able to salvage from our old camp spot, but I saw a toothbrush and a sliver of tallow soap sitting on the rock next to my new clothes. I swam to the rock and brushed my teeth until I tasted blood. I scrubbed my skin with soap until my skin was tight and begging for moisture.

And then I let myself cry.

"What the f**k were you thinking would happen?" I choked, then dunked my head underwater. I blew out the breath I'd been holding as I broke the surface. "You were not prepared for any of this!"

Only gentle birdsong above my head answered me as I climbed out of the water and dried myself off.

I dressed quickly in a billowing, long-sleeved white shirt that was several sizes too big, tucked into khaki pants also several sizes too big that I had to cuff several times so they didn't drag on the ground. I rolled my sleeves up to the elbows and adjusted the belt tied around my waist. The outfit was similar to what I would wear while excavating an archaeological site, in all honesty. That familiarity was a comfort as I pulled my boots on and trudged up the glen, leaving my tarnished thermals, and the memories of the witch's house, behind.

"How come we can drink her wine but not eat her food?" I asked, gingerly taking a sip from the bottle Archer was passing around the fire. The men were busy eating the fish Jared had roasted over the fire, chatting amongst themselves. All of them looked up at me, startled by my voice. I hadn't spoken to them in hours, not since I'd returned from bathing in the creek.

"She didn't make the wine," Archer replied, motioning for me to take a bigger drink. "She was obviously taking things from her victims. Her house was loaded."

I tipped the wine bottle against my lips, letting it roll down my throat. It was strong, and sent a rush of warmth through my body as I passed it back to Archer, who drank deeply from it.

“We don’t need Aeris’s payment for the bounty at this rate,” Brandt added, motioning to the bags at the edge of camp. “We have enough coins and jewels to fund the village for decades.”

“Why go to him then?” I asked.

I glanced across the fire at Jared, who wasn’t looking at any of us. He was sharpening one of his blades against a stone, his eyes downcast.

“Because he’s expecting us,” Archer said, taking the bottle from Brandt and draining it. “And Aeris enjoys Jared’s company, for whatever reason.”

Jared looked up at Archer, the firelight dancing across the planes of his face. The crimson flakes in his obsidian eyes were fanned by the flames, making him look menacing, especially when he turned his gaze to me. He looked down again, examining his blade before sheathing it on his belt. “Brandt, Archer, you’re on first watch,” he said flatly. “Eliza, go to sleep.”

I sucked on my lower lip, glancing at Archer as he groaned and stretched out his legs. Brandt pursed his lips but obeyed, and the two men disappeared into the trees, their voices a low hum against the crackling fire.

I crawled into the bedclothes I’d laid out by the fire, turning away from Jared, who hadn’t moved from his original position. I closed my eyes to the sound of another blade running along a stone.

I didn’t dream. I let the fatigue and darkness take over. But before long I felt someone gripping my shoulder.

“Wake up, it’s our turn,” Jared whispered.

I rolled over, blinking into the star-filled sky. Jared walked away, and I crawled out of my bedclothes, noticing an already sleeping Brandt and Archer lying nearby.

“Come on,” Jared said from the edge of the camp, his figure barely visible in the darkness.

I followed him just outside of our camp, but we didn’t separate and take positions facing the forest. He walked out onto the cliff overlooking the forest below, and to the rolling hills beyond.

The view had been incredible during the day, but at night, it was breathtaking. There wasn’t a single light to be seen for miles and miles.

“Chasing you and that witch took over twenty miles off our trip,” Jared said as he sat on the edge of the cliff, his feet dangling over the side. “We’ll make it to Aeris’s territory by midday tomorrow.”

“Twenty miles?” I gasped, sitting down a few feet away from him. I didn’t dangle my legs over the side of the cliff, however. He glanced over at me, his mouth curving into a wry grin.

“Scared of heights?”

“No, but I avoid them if possible,” I replied curtly, tossing a rock over the cliff.

It was silent for a moment, the only sounds that of a gentle breeze rustling the trees and an owl hooting nearby. Jared was obviously lost in thought as he looked over the landscape. I reached along my belt and unsheathed the knife he'd given me, turning it over in my hands before handing it to him. "Here. I didn't lose it."

"Keep it," he said, meeting my gaze for a moment.

"No, I—I can't keep this. It matches the, uh—" I pursed my lips, my cheeks prickling with heat as his gaze bored into mine. "The hilt matches the tattoos on your arms. I know it must mean something to you."

"It... it's nothing. Just a reminder—"

"Of what?"

He blinked at me, narrowing his eyes.

"I had it made to remind me who I'm supposed to kill with it—the same person who gave me these tattoos."

"What?" I blanched, unable to stop the shock from showing on my face.

He looked away, his eyes watching the sky turn from a deep navy to a soft violet in the distance, the stars beginning to fade.

"It's a long story."

"Well," I said, shifting my weight as I set the dagger down between us. "It seems like we have plenty of time for you to tell it."

He flexed his jaw, considering. I found it unlikely he was going to tell me much of anything, but for the first time since I'd met him, he seemed willing to at least try.

"I've been looking for a man for some time now. I don't know what he looks like, or his name. But he took something from me, and I want it back."

"What did he take from you?"

He was quiet for a moment, his hands spread wide over the tops of his thighs. He didn't answer my question, but continued, "The tattoos appeared on my twenty-first birthday, after I shifted for the first time. At first, I thought it was some cruel prank or a drunken decision I couldn't remember. But when I finally dragged myself out of bed, I found a parcel addressed to me on the dining room table in my house. The first piece of the Cryptex was inside. It had the same markings as the ones that had appeared on my arms."

I opened my mouth but was too stunned and confused to speak.

"There was no note with the parcel, but a few of the men remembered seeing a man go into the house during my birthday party. They hadn't recognized him, but we were all so far gone with drink that no one paid him any mind."

“He left you the Cryptex?” I breathed, unease rippling over my skin. Just thinking about the artifact made me feel that unearthly darkness that lay within it all over again. “Jared—”

“You were right when you said it was cursed,” he cut in, looking over at me with such intensity I felt as though electricity was shooting up my spine. “But no one I’ve shown it to has ever felt it the way that we do. Why is that?”

“I have no idea,” I said honestly. “You’re looking for the other pieces because you think putting them together will break a curse? What kind of curse—”

A rustling sounded in the trees behind us, and Jared snapped his head in the direction of the noise. A fox darted in and out of view, startled by our presence.

“Aeris has a scroll. It was part of the deal we made when I agreed to accept the bounty on his brother. I believe the scroll could lead me to the man, if it’s a legitimate lead. That’s where I need you, Eliza.”

“Me?”

“I don’t know why you’re here, and at this point, I don’t really care, but you’re the only person who has ever given me a shred of information about what the thing is. I don’t know if I’ll even be able to decipher the scroll on my own. I need your help. In return, I will pay you and help you get back to wherever the hell you’re from.”

“I’ll do it,” I said without hesitation.

I didn’t need his money, and I sure as hell wasn’t ready to go home, not yet. This was my grand adventure despite all odds, right? He met my eyes, holding my gaze.

“I’ll do it, Jared. I’ll help you.”

[Chapter 809](#)

We set out on the last part of our journey before the sun had risen over the horizon. Brandt and Archer were chipper, and it was obvious the blanket of tension brought on by walking through a forest full of people-eating witches and whatever the hell else was lurking in its depths had lifted.

Jared and I had stayed out on the cliff for hours, but we’d hardly spoken. I was thankful for the silence, too caught up in my own mind to even think about the Cryptex or the curse Jared had somewhat explained, if not in detail.

I was also reeling from just sitting next to Jared, which was ridiculous. Having a gentle, open conversation with him had been a first. We hadn’t argued, not once, during our time on watch. It’d left me feeling even more confused about my feelings than after our fiery spat in his study.

There was something about him that was pulling me in like a magnet despite my frequent attempts to stay out of his way. I hated it—at least, I was trying to hate it. I was trying to hate him.

But I just... didn’t.

I kept reminding myself that he did, in fact, hold me hostage. He was a cold, calculated man who killed people for a living. And, he was cursed.

Not only that, but I'd just agreed to help him track down the man who'd cursed him in the first place by interpreting a mystical scroll he was getting in return for killing the brother of an Alpha.

Goddess. What was I thinking? The book I was going to write about this, if I survived, was going to be a best seller for sure.

"What exactly are we walking into?" I asked the group as we walked along a long dirt road. Grasses taller than my head grew on either side of the road, making it impossible for me to see where we were going. "Is Aeris a friend to our crew? Or, is he... not so friendly."

"Oh, he's a real prick," Archer chimed in, walking with his usual swagger a few paces in front of me. He looked over his shoulder at me, a boyish smile dimpling his cheeks.

"Everyone is a plaything to him," Brandt added. "He is one of the most influential Alphas in Egoren and believes he can skirt every rule—"

"He throws a damn good party," Archer interrupted.

Jared, who was walking ahead of us, turned his head and glared at Archer.

"What do you mean he skirts every rule?" I asked, panting a bit as I fought to keep up with the men and their long strides. It was obvious they wanted to get this journey over and done with.

"He is rather vocal about his disdain for the Alpha King," Brandt replied. "Some people have taken offense to a White Queen on the throne as his Luna, among other things."

Lena—my stomach tightened into a painful knot but I kept my face expressionless, I hoped. "What other things?"

"Well, let's just say he's a traditionalist—" Archer began, but Jared abruptly turned on his heel and faced the three of us, his jaw clenched tightly and eyes narrowed into slits.

"This conversation stays between the four of us," he began, looking at each of us for the space of a breath. His gaze fell on me and I involuntarily went rigid. "Aeris follows old principles and laws that could put you, Eliza, in danger if we're not careful. His pack is not kind to women."

"What do you mean?" I pressed, tired of the men dancing around my questions.

"He'll consider you... entertainment," Archer said with a shrug. "No matter if you're one of us."

"Archer's right," Jared exhaled, his gaze still firmly fixed on my face. His arms were crossed over his chest, his whole body tight with tension. "Which is why we need to handle this situation delicately. Aeris is backed by several Alphas who aren't thrilled with the current political climate and the changes being made in the capital, but so far those changes haven't reached this far west, so Aeris is still allowed to do as he pleases. You were bought by his brother. By the old laws, that would make you his property."

I looked from man to man, awaiting their solution to this asinine situation.

"Which is why," Jared continued, "we're not going to say anything about it. You are part of our crew. You are my... researcher."

“And what am I supposed to say when he asks exactly what I’m researching? Does he know about your curse?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

Brandt and Archer looked at Jared, surprised.

“She knows?” Archer asked, but Jared waved him away, his eyes still fixed on mine.

“He thinks I want the scroll for my collection. From this moment forward, you are an expert in antiquities, who was trained under your father and took over his trade when he died because he had no sons. That should be enough for him.”

“And if it’s not?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from lifting with apprehension.

“It won’t matter, because we’ll be in and out. This will only take a few hours at the most,” Jared tried to assure me, but Archer snorted with laughter.

“This is Aeris we’re talking about. He’s probably planning a parade in honor of the—”

“Shut up,” Jared growled, cutting Archer off. “Everyone listen to me. I’m only going to say this once.” He pointed to Archer, then Brandt, his face twisted in a scowl. “No f*****g fighting,” he said, then turned to me, pointing an accusatory finger inches away from my nose. “And you’re going to be on your best f*****g behavior.”

“Me?” I said, batting my eyelashes at him. “I’ve never misbehaved a day in my life.”

Archer made a noise in his throat, then sputtered with laughter. Even Brandt fought back a smile, the corners of his mouth twitching as he choked back his own laugh. Jared, on the other hand, ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, his eyes boring into mine.

I loved that look and the challenge behind it.

He gave us all an exhausted look in surrender before turning his back to us and walking away.

We broke through the tall grasses an hour later and crested a steep hill. I had to bend over and rest my hands on my knees to catch my breath after the climb, but I found myself even more breathless after catching my first glimpse of Aeris’s kingdom on the horizon.

A large, circular wall surrounded a sprawling city made of white stone, an enormous castle rising at its center. Cottages and farms dotted the landscape leading into the walled city, and I could see a small, run-down village surrounding Aeris’s ivory fortress.

I’d been walking casually behind the men for some time and noticed their behavior shift as we neared the main gate leading beyond the wall. Archer and Brandt cut off the road and dropped the bags of things they’d looted from the witch’s house into the tall grass. Jared ran his fingers over his knife belt, counting each blade.

“What’s going on?” I hissed as Archer and Brandt returned, but their faces were stone-cold.

I didn’t like this. Not at all.

“I thought you said no fighting!”

The men abruptly stopped walking and I nearly ran into Archer’s back. I peeked between him and Brandt, noticing Jared standing rigid as a half dozen men dressed in warrior garb approached our group.

“Aye, and who are you?” barked one of the warriors.

Jared extended his hands in a motion of surrender, taking a single step forward. “Alpha Aeris is expecting me—”

“How many people you think’ve told us that before?” the man sneered, flexing and clenching his fists. “You’re trespassing on Alpha Aeris’s territory, you filthy forest scum.” Archer grabbed me and pushed me off the road. I stumbled, falling to my knees just as the leader of the warriors reached out to grab Jared’s arm.

Jared had the man flat on his back in a matter of seconds, Archer and Brandt springing into action before I had a moment to come to terms with what was happening. These idiots were just told not to fight. Jared, who was currently taking on two of the warriors at once, had been the one to give that command!

I stifled a surprised scream as one of the warriors slammed his knuckles into the side of Jared’s face. Jared reared back, headbutting the man and shoving him down. Jared straightened up and wiped the blood from his split lip as he met my eye. He winked at me, then threw himself on his next opponent.

“What do we have here?” came a gravelly voice behind me.

I whirled around to find three more warriors standing there, eyeing me with a disgusting amount of primal interest. I unsheathed Jared’s dagger from my belt and held it out before the men, trying not to shake.

“Get away from me!” I snapped.

The men looked at each other, laughing. One of them, a younger man with pock-marked skin and ashen blond hair, stepped forward, looking me up and down. I sliced at him with the dagger but he didn’t falter.

“Pretty thing,” he mused, his eyes lingering on my breasts. “Why’d they dress ya in a men’s shirt when yer such a pretty little pet?” He lunged at me, knocking the knife right out of my hand.

I clenched my hands into fists and swung at him, but he grabbed my wrists and forced me to my knees. “Me first,” he grinned as he pressed me into the ground.

I fought, screaming in frustration as he tried to press my cheek against the road. One of his companions kicked dirt into my eyes and I cried out in pain.

One of the men squeaked in surprise, then the sound of a scuffle erupted behind me. I wasn’t sure what was happening in the background. My eyes were watering painfully and I couldn’t move. I blinked through tears to find Jared rushing toward me, his face twisted in deathly fury.

“You!” he snarled, teeth bared as he pointed a finger at the man holding me down. “You’re dead!”

“Stop fightin’ me sweetheart,” the man breathed against my neck as I screamed Jared’s name.

I could hear a fight taking place behind me as Jared ran toward me from the front, his eyes blazing with rage.

“She’s mine,” Jared snapped, then ripped the man away from me and tackled him to the ground before I had a chance to take a breath.

I heard Brandt cry out, Archer responding with a muffled curse. Suddenly I was being lifted onto my feet, my body protesting before the familiar smell of leather and parchment hit me.

Jared had his arm around my waist, holding me upright. I reached up to rub the dirt from my eyes, blinking into the blinding sun.

I heard clapping. An applause. Then a man’s voice rang out, lifted with... glee?

“I can always count on you to put on a show, Jared,” said a tall, handsome older man with striking golden hair.

He was immaculately dressed and had a thick, well-groomed beard glistening over his jawline. I squinted at him, my breath coming in gasps as I fought to catch my breath.

“Aeris,” Jared growled, tightening his grip on me.

[Chapter 810](#)

On closer expectation, Alpha Aeris was not as tall or as striking as I thought he’d been when he approached us, and what was left of his warriors, on the road leading into his city. He was only a few inches taller than me, and likely in his mid-forties, but he had the strangest eyes I’d ever seen in my life. They were orange, like the fruit.

I couldn’t help but stare at him as he chatted amiably with Jared while his warriors hissed and groaned on the road around us, rolling around in pain. Jared had released his death grip on my waist but was still standing next to me, one of his fingers curled around the back center belt loop of my pants. It felt rather possessive. I kinda liked it. But also I could feel him thrumming with rage as he gritted his teeth and shared niceties with the Alpha standing before us.

I glanced at Archer and Brandt, who were standing beside us now, both of them covered in road dust. Brandt had blood coming out of one of his ears, but otherwise, everyone was in one piece.

“I see you brought a treat for the road this time,” Aeris grinned, his eyes falling on mine.

I squared my shoulders, blinking at him as my face twisted into a scowl.

“Eliza is part of my crew,” Jared said flatly. “She’s an expert in antiquities, and will be examining the scroll you owe me.”

“Ah, yes. I assure you I haven’t forgotten,” Aeris drawled, still holding my gaze. “I find it interesting a female would be interested in the... intellectual pursuits of men.”

My teeth were on edge as I willed myself to calm the f**k down and not say anything to this toad of a man, not yet.

“Well,” Aeris said with a clap of his hands. “Come with me.” He turned on his heel and walked towards the gate, leaving his injured warriors behind.

I glanced between Archer, Brandt, and Jared, silently urging them to explain what the hell just happened. Jared gave me a quick shake of his head, giving me a little push so I was walking beside him instead of behind him.

We walked through the run-down village and into the city. The difference between Aeris’s territory on either side of the wall was striking. The village was the definition of poverty, nothing but shacks and stalls and people dressed in tarnished homespun rags as they carried baskets of coal and produce. But inside the wall?

“Welcome to Suncrest,” Aeris said proudly, his hands outstretched.

We passed white buildings lined with shop fronts as we snaked through the city toward the castle. People stopped to bow to their Alpha, surprised by the group of bandits who trailed them. All eyes were on me, it seemed. Several people glared and whispered as I passed. I couldn’t help but stiffen as we continued on our trek.

Jared was obviously on edge, and Brandt and Archer were keeping in step, walking closely on either side of me.

“Sorry about the warriors,” Aeris said casually as we approached a massive gate leading into what looked like a garden, the castle rising beyond it. “I didn’t want to waste the opportunity for them to train with the lost prince.”

Lost prince? I glanced at Jared but he was expressionless, his eyes as cold as ice. The gate swung open and we were ushered inside.

It closed behind us with a clang that sent a chill up my spine as the warriors guarding the gate locked it in place.

“My servants will show you to your rooms,” Aeris said brightly, his orange eyes creasing with excitement. “Make yourself at home. Jared, be sure to show your friends around, you know the place well.”

My room was directly across the hallway from Jared’s, with Brandt and Archer housed on either side. It was in an inconspicuous and quiet wing of the castle, and seemed relatively empty save for the rapid footsteps of maids scurrying along outside my bedroom door.

My room was furnished tastefully, with plush rugs covering the marble floor and breezy lace curtains covering several ceiling-height windows overlooking the city below. I’d gazed longingly at the massive bed for some time before going into the adjoining bathroom and sinking into the hottest bath I could handle, washing the journey away.

Maids had come into the room while I bathed, leaving behind a tray of cookies and tea and several dresses. I had nothing else to wear but the soiled clothing we’d worn into the city, which was covered in dirt from being pressed to the ground when I was rudely assaulted by Aeris’s warriors.

I held up one of the dresses, which was a pale cream color and sported short, fluffy sleeves and a modest neckline, but would drape around my ankles. Again, I felt as though I'd gone back in time as I dressed and slid my feet into a pair of satin slippers.

I hadn't seen any other women other than Aeris's maids, but based on the quality of the dress, I assumed everyone here was dripping in wealth and would likely be showing it. I gathered my hair into a bun, tying it with a ribbon, then left the room in search of my friends.

Jared didn't answer when I knocked on his bedroom door, so I moved on to Brandt's room, finding the door unlocked. Brandt was curled up in bed, still in his traveling clothes, his open mouth slightly ajar as he peacefully snored.

I smiled to myself as I gently closed the door and moved to Archer's room—also unlocked—and blushed furiously as I tore my gaze from him and exited the room. He'd also been asleep, but was sprawled out on his belly like a starfish, his bare ass on full display and his snores sending a thundering echo through the hallway as I closed his door.

"Hmm..." I sighed, looking up and down the hallway.

I knew should be sleeping too, but I was still thrumming with adrenaline from our run-in with the warriors outside the city walls. Why not do a little exploring?

I walked down the hallway for a bit, rounding a curve. I noticed an archway along one side of the hallway and walked inside, finding myself in a cozy sitting room full of natural light. Bookshelves lined the wall but were mostly bare. Two couches faced each other near the hearth, and in the center of the room...

A piano.

I arched my brows as I walked forward, plucking one of the keys... perfectly tuned.

I sat down on the piano bench, scooting myself in and flexing my fingers before settling them on the keys. I took a deep breath, then smiled. It'd been so long since I'd played.

I started to play, letting the music fill the room. I'd chosen a song I'd composed myself as a child and perfected over the years when I'd trudge through the snow to the castle in Winter Forest, the home of my great aunt and uncle, Rosalie and Ethan. Uncle Ethan would sit in an armchair nearby while I filled his home with music. I'd taught myself how to play and found it was the easiest, and sometimes only way to untangle the thoughts and schemes constantly running through my mind.

I felt instantly more at ease as my fingers moved across the keys in a practiced, dramatic fashion. The music carried through the room, light and sweet. I lost myself and closed my eyes as the song crested into the crescendo.

"Where did you learn that song?"

I spun around, my heart leaping into my chest as Jared leaned against the archway to the sitting room, a book tucked under his arm.

"You're incredibly light on your feet," I panted, trying to still my thundering heart rate. "You scared me to death, again."

He shrugged, eyeing me intensely. A heated blush prickled over my cheeks as I broke from his gaze and turned back to the piano.

"I made it up," I said, answering his question.

"No, you didn't—"

I glared at him over my shoulder. "I did. Why?"

"Because I've heard it before," his face softened a bit, and he looked almost a little hesitant to continue. "I mean, I think I have, a long time ago. Play it again." His last words were a sharp, almost desperate command. The air in the room shifted as I broke from his gaze and turned back to the piano.

I chewed my lower lip, finding it damn near impossible to convince myself to play anything else in his presence. "How long have you been standing there listening to me?" I asked softly, my breath catching in my throat.

"I saw you walking down that hallway and wanted to make sure you weren't getting into trouble."

"So the whole time?" My cheeks burned as I rested my hands on the keys.

"You're really good," he replied, and I turned to face him just in time to see the final hint of a smile touch his lips. But there was something in his eyes that gave me pause, a distant, contemplative look that made my heart squeeze in my chest.

"Thank you," I said softly, trying to smile, but I found myself locked on his eyes as heat flashed behind them. I thought of the study, of his fingers trailing little circles on my inner thighs. For a moment, I was sure he was thinking the same.

"Aeris is expecting us in a few hours. You should get some rest. We're leaving directly after dinner," he said as if he was holding himself back.

The room seemed to be full of electricity, like if I reached out and touched him I'd shock myself just like when our fingers had grazed in the study. That felt like ages ago.

"Alright," I said, a little breathless. I rose from the piano bench, my eyes downcast on my slippers.

Something was happening to the air in the room. I found it hard to breathe for a moment as I looked back up at him.

"Eliza," he said, sounding just as breathless as I felt.

"Yes?"

He opened his mouth but hesitated, his free hand curling into a fist at his side. "You look... beautiful."

"Oh," I whispered. "Thank you."

He nodded, and turned on his heel, walking away with the grace of a big cat stalking silently through the woods. I placed a shaking hand over my heart. I couldn't swallow. My whole body was revolting against him walking away.

"What's wrong with me?" I whispered.

The dining hall in Aeris's castle seemed to be made entirely of gold. We were seated at the head of a long table filled with platters of food and wine, with Aeris presiding over the feast with a wide grin on his face. His court was there as well, dressed in riches that seemed unbelievable after the poverty I'd witnessed the past few weeks. Archer sat across from me, the two of us on either side of Aeris, who was sitting at the head of the table, the two of them bent in conversation. Archer and Brandt were wholly focused on the food.

I was more interested in watching the people of his inner court, those high-ranking members of his pack who ran in his circle. I wondered who was his Beta, and who was his Luna, if he had one.

But the women seated at the table were mousy and poised, none of the speaking unless spoken to.

"No, Aeris," Jared said in a clipped tone that made me immediately turn to witness their conversation.

Aeris gave him a look and poured a substantial amount of wine into his glass.

"The scroll is not going anywhere, my friend. Your companions could use a few days rest after such an arduous journey."

"We're not staying—"

"Jared," Aeris coaxed, a flash of annoyance creasing his eyes. "I think you'd find spending a few days in my court would be in your favor."

I could tell Jared was seething but was maintaining his composure. His shoulders were rigid, and I imagined his hands clenched into fists under the table. I slid my ankle against his. He didn't break Aeris's gaze, but his shoulders relaxed for a moment.

"Just until Friday," Aeris continued, and it was obvious he wasn't taking no for an answer.

To my surprise, Aeris turned his gaze on me, giving me a smile. But his eyes were alight with some scheme I couldn't decipher, I just knew it. "I need some time to get to know your new... companion. What did you say your name was, darling?"

"Eliza," I said firmly. "And I'm not your darling."

Jared gave me a swift kick in the shin beneath the table but I held firm, my eyes locked on Aeris, who seemed amused more than offended.

"Marvelous," he said, leaning back in his chair.