

Kings Breeder 811

[Chapter 811](#)

Dinner passed in a blur of conversation. Archer and Brandt finished several helpings of food before they relaxed into a guarded examination of the people sitting with us at the table. I watched them, wondering what they were seeing and hearing that I couldn't.

Jared gently refused Aeris's offer of a nightcap in Aeris's private library, saying our crew needed to rest.

I rose from the table and followed the men out of the room, but I could feel the stares grazing the back of my neck as we crossed into the hallway and walked back to the wing that housed our bedrooms.

"Goodnight—" I began, trying to turn into my bedroom, but Jared reached out and grabbed my arm.

He opened the door to his room and ushered all of us inside.

"So," Jared said, crossing the room to the bar cart along the far wall. He poured four glasses of what looked like scotch, then handed them to us. "What did you find out?"

Archer drank deeply, extending his glass for another dram.

"There was some talk of Ambrose but no one in his circle seemed to know what Ambrose used his stolen money on," Brandt began, swirling his glass. "There is a ball tomorrow night, and the Alpha King of Egoren has sent a warning to Aeris about what sounded like Suncrest spies in the capital. The spies were apprehended and are being held by Alpha King Alexander's warriors."

I looked from man to man, wondering how the hell Brandt was able to gather so much information in the dining hall when it was filled with chatter over the clanging of silverware.

"Aeris is looking for a breeder to replace the heirs he lost," Archer mentioned.

My eyes snapped to Archer, who shrugged, sipping from his drink.

"Keep your ears and eyes open. I need to know everything," Jared said, then drained his own glass.

I looked down at the glass he'd handed me. I didn't think I'd ever even tried scotch before. I brought to my lips, taking a tiny sip, and grimaced. Jared took it from my hands, his fingertips brushing against mine.

"Get some rest, Eliza," he said, then turned to Brandt and Archer. "The two of you go out into the city tonight; check the taverns and brothels. See what else you can find out."

Archer and Brandt walked away, their muffled conversation swallowed by the sound of the door shutting behind them.

"I'm going to keep you safe," Jared began.

I answered him with a soft smile. "I know, I trust you."

He seemed a little shocked by this reply, the hard lines of his face softening a bit. He drank my serving of the scotch, his eyes still locked on mine.

We were alone... in his bedroom. I could kiss him if I wanted to. He'd let me, I was sure.

"Goodnight, Eliza," he said, breaking the spell.

I pursed my lips and turned toward the door, hurrying across the hallway and into the darkened sanctuary of my own room.

"Oh!" I said with a start, sitting upright in bed. I blinked into the golden glow pouring in through the windows on the far wall, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. A clock on the far side of the room sounded, little bells announcing the hour. I furrowed my brow as I threw the thick coverlet off my legs and stepped out of bed, feeling exceedingly rested.

It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon. I'd slept the entire day!

"Great," I mumbled, wondering what I'd missed and what the guys were getting up to without me.

As if someone was aware that I was finally awake, I heard a knock on my door. I turned just as a trio of maids bustled in, carrying a tray of food and a rack of ball gowns.

"Oh, Goddess," I breathed in exasperation, rubbing my temples.

"We need to fix your hair for the ball, miss. We don't have much time—"

"I can get ready myself, but thank you," I said, giving her a smile.

She looked totally confused and turned to the other maids, who shrugged helplessly. They bustled out of the room as quickly as they'd come, leaving me to munch on some toast and frown at the lace and beading on the gaudy, unbecoming dresses.

I looked around the room for the dress I'd been wearing the day before but it was gone, as were my traveling clothes.

"s**t," I said, taking another bite of toast. I poured myself some coffee and walked to the window. There were still a few hours until sunset, but the city seemed to be perpetually basking in a golden-hued glow. I sipped my coffee, wondering what Archer and Brandt got up to in the city last night, and if they'd even tell me about it... probably not.

The door to my room swung open wide and bounced against the wall, making me jump and spill my coffee.

"Archer!" I hissed, sucking on the burn on my finger. "What the hell is your problem?"

"A gift," he smirked, tossing a large, flat box on my bed.

"Why?" I replied, eyeing him with suspicion.

Archer had his hands tucked behind his back, rocking on his heels as he tilted his head toward the rack of dresses the maids had brought in.

"Jared's idea. He told me to go find you something to wear for the ball that isn't... how do I put this?"

“Going to drown me in lace and beading?”

“Yes, exactly.”

I moved toward the bed, gingerly pulling on the ribbon holding the box shut. I opened it, finding a gown made of pale blue silk. I set my coffee down on my bedside table and gently lifted the dress from the box, holding it up into the light. It was stunning, but simple. A sweetheart neckline faded into short sleeves made of sheer organza that was bunched, but I wouldn't consider it fluffy by any means.

It was modest and flattering, but compared to the long sleeves and high necklines of the dresses on the rack, it seemed rather scandalous. My arms, shoulders, and upper back would be bare.

Silk heels the same color of the dress rested inside the box, as well as a necklace made of fresh-water pearls.

“This must have cost a fortune,” I breathed, meeting Archer's eyes.

“Well, I bought it with the witch's money.” He turned to leave the room but paused at the doorway.

“Oh, wear your hair down,” he added, his cheek dimpling with a smile. “It suits you.”

I stared after him until he closed the door, leaving me stunned into silence.

I looked at my reflection in the full length mirror in the bathroom, then down at the makeup on the counter. I never wore makeup. I just never bothered with it, having spent a good deal of time traveling from dig site to dig site over the years. I picked up a tube of lipstick, inspected it, then set it back down.

I adjusted my curls into a half-up hairstyle, pinning them away from my face and praying they'd behave. The dress fit me like a glove, and the shoes made me a few inches taller. I could walk in them easily, maybe even dance in them too. I smiled at my reflection, pleased with what I saw.

But before I turned from the mirror, I ran my fingertips over the pearl necklace. Each pearl was different, slightly uneven and unique. They were warm to the touch. I wondered why they had been included in the box, and whether it was Archer or Jared who had picked it out.

I heard a knock on my bedroom door and crossed the room, opening it wide. Brandt turned to face me, then stopped, his cheeks coloring as he looked me up and down.

“Wow,” he said, thoroughly surprised. “You look great!”

“Oh, don't act so surprised,” I teased as I took his arm, resting my hand in the crook of his elbow.

He led me down the hallway. I thought we'd stop to fetch Jared and Archer, but we continued walking. I looked Brandt over, noticing his fine, well fitting clothes. He'd brushed his hair back from his face and shaved. He was an incredibly handsome man, especially with those stunning blue eyes reflecting the rich navy of his jacket. “Where's everyone else?”

“In the ballroom. Archer wanted to wake you up several hours ago, but Jared wouldn't let him.”

I frowned. “So, what did I miss today?”

“Don’t worry about that now. We have a job to do.”

“Oh?”

“We’re going to spy.”

Brandt gave me a mischievous smile as he led me down a wide staircase. Music filled the air, a symphony of strings. It was lively, and as we turned into the ballroom, I found myself unable to release the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

At least two hundred people were gathered in the ballroom, everyone dressed in suits and gowns. Many couples were dancing in the center of the room, their bodies swept in a waltz. Brandt nodded pleasantly as we passed the guests attending the ball, all of which were turning to stare at us.

“Everyone’s looking at us,” I whispered, my cheeks turning a bright pink from the attention.

“Everyone’s looking at you,” he corrected, flashing me a smile.

“Because I’m not dressed in a ball gown with a neckline that touches my chin,” I griped, feeling totally exposed.

“Loosen up,” he said, nudging me with his shoulder. “Jared and Archer chose this dress on purpose.”

“Why?” I hissed beneath my breath as he led me further into the crowd.

“Because you’re not from Aeris’ court. You’re not his, and Jared wanted that to be clear. You’re one of us, and you’re dressed like it. You should act like it, too.”

“What do you mean, act like it?” I laughed, but then squeaked in surprise as Archer came up behind me, his arm hooking around my waist as he spun me toward where the couples were dancing. I heard Brandt laugh before he faded from view completely.

“Let’s show them how it’s done,” Archer winked.

“I don’t know how to waltz!”

“Me neither,” he laughed, and it was true.

We looked ridiculous, I was sure, but it was the most fun I’d had in a long, long time. As Archer clumsily spun me around the room, I caught a glimpse of Jared standing next to Aeris. Aeris was watching me like a hawk, his eyes narrowed. Jared was watching me too.

But his gaze heated me to my core.

“I’m out of breath,” I panted to Archer, who immediately tripped over his own feet and nearly sent us both to the ground.

We broke out in a fit of laughter as he led me off the dance floor, mentioning he needed to make the rounds for intel.

I could see a refreshment table nearby, which backed a large archway leading out onto a terrace. I sighed in relief. It was hot, and some fresh air sounded very, very nice.

I grabbed a flute of champagne on my way outside, smiling to myself as the early spring air touched my heated skin.

"That was quite a show," Aeris said behind me.

I froze.

"Tell me," he said, walking beside me and leaning on the terrace to face me. "Where are you from?"

"North of here," I replied as steadily as possible. I met his eyes, but kept my face hard and expressionless.

"Interesting," he purred, raising his golden brows as he looked me up and down like he was inspecting a prized mare. "I heard an interesting rumor about a young woman recently," he continued, "who was bought by my brother at a breeder auction."

My blood ran cold but I held his gaze.

"You have such beautiful hair," he mused, reaching out to wrap a curl around his finger. "She was said to have curls like yours, the same shade, in fact."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said curtly.

"Hmm... an odd coincidence, then. She would have been mine, you know, by law."

"It's a depraved practice," I seethed, my voice cold and clipped.

"For some," he replied, tugging on the curl to make it go straight. I winced from the strain on my scalp but refused to let him see that I was in pain. "I'm sure I'll find her eventually. The truth always reveals itself, doesn't it?"

"Eliza," Jared said, his voice harsh and demanding.

Aeris released my hair, the strand springing back into place. I turned to Jared, inhaling deeply. I wondered if he could see the panic in my eyes. I prayed that he could.

"Dance with me."

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Jared extended his hand to me, beckoning me forward. I glanced over my shoulder at Aeris, who was looking smug and suspicious as he leaned against the railing of the terrace overlooking the city of Suncrest. Night was falling, and the city lights sent an amber haze rippling over the horizon.

It would have been beautiful had that orange-eyed creep not been standing right in front of my view.

"Eliza," Jared repeated more sternly.

I fixed Aeris with a steely glare and took Jared's hand. Aeris raised his brows at me but looked nothing but amused.

Jared placed my hand in the crook of his arm as we walked back into the ballroom, leaning down to hiss, "Don't egg him on."

“He knows,” I said, looking up into his eyes.

Jared looked down at me, nostrils flaring. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything! He said it was—it was my hair. It was my hair that gave it away. Someone in his circle must have recognized me from the auction.”

Jared cursed under his breath and broke from my gaze to look around the ballroom. Warriors were posted along the walls, watching the proceedings. Jared eyed them all, then found Archer and Brandt in the crowd.

“We’re getting out of here tonight,” he said, leading me through the crowd again.

“But he hasn’t given you the scroll yet—”

“I don’t care about the scroll.”

“Of course you do! That’s why you’re here, and why you brought me here. You need it. I’ll be fine—”

“He will stop at nothing to lay claim to what he believes is his,” Jared seethed in my ear. I closed my eyes as a ripple of heat rushed through my body as his breath tickled my neck. “I won’t let anyone else have you.”

Anyone else?

Jared straightened up, catching Brandt’s eye in the crowd. He nodded once, his pointer finger brushing against the tip of his nose. Brandt made another quick motion with his hand in response and disappeared into the crowd.

“What was that all about?” I asked, but Jared moved us deeper into the fray.

We arrived at the edge of the dancefloor where a dance was already in full swing. It was a group dance, the couples weaving in and out of each other and then twirling with their partners.

“We’ll catch the next dance,” Jared said absently, his eyes still scanning the room.

It was obvious he wasn’t going to tell me what was going on. Was Aeris going to announce to the crowd that I was his breeder? Was Jared really planning on trying to escape the castle when it was so heavily guarded?

Was he seriously about to give up on the mysterious scroll he needed because of me?

The song ended and applause erupted through the ballroom. The young dancers beamed with pride as a few couples made their way back into the crowd of onlookers, others staying on the dancefloor as the orchestra prepared for the next dance.

I didn’t know how to dance like this. Every move was calculated and well-practiced. I’d watched some of the young women dancing with their partners when I’d first arrived at the ball. They danced with controlled grace, their faces screwed in concentration as they hit each and every step with precision. They’d been trained to dance like this, likely for years.

Archer and I had simply swirled in a circle, clutching each other's hands for dear life and trying not to mow down anyone dancing nearby. I had a feeling this next dance would be very different with Jared as a partner.

I looked up at Jared as he watched the orchestra prepare for the next set. His eyes were locked on the violinist. Aeris had mentioned a few times that Jared was acquainted with his court and kingdom. He would know these dances. He'd know how to play the game.

That's what this was, after all—a game. I was just a piece of it, a cog in the wheel.

Jared took my hand and led me out onto the dancefloor as the music started.

"I don't know the steps," I said softly, trying to hide my discomfort as he slid a hand along my lower back.

"It's fine. Just pretend like you're enjoying yourself. That's what Aeris wants to see," he replied.

I scanned the crowd, seeing Archer and Brandt posted on opposite sides of the room, both of them looking in the same direction. I knew they were watching Aeris without having to crane my neck to follow their gazes. Aeris was testing us. I had to prove with this dance that I wasn't some lowly breeder saved from the auction block. I had to prove I was some high-born lady like the women in his court.

"Eliza," Jared whispered as he raised our joined hands to shoulder level. "It's a waltz."

"I don't know how to waltz—"

"Move with me," he breathed, then he swept me into the dance.

I knew Jared was light on his feet. He'd mentioned being a good dancer, but the word "good" wasn't an adequate description of how the man moved. He was confident in every step he took, sure-footed and strong. He was as agile as he was graceful.

Me? Not so much.

"Let me lead," he said over the music. "Submit."

And I did.

It was a complicated dance, and I was truly along for the ride as Jared took my hand and spun me in a tight circle. Another twirl, then another, my feet barely touching the ground as we wove between several other couples along with the music, which only seemed to be getting faster.

He knitted his fingers in mine, squeezing softly as I breathlessly looked up at him, totally under his spell.

"How did you learn how to dance like this?" I breathed.

He gave me a playful grin, then had me spinning on my toes before sweeping me across the dancefloor.

"I wasn't raised a bandit," he said wryly. "That came later."

"What—" he spun me again but let go of my hand, his other hand trailing over my back as he sent me twirling freely across the dancefloor.

My outstretched hand met the hand of another woman roughly my age, who took my hand and led me in a tight circle for a moment before I was sent spinning again, right back into Jared's arms.

That happened again, and again, the two of us joining and then separating as we wove between the other dancers. I was out of breath by the time the music reached a pitch, and not from the physical demands of the dance.

Jared's hand pressed against my lower back, his palm spread wide. My chest was pressed firmly against his, our fingers intertwined.

For a moment it felt as though we were the only two people in the room. The music seemed to slow, our movements sure and deliberate as his body moved in rhythm with my own. I was in a trance as the music thrummed through my blood and my bones.

I looked into his eyes while he turned us as if in slow motion. He was looking at me now in the same way he'd looked at me when he'd asked me my name that night at the breeder auction.

"Trust me," he'd said.

I had.

But why?

Why had every glance from him set my entire body on edge? Why had every word he'd ever said to me etched itself into my mind?

Why couldn't I stop reliving that night in his study over and over again in my dreams?

I didn't realize I'd been clutching his shoulder tight enough to crease the fabric of his shirt until I found myself on the other side of the dancefloor from him, practically gasping for breath as the men lined up on one side and the women on the other.

Jared was dressed in dark fabrics, a suit that fit like a glove. He hadn't shaved his face. His hair was still unruly and ruffled. The freckles that trailed across his cheeks and over his nose flared against his sun-kissed skin. His eyes were downcast, his shoulders trembling as the music faded.

The room was silent, still. I could hear the blood hammering in my ears as he slowly raised his head to look me in the eyes as he bowed to me.

Something within my heart I hadn't known was there snapped into place. He must have felt it. He must have seen it written all over my face.

Because the look he gave me was knowing and primal, filled with nothing but the same crushing reality I'd just realized myself.

I dropped into a low curtsy, bowing my head to Jared like the women on either side of me were doing to their dance partners. I met his eyes once more. His expression had softened, his longing gaze replaced by something I can only describe as regret, maybe even pain.

I backed into the crowd, holding his gaze until I finally turned around and walked breathlessly out of the ballroom.

I was trembling by the time I made it to my bedroom. I fumbled with the door, my hands shaking so badly I had to hug myself with my hands pinned against my sides to still them. I fought against the tears welling in the corners of my eyes as I walked to the center of the room and stood in the dusty rays of moonlight streaming through the windows.

I knew what this was. Maybe I'd known the whole time. Maybe that's why I pushed against him at every turn and why I felt that same soul-sucking power within the Cryptex when he'd placed it in my hands.

Maybe that's why I'd never tried to escape, not really.

The odds were astounding, almost unbelievable. I shouldn't be feeling this way.

Maybe I was wrong. I was probably wrong... I had to be, especially because of the look he'd given me after the dance, the pain in his eyes... that look of sheer regret etched in every plane of his face. It was ripping me to pieces.

"You're losing it," I whispered to myself, loosening my grip on my body and letting my arms fall to my sides. "It's not what you think. You're just... afraid. You're afraid, and you're clinging to a foolish, romantic notion of—"

There was a soft knock on my door.

I slowly turned around. The room was dark, the only light that of the moon. Everything was bathed in blue-hued moonlight as I took a few slow steps to the door.

I pressed my hand to the door, trying to swallow past the lump in my throat. I knew who it was before I even opened it.

Another knock.

I slowly turned the knob, letting the soft amber light of the hallway flood into the room. Jared was standing with his hands on either side of the doorway, his head bent and eyes downcast as if he'd been resting his forehead against the door. He slowly looked up at me, his eyes locking on mine with unadulterated vehemence.

I took a step backward into the darkness.

He followed me inside, closing the door behind him.

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It was incredibly still in the room, the only sound that of Jared slowly turning the lock on the door into place. It echoed through the space with finality. We were alone. He turned to look at me, his shoulders tightening and then relaxing as he took a breath.

"Do you know what I am?" he asked, taking a step toward me.

My heart was beating a million miles a minute as he closed the distance between us, his gaze locked on my face.

I couldn't answer. I couldn't form the words. Did I know who he was? A bounty hunter... murderer... closeted master of antiquities... Aeris has called him something else, though.

A lost prince.

“Why did he call you a lost prince?” I breathed as he continued to close the distance between us.

He stopped short of me, looking down at me and the way the moonlight was touching my shoulders. He didn’t answer my inquiry, but he reached out and ran his fingers over my exposed skin. I closed my eyes against his touch.

“You’re not safe around me,” he breathed.

“Why are you trying to push me away?” I replied, leaning into his touch as he stroked my neck.

“Because this won’t end well for us,” he admitted, a hint of regret in his voice.

I opened my eyes, finding him incredibly close now, close enough for me to rest my hand against his chest. I could feel his heartbeat hammering nearly as rapidly as my own.

“Why?” I dared to ask. I bit down on my lip and closed my eyes again as he reached up and plucked the pins out of my hair, releasing my curls.

“Eliza,” he whispered, resting his forehead against mine. We were silent for the space of a breath, my palm spread wide over his chest. “I’m a Dark Lord. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes.”

I knew of Dark Lords. I knew one personally, in fact. Maybe that’s why I’d found Jared so familiar. His dark eyes and even darker shadow of power suddenly made sense. Maybe like the White Queens, his lineage branched off into seemingly endless factions of family carrying the same powers and traits.

‘I’m not afraid,’ I told myself. ‘I’m not. I’m not.’

“I could hurt you,” he said, tilting his head so his nose grazed against mine. I felt his eyelashes on my cheek as he brushed his lips against my jaw. A shiver ran down my spine, causing me to curl my toes in anticipation. “I will hurt you.”

“You couldn’t hurt me if you tried,” I whispered.

“I could,” he repeated, but his voice cracked over the words.

“No,” I replied, closing my eyes as I leaned into his touch.

He took a shuddering breath, then leaned forward, brushing the softest kiss against my lips.

He had some kind of power over me that I couldn’t put into words.

I opened my mouth to him, my hands running up his chest and gripping his shirt, pulling him closer. He groaned low in his throat, a tremble running through his body as he tangled his fingers in my hair and deepened the kiss, his tongue running along my lower lip. I whispered his name in a barely audible plea.

Thank the Goddess he’d locked the door.

His free hand trailed down my back and over the laces that held my dress up. He loosened them with his fingers, pulling on the fabric until it gave way. The sleeves fell from my shoulders and the bodice fell over my chest, held up only by the breasts.

He released his grip on my hair and trailed his fingers along the tops of my breasts. I sucked in my breath, a desperate moan escaping my lips. He stole the sound with another kiss, then pulled the dress down until it rested around my waist.

“Eliza,” he breathed against my lips.

He cupped my breasts, his calloused hands warm and rough against my skin. My n****s tightened and peaked under his touch, begging to be touched.

I wanted to ask him if he felt what I was feeling. I wondered if he felt that same magnetic pull. I didn’t want to break this spell, however. I couldn’t form the words anyway, no matter how hard I tried. He bent his head, running his lips across my chest, then took one of my n****s between his teeth. I hissed, gripping his shoulders in response to the sudden sensation.

But I liked it, a lot.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped as he sucked, his tongue flicking over my n****e, sending a rush of warmth down my spine. I threw my head back, shivering in ecstasy.

He made a primal, very male sound deep in his throat that set my teeth on edge with desire as he knelt before me, his hands running over the curve of my hips and gripping my ass over the dress.

His lips traveled lower, the tip of his nose dragging over my belly before he kissed me just above my hip bone. I closed my eyes as he slowly pulled my dress down over my hips, exposing me completely to him.

“No underwear?” he growled, circling his thumb over the apex of my thighs.

I choked on whatever sarcastic reply I’d had in mind as he kissed me just below the belly button.

I was drenched. I could feel the wetness pooling as he slid his fingers between my thighs. I hadn’t realized I was clenching them together until he forced my legs apart, growling in satisfaction.

I cried out in mingled shock and relief as his mouth settled on my core. He was rough, his stubble scraping against the tender skin along my upper thighs as he pulled me closer to him, one hand spread wide on my lower back to stop me from moving away.

“Jared,” I cried, tangling my hands in his hair.

I was losing the ability to stand upright, my legs trembling as the warmth of his mouth fanned over my skin, his tongue lapping me into a stupor. “I-I can’t—Oh, please—” I pleaded, my breath coming in gasps as I fought to stay upright. Every muscle in my body tightened. I was on the edge of release.

But then he pulled away.

I yelped in surprise as he scooped me into his arms and walked me across the room, tossing me roughly on the bed. I looked up at him, watching as he hastily removed his clothing. His eyes were on me, on my body, on my legs spread wide on the bed.

“f**k,” he cursed under his breath, his eyes glassy with passion, heat burning behind his eyes as he watched me. He was nearly all the way undressed, wearing nothing but his shirt, which was long enough to hide the one part of him I was absolutely desperate for at the moment.

He slowly tore his eyes from my fingers and met my eyes, his gaze feral and dripping with hunger. He grabbed my ankles and pulled me toward him.

There would be no going back, not now... not now that he was climbing onto the bed, holding himself over me as he bent his head to kiss me. It was a long, hungry kiss. He ran his tongue along mine as he lowered himself on top of me.

He explored me with his hands, running his fingertips from my cheek all the way down to my navel, and then between my legs. I shivered under his touch, then cried out as he slid his fingers inside of me. I arched my back, pleading with him as he circled his thumb over my clit.

I'd never been with a man before, not fully. I could feel the length of him resting against my inner thigh, hard and hot and aching as he slowly ground against me, his breath coming out in a rasp.

I whimpered as he worked me with his fingers, always slowing his movements whenever he felt my muscles tighten around him.

He was enjoying this. He was enjoying teasing me and making me beg. He was watching every shred of pleasure and desperation pass over my face, the corner of his mouth lifted into a devilish smile.

He kissed me again, his hand leaving my core and resting on my knee, pushing my legs open wider for him. I tore at his shirt, ripping it open in a shower of buttons that bounced over the bed and onto the floor.

The head of his c**k slid across my drenched entrance again and again. My eyes nearly rolled in the back of my head at the movement, my arms falling limp at my sides. With one hand he took me by the wrists and pinned them above my head, holding them firmly against the mattress.

“You’re a virgin, aren’t you?” he rasped against my neck.

“I’m not afraid,” I whimpered.

He choked on a short laugh, his eyes shining in the moonlight as he rose onto his knees between my legs, running his hands over my thighs in the softest of touches. My words were an invitation. Claim me, I prayed. Take me however you want.

“You’re exquisite,” he breathed, taking me by my hips and pulling me toward him. He positioned himself, his hand stroking his length over and over, his eyes fixed on mine.

He thrust into me achingly slow—inch by inch, by inch, until I was gripping the bed sheets in a desperate attempt to stifle the scream threatening to tear through the room. He pulled out just as slowly, testing me, his hands gripping my hips tight enough to leave marks.

I knew he was holding himself back. I could see it in his face, which was twisted in concentration. He was trying not to hurt me, but I was beyond caring. I wanted him to release himself on me, to ravage me, to tear me apart.

“Please,” I whimpered as he slowly pushed his length inside of me, stretching me apart. “Oh, f**k, please—” I arched my back as he pulled out again, a little faster this time. I clenched my muscles around him, trying to stop him from pulling out completely.

He growled, his fingernails digging into my hips.

“Don’t play games with me, Eliza,” he choked, then thrust back into me with all of his might.

I screamed, the line between pain and ecstasy blurring just like my vision as he thrust over and over, his teeth gritted in concentration. “f**k! You are fucking... tight—”

He grabbed my ankle, lifting my leg in the air. He pulled me closer, his teeth grazing my ankle as he thrust, and thrust, and thrust until I was seeing stars. His other hand toyed with my clit until I felt a rush of warmth tighten in my belly. I gripped the sheets, gritting my teeth to stop myself from babbling incoherently.

“Come for me,” he commanded.

I whimpered, shaking my head. I clenched my muscles around him again and he roared, his eyes narrowing in concentration. I didn’t want this to end, not yet—maybe not ever. I was absolutely out of my mind.

He dropped my leg and in one swift motion had me face down on the bed, his grip tightening on my hips as he drove into me from behind. I screamed into the pillow, losing myself completely.

“You’re mine,” he rasped, tangling his fingers in my hair. “No one else can have you. No one else.”

He lost himself just like I was praying for. He claimed my body, rocking into me fully and crying out as he spilled himself inside of me just as my body tightened with a mind-bending pleasure that had my vision going black and my chest heaving for breath.

I trembled beneath him. He pulled me into his chest, holding me upright against him. He was still inside of me, his c**k pulsating in rhythm with his thundering heart.

I leaned my head against his shoulder, fighting for breath. He cupped my breasts and then kissed my neck all the way up to my ear.

“Again,” I said in a shattered breath. “Please, I want to do it again.”

“Insatiable,” he rasped in my ear, his breath tickling my neck.

I was totally at his mercy in this position. The air in the room was chilled but my skin was burning with heat and unquenchable desire.

He flipped me over, our legs tangling in the bedsheets.

We didn’t sleep.

Not for a long, long time.

[Chapter 814](#)

Jared

I woke with a start, blinking into the early morning sunlight that was drifting through the ceiling-height windows on the far side of the room. I was incredibly warm and pleasantly satiated. It was no wonder, based on the woman currently curled up next to me with her head resting on my arm.

She was fast asleep, a rogue curl lifting and falling against her cheek every time she released a breath. I tucked the curl behind her ear, my fingertips lingering on her cheekbone for a moment. Her naked body was bathed in sunlight, glistening like gold. I fought the urge to cup her breast, my hands aching to feel the weight of them again.

Speaking of aching... I closed my eyes and hissed out a breath, trying to stop my mind from going over every second from the night before. I was ready to take her again, right now.

“f**k,” I groaned, running my hand over my face. What the f**k had I been thinking?

I slowly removed my arm from beneath Eliza, clenching and unclenching a fist as my entire arm tingled. She didn’t even stir. I watched her as I gathered my clothes, my heart squeezing in my chest as her eyelashes fluttered and a soft, sleepy smile drifted across her lips.

This wasn’t fair to either of us.

I’d f****d up royally, and I didn’t know what to do now.

I picked up what was left of my shirt and shrugged it on. All of the buttons were gone, and would no doubt be found by the maids who were likely to gossip about it to the other servants.

It didn’t matter. We’d be out of this place by midday. I’d make sure of that.

I cursed under my breath as I searched for my pants. I found my boxers at last and pulled them on, turning around the room for the rest of the remains of my outfit from the ball. Eliza stirred, mumbling something in her sleep. I froze, holding my breath as she turned over and hugged one of the pillows to her chest.

I could see my pants peeking out from underneath her. I chewed my lower lip and sighed, seeing no solution other than to risk the three-second walk across the hall to my own bedroom, hopefully without being seen.

I couldn’t wake her. I wasn’t ready to have the conversation I needed to have with her. It was going to hurt. My heart was already shattering just thinking about it.

Part of me prayed that I was the only one feeling the way I did. Maybe she was just looking for a bit of fun and a warm body to explore. But dancing with her at the ball last night had ignited something inside me that I didn’t think I’d ever feel.

It was a cruel twist of fate, truly. Rage rippled over my skin just thinking about it. Borrowed time... I only had five months.

Five months had felt like an eternity only yesterday, but now I felt like I was watching my life slipping through my fingers, a life that was lying right in front of me, still tangled in the bedsheets.

“Don’t be foolish,” I whispered to myself. There was a reason I didn’t get close to women, not anymore. I’d avoided them at all costs lately in the event I ever felt a flicker of a mate bond so I wouldn’t hurt

anyone, especially myself. It was selfish, sure, but the idea of finding my mate and then watching her witness my untimely death was a crushing, suffocating weight.

And if death didn't come on the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday?

Those dark powers would consume what was left of me. I'd be powerless against them, my wolf the only thing keeping them in check.

I unlocked the door, wincing as the lock clicked and the door groaned as I opened it, then crept into the hallway.

"Well, well, well," Archer mused, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the corridor. I cursed beneath my breath and shut the door to Eliza's room behind me, glaring at Archer. "You look well rested."

"Shut up, please," I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Did she do that to your shirt?"

"Leave me alone, Archer—"

"Maybe now you'll be in a good mood for once in your life," Archer pressed, arching his brow.

"I'm not talking about this—"

I was interrupted by Brandt's door opening and a young, timid-looking woman walking into the corridor in nothing but a shift covered by what looked like the shirt Brandt was wearing last night. She saw me and Archer and froze, her eyes going around with shock and embarrassment.

"Good morning," Archer grinned.

I nudged him in the ribs and he grunted as the woman squeaked an inaudible response and darted down the hallway, a tarnished ball gown clutched against her chest. Brandt peeked his head around the doorframe, his cheeks burning with a ferocious blush but a smile on his face nonetheless. Archer pursed his lips, chuckling to himself. Brandt looked me up and down and c****d his brow.

"Eliza?" he asked.

I exhaled deeply, glaring at both men as I walked between them and into my room, shutting the door firmly behind me.

Great.

Eliza wouldn't meet my eyes over the informal breakfast table laid out in the dining hall. She picked at her plate, her cheeks burning red as Archer and Brandt sat on either side of her. The men kept looking at her, then at each other.

I ground my teeth as I toyed with my food. I was defensive of Eliza already, but now that I'd had her in bed?

"You're a prick!" Eliza hissed.

Archer sucked in his breath and squirmed, reaching under the table to rub his shin as he glared at Eliza. I looked Archer up and down, wondering what he'd said to her.

I felt awful. It was my fault that Archer and Brandt knew... even though I hadn't verbally confirmed it. While I considered their merciless teasing all in jest, it still ground my gears that Eliza was uncomfortable.

I felt even worse that I'd snuck out of her room without having the decency of waking her up and telling her I was leaving.

I just couldn't take that look in her eyes—that crushing disappointment that lingered there, that same confusion that I felt.

That same deeply rooted longing.

"f**k me," I said beneath my breath.

"What's wrong?" Eliza quipped, which startled me enough to spill my coffee.

I glanced up at her, holding her gaze for a few seconds longer than I meant to. She gave me a weak smile that broke my heart.

She didn't know about the curse, not entirely. I needed to tell her, and then I needed to take her home.

"Nothing," I said, trying to smile in return, but only the corners of my mouth lifted.

"There you are!" Aeris's voice boomed through the dining room, bouncing off the golden wallpaper and nearly bursting my eardrums.

Archer sighed audibly, setting his fork down on his plate. Aeris walked around the table, resting his hand on my shoulder. I fought the urge to stand and shove him away.

He made my skin crawl. He always had. And watching him gaze down at Eliza with a look of fierce desire made me want to reach up and snap his scrawny neck.

How bad would it be if I did?

"What a show you put on last night, Jared. And you too, Eliza."

Aeris lingered a little too long on her name. I clenched my hands into fists under the table.

"Thanks," Eliza said brightly. I looked at her, wondering what exactly she was playing at. "Jared is a fantastic dance partner."

"He's always been especially talented in the art of dance. He trained for years in my court as a child."

Eliza shot me a look. I could see the curiosity bubbling behind her eyes. Stop. Stop—

"Really?"

"Oh yes," Aeris drawled as he sat down beside me, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Jared's grandmother was once part of this court, before my time, but she used to bring him here in the winter. How he ended up a bounty hunter is... a mystery indeed."

Eliza was looking right at me, her sea-green gaze cutting me to the core.

“What?” I mouthed at her, but she only smiled, her eyes flashing with some hidden scheme.

Great. That was the last thing I needed. Aeris was already onto her about being the breeder his brother purchased from the auction. She knew I was leaving without the scroll. We would’ve been halfway home by now had I not rushed after her after we danced last night.

“He never mentioned that to me, and I’ve known him for a long time,” Eliza lied, and she lied well.

I arched my brow at her, still vexed that she was playing this game but also curious about where she was planning to take this next.

“And how long have you known my beloved Jared?”

“A few years now. My father was curious about Jared’s collection, and that’s how we were introduced.” She exhaled, her eyes shifting to a look of pure, pained grief.

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest as she wiped an actual tear from her eyes.

“When my father died... I’m sorry,” she choked, sniffing pathetically.

Aeris clicked his tongue, making comforting noises as he handed her a napkin to wipe her eyes with.

“When my father died, I took over cataloging Jared’s collection. I’ve been living at his house for the past year because of it. It’s a rather extensive collection.”

“The past year, you say?” Aeris said.

I fought back a smile as a flash of disappointment blurred Aeris’s face.

“Mhmm,” Eliza said, sipping from her coffee. “It was just my father and me, you see. He had no sons, so the property went to my uncle, you know, under the old laws and such. Jared offered me my father’s old job and a place to stay.”

“Jared,” Aeris smiled wickedly, glancing at me before turning back to his conversation with Eliza. “He’s such a gracious guardian to the females, is he not?”

Eliza smiled sweetly, nodding, but I could see the fire behind that smile.

“He is. I rather enjoy his company,” she said in a purr that set my blood boiling, and not in anger.

Aeris caught this and pursed his lips, looking me up and down. I ran my tongue along the side of my lip, c*****g my brow at Eliza.

She ignored me, setting her coffee cup on the table with a clang.

“So, Jared said you were giving him a scroll as part of the bounty payment. I’d like to see it, of course. Please don’t take offense,” she said hurriedly, waving her hand, “but I want to make sure it’s legitimate, you know. Because he murdered someone in exchange for it.”

I placed my booted foot over her slippers, pressing down in warning. Aeris’s eyes shot up, taken by surprise.

“Oh, my darling. Do you really think I’d cheat a man such as Jared in that way?”

“I don’t know,” she said playfully, batting her eyelashes at him. “Would you?”

Aeris was blushing at her attention now. She was going too far. I stepped down on her toes, but she was a step ahead of me, kicking me firmly in the shin.

I coughed to cover the grunt of pain I couldn’t stifle. Aeris reached out and absently patted me on the shoulder.

“I assure you, my own collection is absolutely legitimate. In fact, I will show you. I have some business to attend to today but—”

“Tomorrow then! Oh, this is wonderful!” Eliza clapped her hands together, beaming at the Alpha.

I clenched my jaw and glanced at Archer and Brandt, who were staring up at Eliza in awe.

“It would be my pleasure, darling,” Aeris drawled, rising from his seat as Eliza extended her hand for him to... kiss.

He beamed right back at her as he brushed a kiss across her knuckles. My fingers curled under the table. I was going to rip him to shreds. But before I could, Aeris turned to me and reached into his jacket, pulling out the scroll and setting it in front of me.

Aeris, now in an even more chipper mood than usual, practically floated out of the room.

“Bravo, Eliza,” Archer whispered, raising his coffee mug in a toast.

“What the hell are you thinking?” I hissed, fixing her with a glare.

She narrowed her eyes at me as she picked up her coffee mug, rolling her eyes before she took a sip.

“I’m just stroking his ego. That’s all he wants. You should try it, Jared. He’d probably offer you more than the scroll.” She took a long, annoying sip from her coffee and set it back down, rising from her

chair and snatching the scroll off the table. “Although, that won’t matter now that I get access to his ENTIRE collection!” She turned on her heel, flicking Archer soundly on the temple as she walked out of the room and out of sight.

I rose from my seat and took off after her.

[Chapter 815](#)

Eliza

I knew Jared was following me. I knew Archer and Brandt would be close behind as well. I had it in mind to turn into my bedroom but turned toward Jared’s room instead. If the evidence of our night was still scattered around the room, well, I wasn’t going to give Archer the satisfaction of seeing it. I threw open the door and stepped inside Jared’s room without hesitation.

“Hey!” Jared hissed, catching the door before it slammed shut. He locked it behind him.

“Brandt and Archer are going to want to see the scroll too—” I began, but he snatched the scroll from my hand and tossed it on the bed, taking a step toward me.

“Last night,” he said, then hesitated, his jaw rigid with tension.

I relaxed a bit, but my stomach was tying in a knot as I looked up at him and held his gaze.

“Was it not good for you?” I asked.

He looked shocked.

“Eliza that’s not—”

He ran his fingers through his hair, then down over his face as he exhaled deeply.

“That’s not it all. It was great. You were... great. I just—”

“It’s okay,” I said hurriedly, turning away from him to hide the pain on my face.

I didn’t want to know what he was going to say next. I went to his bed and slowly picked up the scroll, telling myself I was testing the weight of it in my hands and not trying to distract myself from the searing pain of rejection blossoming in my stomach.

“Eliza,” Jared breathed.

I didn’t turn around. I’d been wrong, of course. This was just a very intense case of lust, primal lust... primal lust for my captor. There had to be a name for that, some physiological term or condition....

“Eliza, the curse,” Jared said firmly.

I turned to face him, furrowing my brow. “What about it?”

“I’m losing my wolf. I don’t want to hurt you if you think—if you think that we could be—”

I blinked at him, clutching the scroll to my chest. I bit back the hurt, focusing on the word “curse” to distract myself from the pain and roaring feeling of stupidity rushing through my blood.

I’d heard of people losing their wolf powers, but it was usually because of some kind of severe psychological trauma, like the abrupt loss of a mate. It wasn’t always permanent, either. I’d never heard of someone losing their powers because of a curse.

“You said the Cryptex might be something that’s capable of keeping time,” he continued, taking a step toward me. “I think you’re right, and that when I have all the pieces, I’ll be able to break the curse and stop it from stealing what’s left of my powers.”

“What does that have to do with last night?”

“I told you what I was—”

“You guys had all night to do whatever it is you’re doing in there. Come on. We want to see the scroll,” Archer said from behind the door.

Jared let his breath out in an annoyed growl, his eyes moving toward the door.

“We’ll talk about this in a moment,” he said, but I turned away from him and walked toward the door, opening it wide for Archer and Brandt to enter.

Get yourself together, I told myself. You’re being insane, Eliza. I sucked in my breath and steeled my expression, locking everything else away.

Archer entered and gave me a playful look, wiggling his brows. I smacked him soundly on the arm with the scroll.

“Eliza!” Jared hissed, eyes wide with shock.

“It’s fine,” I said, closing the door. “It’s a fake.”

“What?” the men said in unison.

I smiled to myself, twirling the scroll over my fingers before tossing it in the air and catching it in my other hand. Jared winced, looking incredibly annoyed that I was handling his precious scroll so roughly.

“Smell it,” I said, tossing it to him.

“Smell it?” Archer said, c*****g his brow.

Jared eyed me suspiciously as he raised it to his nose, then narrowed his eyes.

“It smells like tea, and charcoal,” I said, watching with interest as he carefully unfurled it. “That’s how you process parchment to look older than it is. It might just be a copy of the actual scroll he promised you, but still. I knew the second he pulled it from his jacket that it was a fake. He’s playing you.”

“I had a feeling he would,” Jared said under his breath as he handed the scroll to a very curious Archer. Archer sniffed, shrugging, before handing it to Brandt.

“Why would he be trying to lead you astray?” I asked, accepting the scroll back from Brandt.

I looked at the text, which was obviously copied, and recently. If I had a lab with the appropriate equipment for the job, I could have dated the ink.

When none of the men spoke, I looked up from the scroll, noting how intently Archer and Brandt were looking at Jared, some silent conversation obviously taking place over mindlink.

“Whatever it is,” I continued, looking back down at the scroll, “it’s written in Pritian, I believe. I’ll need some time to work through the translation.”

I felt the air in the room shift as the men turned to look at me, stunned.

I blinked up at them, shrugging one shoulder. “What?”

“How do you know any of this for certain?” Brandt asked.

“And what the hell is Pritian?” Archer added.

I rolled it up and tucked it in my back pocket. “Pritian was the name of the language spoken by the people who existed before the time of Morrighan and Lycaon,” I said, matter-of-factly. “Artifacts have been found throughout the northern territories in my realm—” I sucked in a breath, glancing from man to man and settling my gaze on Jared.

"I was wondering when you were going to admit that," Archer mused with a smirk.

I broke from the intensity in Jared's gaze and glared at Archer.

"Fine, I'm from the Realm of Light," I said in surrender.

"What's it like?" Brandt asked, a boyish longing in his tone.

I smiled at him, but then my gaze drifted back to Archer, who had a distant look in his eyes. My chest tightened as I watched a shadow pass over Archer's face, some distant memory of the war with the vampire king drifting to the forefront of his mind, no doubt.

"Very different from here," I said softly.

"You can ask her whatever you want about her realm later, Brandt," Jared said sternly.

I met his eyes, noticing the same apprehension behind his gaze in regard to explaining my realm in front of Archer, who had witnessed a very different side of it.

"Anyway," I breathed, crossing my arms over my chest, "this scroll is likely copied from something written on stone. I'll translate it to the best of my abilities and we will go from there."

Jared gave Archer and Brandt a look and tilted his head toward the door, his way of telling them to "Get lost."

I turned to leave as well, but Jared stopped me with a gentle touch to the back of my arm.

"Wait," he said.

I waited to face him until Archer and Brandt closed the door behind themselves and their footsteps retreated down the hall.

"I'm sorry about the scroll."

"I don't care about the scroll," Jared said as I turned around. "This is probably one of his tricks. I know you think you played him today, but Aeris is cunning, and if he finds out who you are—"

"I'm not afraid of Aeris," I replied, sitting on the edge of the bed and crossing my legs. "I don't think he's as cunning as you think he is. I was sold at the auction against my will. I'm not his."

"You're wrong."

"How?"

"Aeris always gets what he wants one way or another. You might slip through his fingers as a breeder, but he will find some new way to use you and make it impossible for you to leave without violence. I have to keep you safe—"

"I'm not asking you to do that—"

"I'm not asking for your f*****g permission," he said in a clipped tone, his eyes darkening with frustration. "Who do you think I am? Someone who takes you to bed and then throws you to the wolves afterward? I meant it when I said no one else can have you. I mean to keep it that way."

“Do you even want me?” I bit out. “You snuck out of my room this morning. Were you just in it for some fun? Some distraction from your bigger problems, like your curse? Or are you—did you feel it too—” I bit down on my lip to stop myself from saying anything further, my cheeks going rosy with emotion.

“I felt exactly the same thing you did, Eliza. I knew exactly what you were feeling during that dance and how you felt when you left. That’s why I followed you back to your room. That’s why I locked the f*****g door behind me when I came inside because I didn’t know if I could handle being interrupted again. I’ve wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you.”

I was at a loss for words. He took another step toward me, then another.

“I can’t keep you safe,” he said. “So I’m going to find a way to get you back to your realm.”

“I’m not ready to leave yet—”

“I don’t care—”

“I’m the only person who can help you and you know it!”

“That scroll that you just told me was fake was my last shot of finding the person who gave me the Cryptex in the first place. Those powers you felt within it? Eliza, they were my powers. They didn’t belong to the Cryptex. It’s been taking those powers from me for years. I tried getting rid of it, trust me, I have, but no matter where I bury it, no matter what body of water I throw it into, I find it back in my study, untouched.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Because the more I think about it, the less I want you to be involved. You mean too much—” he bit down on the words, eyes flashing with regret.

I went rigid, a flickering of girlish hope sparking deep within my heart.

“If Aeris has anything on the person who cursed me in the first place, he will try to bargain with me for it. I’m guessing he knew exactly what he was doing with this fake scroll in particular. He’s testing us, Eliza.”

I didn’t want to talk about Aeris anymore. I wanted to talk about what was happening between us and why he was pushing against it, but I could tell I’d hit a dead end with Jared, at least for now.

“He thinks I’m not actually educated in this. He thinks I’m faking it.”

“Possibly, yes.”

“Then I should continue to play the part, right? He’s going to show me his collection. I could find something—”

“There’s nothing to find.”

“Then you’re just giving up? Because you think it’s too dangerous for me?”

“I’m giving up,” he said, his voice dropping an octave. I stiffened at his tone, sensing the seriousness in his voice. “I’m giving up because your safety means more to me than dragging you on a fruitless quest.

I'm guessing your parents are alive, and well, and very much loved, are they not? How would they feel about their daughter running around the f*****g Dark Realm with a Dark Lord—"

"A Dark Lord married the Princess of Valoria," I cut in.

"He is not like me," Jared sneered. Unease rippled over my skin as I looked up into those dark eyes of his, remembering that dark shadow of power that'd followed his wolf when he left me in the woods—that same shadow he'd cast over me like a net in the witch's house, protecting me, even if just for a minute. "I could rip you to shreds without realizing it—"

"I'm not afraid of you," I hissed. "I proved that to you last night!"

"I wish you were," he replied. "That would make this so much easier!"

A crack formed in my heart, somewhere deep in the same place I was stuffing my feelings for him. He'd said he felt it too, whatever it was. But now?

"I'm not going to let you give up on this," I whispered, letting that hurt ring loud and clear. I could see the effect of it on his face as I rose from the edge of the bed, looking up at him through my lashes. "I didn't believe in fate until I ended up with you, Jared. You said you'd protect me. You promised me. Now I'm promising you something in return. I'm going to help you find the person who cursed you, and

I'm going to help you break the curse." I ran my tongue over my lower lip, my mouth going dry around my words as I continued. "Then you'll be rid of me, I promise. I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Eliza—"

But I was already gone.

[Chapter 816](#)

I tried not to think about Jared's words as I set to work on the scroll.

There was a small desk near the windows of my room, showered in crisp, early spring sunlight. I set up camp there, rummaging around in the drawers for paper and several quills, then set to work.

Translating anything from Pritian was always a challenge, especially with no published texts to work from. Pritian was nothing but symbols that danced in an uneven rhythm. It could be read side to side, left to right, right to left, or even top to bottom, so on, and so forth, which is why, after nearly two hours of copying directly from the scroll and then doing my best to translate each individual symbol on a separate piece of paper, I found myself with a toe-curling headache that had me seeing stars every time I blinked.

I heard a knock on the door and mumbled a silent prayer that someone was bringing me a lunch tray with hot coffee, but found myself now sharing the space with Brandt, who seemed a little sheepish as he gave me a boyish grin as he closed the door behind him.

"I'm not bothering you, am I?"

“No, of course not,” I breathed, giving him a weak smile. “It would have been better if you’d brought me some coffee, or were fluent in written Pritian.”

I waved my hand over the mess of papers now littering the desk and the floor. Brandt shrugged and pulled the chain of fabric next to the door that would ring a little bell somewhere in the depths of Aeris’s castle, alerting a maid that I needed attention.

“I can get you some coffee, but I’m no help with... Pritian, right?” He crossed the room with his hands tucked behind his back, peering over my shoulder at the work I’d accomplished. I’d translated nearly all of the symbols, but I wasn’t ready to start deciphering what the scroll was trying to convey. I’d be at this all day at this rate.

“Yes, Pritian,” I mumbled, squinting at the bottom line of the scroll. It was a signature of some kind, the symbols totally new to me. “Damnit, I have no idea what this is supposed to be.”

There was a soft knock at the door. I didn’t turn my head to the soft footsteps that entered the room. It was her startled squeak that had me snapping my neck to face her, a mousy young woman with blonde hair and cornflower eyes. She looked... scandalized, but not because Brandt was in my room, no. She was looking at the papers strewn all around me, covered with ink and my untidy scrawl.

“Could you bring us some coffee, please? Maybe a few sandwiches,” Brandt asked kindly, giving the young maid a beautiful smile.

She blinked up at him, then bobbed her head, trembling a bit as she turned back to the door.

“Wait,” I said hurriedly. “Do you by chance have any texts related to the early people from this realm? Early Lycaonic people, from when he—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t know,” the maid squeaked, her voice wrapped in sudden apprehension. “We aren’t allowed to read.”

“What?” I scoffed, glancing up at Brandt, whose brow was furrowed as he peered at the young woman. “Why not?”

She shrugged, her cheeks coloring. “Most of us can’t read—”

I opened my mouth in shock, but Brandt took a step toward the maid and handed her a small cloth bag. It was a coin purse, and it was heavy.

“Can you find someone that would have access to Alpha Aeris’s private library, or possibly the rectory of the Temple of Lycaon next door? It’s imperative she has the resources she needs. And—” Brandt reached into his pocket, pulling out another small purse. He plucked a small gold ring from it, dropping it in the pocket of her apron. “If everyone keeps their mouths shut about it, there will be plenty more where that came from.”

The maid backed out of the room, her eyes wide with shock and maybe even fear.

I tried not to think about Jared’s words as I set to work on the scroll.

“What did she mean?” I asked, turning in my chair as Brandt walked back over to stand beside me.

“None of them can read? Really? What the hell kind of place is this?”

“The kind of place that prefers women to warm their master’s beds rather than debate them about politics and decorum,” Brandt said flatly, picking up one of the papers I’d been scribbling on. “What is this?”

“It’s the center of Jared’s artifact, the Cryptex. At least, that’s what I think it’ll look like when we combine all the pieces. I was wondering if the symbols on the Cryptex were Pritian too, but now I’m not so sure.” I tapped my finger on the scroll, frowning. I didn’t have anything I needed to do this. I could provide a loose translation of the scroll to Jared, but then what?

“What made you interested in this kind of stuff?” Brandt sat down on the edge of my bed, then reached out to pick up a scratch paper I’d wadded up and tossed over my shoulder an hour ago. I shrugged, turning back to my work.

“I was studying to be a nurse, actually. But I needed a history credit. I took a class in ancient history and was hooked. I guess I just like to know—”

“Everything?” Brandt smirked.

I glared at him playfully over my shoulder.

Thus began Brandt’s questions about the Realm of Light, which was probably the main reason he was in my room. I answered any questions he had, cleared up some rumors about the differences between the realms, and spent a great deal of time recounting the two years I’d spent at the University of Mirage. He loved my animated stories of the college parties I’d attended, and he sat enraptured as I continued to slowly piece together the scroll while mindlessly spilling my life story.

I’d left out the important details about my family and my pack, however. I hadn’t mentioned my ties to the royal families of my realm, or my tie to his Luna Queen. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him, even though I did trust Brandt. I liked him, and I knew that he wouldn’t run his mouth and cause chaos knowing I was the cousin of not only the Luna of Egoren, but the Moon Goddess herself.

It wasn’t that I thought they were going to try to fetch a ransom for me, or use me in any way if they knew the truth.

It would just give Jared all the more reason to try to get rid of me, knowing I had family in this realm.

I wasn’t ready to leave, not yet.

The maid returned with our coffee, but no books. She gave Brandt an apologetic shrug as she hurried back out of the room.

“Damn,” I said beneath my breath.

I really needed to talk to Jared about this. After translating every symbol, there were at least twelve that I couldn’t make sense of. They weren’t written in Pritian, I was sure.

Brandt had little knowledge of the ancient people from his realm, so I was s**t out of luck.

I leaned back in my chair with my coffee clutched between my hands and breathed deeply, my head still throbbing.

“What do you think it says?” Brandt asked, leaning on one of the windowsills as he sipped his coffee.

I blew out my breath, shaking my head.

“I have no f*****g clue,” I grumbled, taking the biggest sip of coffee that I could without burning my mouth. “I think it’s encrypted. I could probably read it with a cipher as a guide, as long as the cipher had the symbols I’m not familiar with on it... ugh!” I set my coffee down and rubbed my temples. I should have paid more attention in Cryptography. I felt like my head was going to explode.

looked sympathetic, but it was obvious he had no idea what I was complaining about.

I rose from the chair, several papers falling out of my lap. My hands were ink-stained and aching, my neck felt tight and strained. I walked to the edge of my bed and fell face first onto the mattress, my arms spread wide.

“How the hell did Jared think he was going to decipher this thing? Did he know it was going to be in code?” I muttered against the bedclothes.

Brandt walked across the room, turning out the light.

“He said something to me about enlisting the help of the witches a while ago,” he shrugged.

I turned my head to look at him, narrowing my eyes.

“Not the kind of witches we ran into in the forest,” he assured me, chuckling to himself. “I’m sure he has a few books on this stuff too, Eliza. When we get home you can... do whatever you’re trying to do then.”

I propped myself up on my elbow, considering this. The conversation had also shifted to the topic of Jared, which I’d been waiting for.

“Why did Aeris call Jared the Lost Prince?” I asked.

Brandt’s cheeks flushed as he blinked at me, then he looked down at his shoes and shifted his weight. I sat up a little straighter, noticing Brandt’s sudden discomfort.

“It’s not for me to say,” he said weakly, giving me an apologetic look that made me even more suspicious.

“Is Aeris trying to make Jared his heir?” I pressed.

Brandt looked surprised, furrowing his brow. “No, of course not!”

“Then why would he call him that?”

Brandt gritted his teeth, obviously on the verge of telling me something he wasn’t supposed to. Brandt was the kind and innocent—as far as innocent went with this group—personality among the three bandits. I could see the internal battle going on behind his blue eyes.

“I won’t tell him you told me,” I smiled. “Please, tell me!”

“Eliza,” he said. “I can’t.” His voice was edged with what sounded like pain.

I slumped against the bed, sighing in surrender.

“You could ask him yourself?”

“I tried,” I sighed. “I don’t... understand him. He’s so hot and cold with me.”

“I know. He’s like that with everyone.”

“But why? I actually enjoy his company when he’s being just... Jared, and not the Ice Lord.”

“Ice Lord?” Brandt laughed, then really laughed, his straight white teeth gleaming in the sunlight pouring through the windows.

“You know what I mean,” I murmured, adjusting the pillow under my head before lying back down.

I sucked on my lower lip, wondering if Brandt really knew what I meant. He couldn’t possibly know how that hot and cold behavior transferred to the bedroom. Jared had been an absolute savage last night, especially once I made it clear that’s what I wanted to see. I’d loved every second of it. I’d wanted it that way. I wanted it like that again.

But then there was the overprotective and self-righteous Jared, who also laughed and teased and seemed to truly care for me, for all of us.

Then, he was cold and distant, secretive, that dark shadow weaving itself around him and closing him off from us, and especially from me, completely.

He was just like the scroll I was trying to decipher—impossible to crack.

“You should get some sleep,” Brandt shrugged, his hand resting on the doorknob. “I... don’t think you got much of that last night.”

“Not you too,” I groaned, rolling over to face the windows. “Leave the incessant teasing to Archer, please.”

“See you later,” he laughed, then left, and I found myself in blissful quiet.

I sandwiched my aching head between two pillows, closing my eyes against the sun. One of the pillows still smelled like Jared.

mouth twitched into a smile as I fell asleep.

[Chapter 817](#)

Jared

I ran the back of my knuckles over her exposed ankle and she didn’t even flinch. She was sprawled out on her bed, face down, her arms and legs splayed with a pillow over her head. I slowly lifted the pillow to make sure she was still breathing and hadn’t suffocated herself, but she was fine, out cold.

Eliza slept like a rock. I was more than impressed by it, and slightly jealous if I was being honest. I let the pillow fall back over her head and crossed the room to pull the curtains closed, blocking out the late afternoon sunlight. Papers were strewn across the desk and the floor, all of them covered in ink blots and rough sketches of the Cryptex.

I picked up the discarded papers as I walked through the room, flipping through each page. She had terrible handwriting, almost illegible, but she was a historian, after all. I'm sure she was writing as quickly as her mind was moving.

Eliza sighed in her sleep, a breathy sound that sent a shiver of heat down my spine. She'd made that same sound when I'd taken her just as the first hints of early morning dusted through the curtains, a blue-hue glow spreading over her breasts as I'd dragged myself slowly in and out of her, my forehead resting against hers.

We were achingly spent, but it hadn't mattered. She'd whispered my name and I'd stolen with it a kiss like I'd never kissed anyone else, and likely never would again. That burning desire hadn't ceased until I could no longer keep my eyes open and submitted to sleep.

I looked over at her, wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed beside her and hold her to me, to run my fingertips over the curve of her hip and tangle my hands in her wild hair.

I would have, had I not been on my way to have dinner with Aeris.

"f**k," I breathed, closing my eyes against the memories of the night before as I reached down to adjust my pants, which were suddenly a bit too tight. That darkness inside of me, that piece of me at constant odds with my wolf, was pleading to take advantage of her current vulnerability. I detested that darkness, that shadow that clawed at me and begged me for release.

Eliza was bringing out a part of me I kept locked away, the very reason I wanted to be alone and spend my days on violent escapades that kept that darkness satiated and at bay. She wanted that part of me, though. And she'd had that part of me by the balls last night.

I slowly let out the breath I'd been holding. I was supposed to be waking her up for dinner, but maybe it was better if she wasn't there. I was constantly distracted whenever she was around. I couldn't be distracted tonight.

I started for the door, folding her scratch papers into a square and tucking them into the pocket of my jacket. I glanced over my shoulder at her once more before I left the room. Archer was waiting for me in the corridor, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the wall.

"She's asleep," I said, tilting my head toward the door as I closed it quietly behind me.

"Brandt said it looked like she had a pretty bad headache," Archer replied, shifting his position. "Are we waking her up?"

"No." I walked a few paces, then stopped, motioning for him to stay put. "Guard her door. I don't know what's going to happen tonight. If Aeris tries anything—"

"I'll guard her with my life," Archer said, giving me a little smirk.

I pursed my lips and gave him a narrow-eyed look. Archer wasn't going to let go of the fact Eliza and I had slept together, and knowing him, the teasing was only going to get worse. If Archer hadn't been a close friend of mine, I would have killed him years ago.

"It's not what you think," I said coolly. "Just make sure she's safe."

Jared

I ran the back of my knuckles over her exposed ankle and she didn't even flinch. She was sprawled out on her bed, face down, her arms and legs splayed with a pillow over her head. I slowly lifted the pillow to make sure she was still breathing and hadn't suffocated herself, but she was fine, out cold.

"What is it, then?" Archer retorted, the corners of his mouth twitching as he found a teasing smile.

"I'm not having this conversation with you, again." I waved my hand in dismissal and turned on my heel, walking away.

Aeris leaned over the table, pouring me another heavy glass of wine. I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to give a gentle nod in thanks.

"Such a shame our dear Eliza couldn't make it," he purred, his orange eyes glassy with heat. Brandt shifted his weight beside me, his hand clenched in a fist on his thigh.

Dinner had been just as uncomfortable as I thought it would be. Aeris pulled out all the stops, pushing the most expensive wine and food in front of us that he could produce, despite the reports of the villages under his control going hungry. He talked in length about the "whores" he employed in his castle, wanting nothing more than to give one each to me and Brandt for the night. He even brought the women in and made them dance.

I could snap his neck. I could. I could just look into his eyes and let that darkness in my soul rip him to shreds.

"She's busy with the scroll," I said as pleasantly as possible, sipping the wine.

Aeris snorted, shaking his head.

"Poor thing, slaving away all day. It's terribly difficult for them to read, you know. Women just don't have the same mental capacity as us males. You really shouldn't encourage her, Jared. It's a waste."

I stifled the fury beginning to ripple over my skin.

"Someone like that? Well... imagine the pups you could get out of her. Those hips? She'd have an easy time."

Brandt cleared his throat, reaching for his wine. I exhaled deeply, nostrils flaring.

"How much do you want for her? Name your price."

"You're mistaken," I ground out, holding onto the last shred of sanity I had left for this man. "She isn't for sale."

"A trade, then?" Aeris's eyes were sparkling under the light of the chandelier above his head. He tapped his manicured fingertips on the table as he leaned back, sighing deeply.

"No—"

“That man you seek, perhaps? What if I knew where he was?” Aeris glanced up at me as he inspected his nails.

I blinked, narrowing my eyes at him. “You don’t know who he is, Aeris. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Give me Eliza and I will—”

“No,” I said with finality, meeting his eyes.

He leaned back in his chair, his mouth twitching into a smirk.

“The hard way, then? Ha, why must it always be this way with you, Jared? The things we could accomplish together—”

“Thank you for dinner,” I interrupted rudely, nodding at Brandt as the two of us rose from the table.

“Not so fast,” Aeris growled, his eyes glowing like polished amber.

He waved to a guard standing by the door, who opened it, allowing a small, rat-faced man to stride inside. He was dressed for the road in stained, tattered clothing. I could smell the liquor on him from across the room, mingled with sweat and the tang of body odor.

I knew who he was immediately.

‘Go into her room and lock the door,’ I said to Archer over the mindlink.

“I really didn’t want to have to do it this way,” Aeris drawled, leaning back in his chair with his legs crossed as the man approached. “It seems Lou is missing a breeder... the same breeder my brother purchased just before you killed him. Interesting, is it not, that Eliza matches the description of her to a T?”

Brandt glanced at me, his face an expressionless mask.

“Tell me, Lou,” Aeris mused, tilting his head. “How’d you come across this w***e in the first place?”

“A trading ship,” Lou said in a hoarse, gravelly voice. “She put up a fight.”

Rage ripped through me, blurring my senses as I slowly turned to face Aeris.

“You’re saying this breeder was taken to the auction against her will?” I asked, trying to maintain my composure. “And now you think you have a claim to her, whoever she is?”

“Lou?” Aeris said, inspecting his nails. “Where did you say this trading ship was coming from?”

“The Realm of Light, Alpha.”

Aeris’s eyes flicked up to mine, a gruesome smile stretching across his lips.

“I’ve heard of women from that realm. Highly educated whores with nothing but freedom and no consequences. Confident sluts, wouldn’t you say? Tell me, Jared, is Eliza an animal in bed like they’re rumored to be?”

‘Stop,’ Brandt said urgently through our link, his eyes still fixed on Lou. ‘Don’t give her away.’

“Eliza is not from the Realm of Light,” I said sweetly, then chuckled, turning my attention to Lou. “And you surprise me, Aeris. I’ve known you for years, and I thought I knew you to be above taking the word of a man who let a female best him.”

Lou turned a fiery red, his eyes narrowing on mine.

“Ya’ smug motherfucker—”

“Jared, Jared, Jared,” Aeris breathed, shaking his head. “Do you see the situation you’ve caused? My brother spent an outrageous amount of money on that w***e, my money. Now Lou will have to pay me back because the breeder I’m entitled to is missing! Then he’ll be out of the money he needs to keep his stock comfortable and fed—”

“That sounds like a personal problem between you and Lou,” I hissed through gritted teeth. “And if you refer to Eliza as a w***e one more time—”

“She belongs to me!” he slammed his fists on the table, sending the wine glasses crashing to the ground. “You’ll regret this—”

“Goodnight,” I said firmly, bobbing my head before glancing at Brandt.

Brandt ran his tongue along his lower lip as we walked through the dining room and through the door.

“She’s still asleep,” Archer said in a whisper as the three of us convened outside Eliza’s door. “I dropped an entire dinner tray on the ground and she didn’t even stir.”

“Good,” I breathed, running my fingers through my hair. “We need to leave, tonight—”

“He’s bluffing, Jared,” Brandt said, shaking his head. “Eliza has a meeting with him tomorrow about his collection. If he has anything that could help you—”

“I’m not putting her in danger!”

“I don’t think you’re going to have a choice in the matter,” Archer argued. “This is Eliza we’re talking about. She’s going to throw a fit about it if you say she can’t go.”

“I will carry her out of here over my shoulder if I have to,” I seethed.

Archer was right, though. I hated to admit it. Eliza would dig in her heels and force my hand.

“Aeris will pursue her even if we leave. He has scouts. They know where the village is. If we take off in the middle of the night, it puts us all at risk,” Archer said firmly. “We’re stuck.”

“We’re not stuck,” Brandt breathed. “The man from the breeder auction hasn’t seen Eliza since that night, right? If Aeris is using him as a witness to try to pressure us into leaving her behind, well... we could take care of that issue.”

“Brandt’s right, but he’s probably here with his friends, some escorts and guards, probably. But it’s nothing we can’t handle. Get that man out of the picture and Aeris has no proof that Eliza’s his breeder.”

I ran my tongue over my lower lip, seeing red. These were the same men who'd forcefully taken Eliza from the ship and tried to sell her. They were the reason she was in this mess in the first place.

"Let's go."

[Chapter 818](#)

Eliza

This was getting ridiculous.

I rolled over in bed, staring up at the darkened ceiling. This was the second time I'd slept through the day. My sleep schedule was all over the place. I was sure I'd missed out on something during the evening I spent glued to the mattress, especially since I woke to the sound of aggravated male voices whispering just outside my door.

I stepped out of bed, the muted green dress I was wearing now creased and wrinkled from sleep. I padded slowly to the door, leaning my ear against it.

"He'd be at one of the brothels in the city. Aeris wouldn't be a man that... stay here—" Jared's voice broke through the stillness of my room, his words slightly distorted by the door.

I threw open the door, much to the surprise of my murderous comrades, who snapped their necks to look at me.

"What're you talking about?" I asked, stifling a yawn. "What did I miss? You really shouldn't let me sleep like that. I know for a fact that none of you have qualms about just strolling into my room—" I tapered off, noticing the sharp expressions etched into each of the men's faces. "What happened?"

I locked eyes with Jared. He looked... terrifying. My chest squeezed as I held his gaze, willing him to explain what the hell the matter was. But something behind his eyes told me I was better off not knowing. I fought the urge to go back into my room.

Jared broke from my gaze and motioned to Brandt.

"We're going into town. Archer, stay with her. Keep the door locked."

"What? Me?"

Jared shot Archer a dirty look, then walked away without glancing back in my direction even once.

"What the hell is going on?" I bristled as Archer took me gently by the elbow and led me back into my room.

He closed the door, locking it in place before crossing the room and picking up the heavy armchair near the fireplace. I gaped at him as he carried it over to the door as if it weighed nothing, then dropped it soundly against the threshold, sitting down with his long legs outstretched.

"Archer..."

“Aeris is going to force our hands, Liz. He wants to keep you here, use you as his breeder. Jared and Brandt are trying to find a way to get you out of here without causing a war between our people and his pack.”

My mouth went dry as I backed away from him and sat on the corner of the bed, my hands folded in my lap. There was no teasing note in Archer’s voice, not a single shred of his usual mirth. He was serious. It sent a shiver down my spine as I slowly met his eyes.

“Were you really taken by force from a trading vessel?” he asked softly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I whispered.

I really didn’t. A lot had happened to me over the past few weeks, but nothing compared to that night. I could barely think about it without my body freezing up in fear.

“That’s alright, we don’t have to.” Archer shifted his weight, noticing how I was picking at my fingernails. A heavy silence settled over the room. Even the hearth, normally crackling with a warming fire, was silent.

“Tomorrow you... you will be taken to Aeris’s vault, like planned. I’ll be guarding you, but I can’t promise Aeris will let me into his vault, so you’ll be on your own for a little while.” Archer gripped his knees, fighting a smile. “You’ll need to be up to your usual games. Pull out all the stops, okay?”

I felt my own mouth twitching into a smile. “I appreciate your confidence in my ability to play the game, Arch, whatever that game is.”

“Survival. No one does it better than you. You were meant to be one of us, I think. We’re gonna make sure you’re okay, okay? I promise.”

Don’t promise me that, I thought, my heart squeezing around Archer’s words. I was one of them. I was... theirs. And they were mine. They wouldn’t let Aeris have me, and in return, I was going to do everything I could to help Jared, even if it meant letting Aeris believe I was in his clutches.

“I fought in Breles,” Archer said softly after several long minutes of silence. He seemed to be radiating pent-up energy, and I could tell he was disappointed Jared had made him stay behind with me while they were off doing whatever the hell they were doing. “I was on the front lines with the allied armies. I fought under Alpha Troy of Poldesse.”

I bit down on the homesickness threatening to spread across my face at the mention of my uncle Troy.

“That’s all I saw of your realm... the war camps, a destroyed city....” He tapered off, sighing deeply. “Did you fight?”

“No,” I breathed. “My parents said... my dad and brother fought. I stayed home with my mom, and my little sister.”

“I didn’t know you had siblings,” he said, a hint of sorrow in his voice.

“My brother is older than me. Mated, and has a son, my nephew,” I smiled tearfully. “My sister just turned eighteen. She wants to be—to be a teacher—” Tears began to roll down my cheeks as I told him

about Beatrix. I still couldn't bring myself to tell him their names. Homesickness hadn't hit me yet, but now I was drowning in it.

Archer and I walked in step together through the castle, following close behind Aeris as he rambled about nothing in particular. He was giving me a tour, apparently, no doubt trying to sweeten whatever plot to keep me here that he had roiling through his sick mind. My pale pink dress trailed behind me, long sleeves and high neckline making me feel overwhelmingly claustrophobic as we walked, and walked, and walked.

Play the game, I'd told myself as I let the maid dress me and style my hair this morning. Play the game.

Playing the game also meant pretending I wasn't nearly as intelligent as I was, according to Archer. Sure, I could know a thing or two about history and all of that, but the credit should go to my pretend late father who apparently had a soft spot for his dimwitted daughter.

We descended a wide stairwell into the depths of the castle, the air turning frigid the further we went. I tightened my grip on the crook of Archer's arm as we walked into crippling darkness for a few minutes. The only sound was that of our footsteps echoing off the stone walls.

The warrior walking ahead of Aeris produced a torch, and suddenly the area was bathed in amber light. I stifled a gasp as a huge door made of bronze rose up before us.

Aeris stepped forward with a key, chucking under his breath as he struggled with the lock.

"I haven't been down here in a very long time," he said through gritted teeth as he tried to turn the handle.

I could tell the door was incredibly heavy. I also realized he'd just given away the fact that the scroll was, in fact, a fake. If it was as valuable and old as he said it was, well, it would have been kept in here.

The warrior helped pull the door open and Aeris took a step to the side, allowing Archer and me to step through the threshold, but Aeris rested his hand on Archer's arm, halting his progress.

"Just your... expert," Aeris said in a sickly sweet voice that sent a shiver of unease licking down my back. "You and I are meant to meet up with Jared today, remember?"

Archer nodded but said nothing in return. He gave a quick look that told me everything I needed to know. Be on your guard. Go straight back to your room. Lock the door behind you.

"My warrior will stay with her and answer any question she has," Aeris continued as he turned Archer back toward the stairs.

I glanced up at the warrior, whose eyes were bloodshot and shadowed by dark circles. He smelled heavily of alcohol, too... hungover, most likely, maybe even still drunk.

"Thank you for allowing me access—" I tried to say, but Aeris was already walking back up the stairs with Archer.

Odd, I thought. I glanced at the warrior again, who swayed a bit as he motioned me into the vault. I wondered if he was going to try to lock me in here like some prized possession of Aeris, but he followed me inside, lighting torches as he went.

The room exploded in shimmers of gold. The walls were lined with shelves piled high with treasures and the floor was a mess of books, scrolls, and bags toppling over with jewels.

It was a mess in here, which caught me by surprise. There was no organization at all. Riches beyond belief were just... scattered around. I stepped over a broken vase as I walked further into the long, narrow room.

I heard something hit the ground and turned around to investigate, finding the warrior slumped against one of the columns, his chin tucked into chest as he slept.

“Good Goddess,” I breathed, slightly annoyed and entirely suspicious of the situation.

Aeris obviously thought I was bluffing. He thought I’d be more taken by the jewels and gold to pay any mind to the artifacts scattered and broken around the room.

“What a waste,” I breathed, nudging a broken icon of some kind that was laying in the middle of the floor, split in two like someone had just chucked it in here before walking away.

I spent at least an hour scanning the shelves. I wasn’t entirely sure what I was looking for. I hadn’t expected this place to be so chaotic. Finding anything related to the scroll, which I’d tucked into the waistband of my dress, seemed impossible.

But then by happenstance, I saw something peeking out of a pile of dust-covered books in the far corner of the room.

I crouched, careful not to get dust on my dress as I slowly pulled a map from the pile.

“Holy s**t,” I breathed, balancing the incredibly fragile length of fabric over my hands.

It was nearly brown with age. The map was hand-painted and so faded it was hard to make out what was on it, but I knew the symbols that bordered the map. I’d seen those same symbols on the stones in the circle. I’d seen them on the Cryptex. I’d seen them roped around Jared’s arms.

I sucked in my breath, my hands trembling. “No way—”

A faint ringing filled the room. I turned around, looking down the length of the space, but saw nothing but the warrior still asleep by the open door leading out of the vault. I gently let the map drape over one hand and rubbed my ear with the other as the ringing got louder and louder until it was impossible to ignore.

“What the hell,” I growled, closing my eyes.

A chilled draft settled over me, like someone had come up behind me and cast me in their shadow. I opened my eyes in panic, but found myself alone.

A ticking sound filled my ears through the incessant ringing. I turned toward the sound, which was coming from another pile of dust and discarded treasures. I gingerly walked toward it, my breath

catching in my throat as I crouched and used my free hand to blindly reach into the pile, pushing against books and artifacts and tangled jewelry.

My fingertips grazed against something solid, its surface colder than the room. A feeling of dread crept up my arm and made me go rigid with a crushing familiarity that had me at a loss for breath.

I curled my fingers around the third piece of Jared's Cryptex and pulled it from the pile.

[Chapter 819](#)

The trio of maids tittered around me like little songbirds. They were used to my presence now, especially since we spent nearly four days at Aeris's castle now. One of them was undoing the laces on my dress while the others tidied up my room. A lunch tray sat on the edge of my bed as I kept my hands on the desk by the windows, guarding the stolen treasures that I'd hidden in the drawer before the maids came in.

I played the role of docile, submissive, high-bred female as the maids continued their work. They gossiped as if I wasn't standing there listening to their every word.

Someone within Aeris's court was getting married soon, but there were rumors of a mistress causing issues for the betrothed couple. One of the kitchen maids had just found out she was pregnant, and was mum about who the father was. Two scullery maids had scrapped so badly one of them needed stitches and the other had a broken wrist. A warrior had been caught trying to steal from Aeris, and was currently in the dungeon, facing death.

So on, and so forth... nothing useful for my current situation, and nothing about the mystery behind Jared's whereabouts the past day.

They left the room as quickly as they'd come after dressing me in what they called a "day dress," which was really just a long skirt and tapered blouse. I let out the breath I'd been holding as I padded to the door, listening to their footsteps and chatter retreating down the hallway as I turned the lock.

I was starting to feel like a prisoner in this room. But, I was following Archer's instructions. Lock the door. Stay inside. Wait.

Wait for what, exactly?

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment as I turned back to the desk. Gray afternoon light filtered through the windows. It was raining now, little specks of water speckling the glass. I walked to the windows and cracked open one of the panes, letting the sweet scent of a wet early spring day cut through the snug room against the smell of the wood burning in the hearth.

I'd snuck both the map and the Cryptex back to the room. It had been far too easy, and I knew without a doubt that Aeris wouldn't know anything was missing. How could he? That place had been a mess. Just being in his vault had given me a terrible headache and had me choking on dust within minutes.

But I had a newfound curiosity about Aeris. Sure, he wanted to keep me here and use me as a breeder. He also had a treasure trove beneath his castle, artifacts and scrolls and books I'd never seen or heard of before. How had he acquired them? He obviously didn't know what he had.

I pursed my lips as I caught my reflection in the full-length mirror across the room.

The little demon who my mother told me was permanently fixed on my shoulder said, 'Would being his breeder really be all that bad if you had access to every shred of knowledge about the Dark Realm you desire?'

"What is wrong with you?" I told myself, shaking the thought from my mind.

I opened the desk drawer and gingerly pulled out the Cryptex, setting it on the desk before the powers within could penetrate my skin. I carefully lifted the map and laid it out flat over the desk, peering down at it.

It was a map of Egoren of course, but a very primitive version. Large chunks of the land were missing, likely unexplored during the time when the map was created. What was interesting about it was the script on the map, however.

The modern written language of the Dark Realm was the same as the Realm of Light. A few things were spelled differently or had different meanings, of course.

But the script on the map wasn't any language I'd ever seen written before.

I took the scroll from the drawer and spent the next several hours matching up the symbols on the map to the symbols on the scroll, the lunch on the edge of my bed all but forgotten.

The sky was darkening with the impending night by the time I'd confirmed my suspicions about the scroll. It was in code, a mix of two ancient written languages. I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes, blinking back fatigue and dismay. I had no tools to translate this here. Jared might have something in his study, but if he didn't?

I had no idea what I was even looking for, or why. I sighed as I flexed my aching hands. Everything would be fine once we were back in his village and out of this Goddess-forsaken city.

A knock sounded on the door. I turned around, staring at the door for a moment until Jared's voice boomed through the room.

"It's me," he said, pounding on the door again.

I bristled at the urgency in his tone as I hustled to the door, unlocking it and throwing it open. Jared had a hand resting on the doorframe, panting as he looked down at me. My body tensed with sudden desire as his eyes met mine. It was so much like the night after the ball.

But then I saw his split lip and the bruising along his jaw.

"Goddess—" I began, then yelped as he grabbed my arm and hurried me across the hallway into his room, where Brandt and Archer were waiting, all of them looking worse for wear.

I gaped at them. Archer had a black eye, and Brandt's nose was definitely broken, among a variety of other superficial injuries.

"What happened?" I exclaimed, looking from man to man before settling my gaze on Jared. "Is anyone going to tell me, or should I get used to the three of you looking like this all the time?"

"You're having dinner with Aeris tonight," Jared said, wiping a trickle of blood from his lip. "Alone."

“...Why?”

“Because we can’t be seen like this, not right now.” Jared shifted his weight like he was uncomfortable, his eyes still locked on mine. “But we’ll be nearby.”

“Who’s asinine idea was this?” I choked, looking from man to man.

“Mine,” Brandt said with a shrug.

It was said so casually that it gave me a start as I glared at him, then Archer, and then Jared.

“What’s going on? Where the hell have the three of you been—”

“You’re going to distract Aeris while we take care of some... business,” Jared said firmly as he straightened up and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Business?” I scoffed. “It looks like you’ve been taking care of business all evening.”

“The man who ran the breeder auction is here, Eliza,” Brandt said, wincing a bit as I went rigid, the blood draining from my face.

“What?” I said through gritted teeth.

“We need to know what happened to you,” Jared cut in, taking a step toward me.

I looked up at him as I chewed the inside of my cheek, then shook my head. Fear ripped through me, making every downy hair on my body stand on end. The rat-faced man was here? In the castle?

“Where is he?” I asked, unable to stop my voice from trembling.

Jared exhaled through his nose, nostrils flaring as he glanced between Archer and Brandt.

“And why are you all beat up? Was it him?”

“Tell us,” Jared commanded without answering, which was answer enough, “how you ended up at the breeder auction. The man says he has proof—”

“He doesn’t have proof,” I bit out, hugging myself. “He has the captain’s logs, but I went aboard under a false name.”

Brandt breathed a sigh of relief, but Archer and Jared kept their gazes on me, unflinching. I knew I wasn’t getting out of this, not now. How much could I tell them without giving myself, and my connections, away completely?

What would happen if Jared found out my cousin was the Luna Queen of his realm?

“I was part of a research team conducting an excavation at Dianny in the Southern Jungle, the southernmost tip of my realm.” I sucked in my breath, closing my eyes as the memories of that last day in my realm rushed back to me. “The people of Dianny were Lycaonic people. No one knew they were there until twenty-two years ago. I thought it would be an adventure, but my real desire was to explore the Dark Realm.”

“So you just packed up and came here?” Archer asked dubiously, arching his brow.

"I have... family, in the capital," I admitted, meeting Jared's eyes.

His cheeks colored momentarily but he maintained his composure, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I was told by my family in my realm that the trip was too risky for a single woman without escorts, so I was told no. They made me promise. I went anyway. I boarded a trading vessel that was docked in New Dianny and traveled through the Southern Pass into the Dark Realm."

"When and where did your ship get boarded?" Jared asked flatly, not a single shred of emotion in his voice. He was all business, but I could see the frustration flashing behind his eyes.

"I don't know where we were. It's all water, you know, between our realms. The portal is gone, I'm sure you know. They simply called it 'The Crossing,' and said it would be three days until we reached the capital city of Egoren. I went to bed that night and was woken up to an alarm going off. Everyone was running around, saying the ship was sinking. It was chaos. I got to the deck of the ship and someone grabbed me, trying to drag me. I thought they were helping me, but then I saw—I saw the ship captain. He was dead. The boat wasn't sinking. We were being boarded." I swallowed back the quiver of fear in my voice and breathed deeply for a moment, trying to steel my expression.

"I fought back. Whoever was holding me down was very rough with me and threatened to... well, he threatened to assault me, right there on the deck. A few of his men seemed keen to join in before that rat-faced man stopped them and told them not to ruin me."

Jared closed his eyes, his hands clenched into fists against his ribs.

"I told them to f**k off and someone hit me in the head with what I believe was a bat," I continued, absently running my fingers along the base of my skull. "I woke up days later, I guess. I don't really know. I don't remember anything between that moment and waking up in a room, by myself. The rat-faced man called me by the fake name I'd used to board the ship, which is why I think he has the captain's logs."

"So, you didn't know you were at an auction until you were on stage?" Brandt asked, his own naturally calm composure cracking as I nodded.

"I had no idea where I was or why."

"That's enough," Jared breathed as he glanced between Archer and Brandt, nodding and flicking his hand.

Archer and Brandt immediately left the room, leaving Jared and me alone.

"What is this all about?" I practically begged, still hugging myself so tightly my fingers were pinching my skin.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before, what those men tried to do to you?"

"Why? So you could track them down and kill them? What good would it have done, Jared? I'm here now. I'm helping you. I don't care—"

"Aeris means to use you as a breeder, Eliza. That man, Lou, has sworn that you are the same woman from the auction and the fact is that he's right. The truth doesn't matter in this situation."

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

“You said you have family in the capital,” he said, ignoring my question completely. “Who, exactly? A man who can claim you?”

“What do you mean, claim me? Like property?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“What the hell are you getting at?”

“Can anyone in this realm claim you other than Aeris?”

“No,” I said, although it was a lie.

Xander and Lena could claim me as family. Lena would be ripping the realm apart to find me if she knew I was here. I wasn’t going to involve them in my mess, but I understood the urgency of the situation. I was slowly starting to wrap my head around what the men meant when they spoke of the “Old Laws.” I’d heard whispers of a tense political landscape in this realm.

I knew in my bones that if Aeris truly meant to keep me here, he’d do whatever he needed to do to make that happen.

Jared stepped forward, one hand outstretched in surrender.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” he said, and I could tell he meant it. “I need you to trust me. I need you to distract him, just for an evening.”

[Chapter 820](#)

I watched Aeris over the rim of my wine glass. He was dressed almost casually in a vest and white shirt, his thick golden hair and beard trimmed, but still slightly ruffled. He wasn’t a terrible-looking man by any means. Those eyes were strange, yes. But he was handsome, and he had a rather friendly face.

But I could see the strain and frustration behind his eyes as he cut into his steak and forked a piece of it into his mouth. He’d be surprised when I was the only one who showed up to dinner in his formal dining room, which he’d obviously taken great lengths to decorate with hot-house flowers and a dinner spread meant for an Alpha King.

But it was uncomfortably intimate with just the two of us.

“Play the game,” I’d been told by Jared.

Why me? What the hell were those men up to, anyway?

“What a pleasure it is to have you alone for an evening, darling,” he mused, tilting his wine glass against his lips.

I blinked at him for a moment, barely registering what he’d just said as I was so lost in thought, but gave him a tight smile nonetheless.

“Were you expecting company?” I asked, waving my hand in a short circle.

“Your companions, of course. I had something I wanted to discuss with Jared.”

“Ah,” I smiled, rolling my eyes. “Jared is quite ill. Archer and Brandt are useless without his direction. I do appreciate having you alone, however. I didn’t want to waste the opportunity to thank you for allowing me access to your vault. Jared isn’t nearly as interested in these things as I am.” A lie, of course.

“And how did you find it?”

I took a deep breath against the flush of unease rippling over my skin. How did I find his vault? Or how did I find the Cryptex?

Surely he knew Jared was looking for it, especially if he knew Jared as well as he said he did.

“A bit... messy,” I replied, flashing him what I hoped was a charming smile. “Tell me, how did you come across so many jewels?”

That was exactly what he wanted to hear from me. He wanted to prove I had no interest in the artifacts and books scattered haphazardly around the vault. He wanted to prove that I was just some bright-eyed, submissive female who could be bought for the right price.

Play the game, I told myself over and over. Keep him occupied.

But I wasn’t entirely sure what game Jared was wanting me to play.

“You like jewels, then?”

“Oh, yes. What woman doesn’t?” I batted my eyelashes at him, which he seemed to adore.

His face softened a bit as he grinned and poured us both another serving of wine.

“Did you find anything in particular you liked the best? I could take you there after dinner. You can have whatever you like.”

I wanted the books... the scrolls... the artifacts, even the broken ones.

“That’s not necessary, but thank you,” I replied, forcing myself to blush. “Jared keeps me well supplied and paid, I assure you.”

“But as a gift—”

I shook my head, sipping my wine.

Aeris pursed his lips, looking somewhat annoyed as he glanced at the door to the dining room.

“Are you expecting someone else?” I asked, my stomach tying in a knot.

“Yes, actually. It’s rather odd that he’s not here.” Aeris turned back to me, studying my face for a moment.

I prayed to whoever was listening that my expression was neutral.

“He?” The rat-faced man who’d hit me in the head with a bat, I guessed. I also guessed that that was exactly the business Jared was taking care of tonight, probably finishing the job.

I exhaled through my nose, draining the rest of my wine. Aeris absentee refilled my wine glass. The wine was already turning my cheeks a ruddy pink. I could feel it. I told myself to stop, to not drink anymore. I was more likely to get "mouthy" with some liquid courage, which is exactly what Jared had told me not to do, but....

"Do you really believe I'm the breeder your brother Ambrose bought at the auction?"

Aeris choked on his wine, his eyes watering. I arched my brows, swirling my wine as I watched him compose himself.

"My dear—"

"It's rather offensive, Alpha," I said curtly, lingering and drawing out the word Alpha with a hint of annoyance that made his face twist with shock. "I am high born. My father is likely rolling over in his grave right now knowing his daughter is being accused as such."

"What I don't understand," he began, his tone sharpened to an edge, "is what you're doing with the likes of Jared if any of that is true?"

"I already told you," I said innocently. "I'm cataloging his—"

"Do you know what he is?" he asked, his eyes like frosted amber as he ran his finger in a line across the table. "Who he is?"

I waved my hand in dismissal, shaking my head. "A Dark Lord? Of course."

"The Dark Lord," he corrected. "The true heir to the throne of Egoren."

My chest squeezed as I caught the look of pure, unadulterated menace flash behind his eyes. What the hell had he meant by that?

My confusion must have shown on my face plain as day because he smiled, continuing, "Many Alphas of the west are interested in overthrowing King Alexander now that he brought home a White Queen from the Realm of Light as his bride. The Luna of Egoren, a White Queen, can you believe it? Lycaon's most hated enemy was a White Queen... the reason he brought our people to this sacred place. I've even heard rumors she is masquerading as the Moon Goddess reincarnate! What a travesty. King Alexander should be hung by the castle walls with his wife and their children for such treachery, and I'm not the only one who feels that way."

I was fighting for breath as much as I was fighting for a response.

"Jared won't consider leading our forces to the capitol and overthrowing his brother," Aeris sighed before drinking deeply from his wine glass. "But maybe... you and I can strike a deal. What do you say? Our forces are ready to invade. Jared just needs to give the order. You can go, freed from my possession, if Jared agrees to take his rightful place—"

"N-no—"

"No?" he laughed, furrowing his brow. An awkward silence settled over the table as he tapped his fingers on his glass. "Are you sure?"

“Yes. He’s-he’s not the brother—” I stuttered, Aeris’s breathy sigh cutting through my words.

“The hard way, then,” he sighed, rolling his eyes. “My friend who was supposed to come to dinner tonight had some interesting information about you, Eliza. I find it hard to believe a woman such as yourself is a product of being raised this far west, or even in this realm at all. Even with a more... progressive father. You are far too educated and ill-mannered to be a high-bred lady from any of my neighboring territories, which leads me to believe I am correct in my assumption that you are, in fact, nothing more than a whore.”

“How dare—”

“Did you know that someone on the trading vessel was kept alive for questioning by the pirates who boarded it? They tortured him for days.” Aeris grinned, pouring himself another glass of wine. His lips and teeth were stained red now, making him look like some unearthly creature sent from hell to set me on edge. “He mentioned a girl had snuck aboard and only gave her name when the captain of the ship was about to turn the boat around and take her back to the port. This man is still alive, and will arrive in my territory very soon to confirm you are who I think you are.”

I chewed the inside of my lower lip, keeping my eyes fixed on his despite the fear tightening my throat.

“He described you, just like the man from the breeder auction had... the curls, the blue-green eyes... that filthy mouth and hot temper!”

I sucked in my breath and tilted my chin toward the ceiling in preparation for whatever fight was coming my way. Filthy mouth? He’d hadn’t seen anything yet, that was for damn sure.

“You’re mine by law, and I’m not letting you leave. That’s final. I want boys out of you, a few of them.” He threw his napkin on the table, motioning to me as he rose to his feet. “Lift your skirts and bend over. We’re doing this now.”

“How dare you speak to me in such a way!” I shouted, rising from the table.

I slammed my wine glass down, shattering the stem of the glass and slicing open the palm of my hand. Fear ripped the air from my lungs as Aeris began to loosen his belt, his knuckles white with tension.

“The only man who can command me to do anything is my husband,” I sneered, clenching my injured hand into a bloody fist as I backed away from him. “You are not my Alpha, and I am not your breeder. I am your GUEST.”

“Your husband?”

Well, that caught him off-guard. I hadn’t meant to say it. I didn’t know why I had. But there was no going back now.

“Of course,” I sniffed, screwing my face into a scowl. “Jared.” I took a step back, noticing the unfiltered fury coloring his face.

“You’re lying,” he hissed, straightening to his full height.

“Ask him,” I croaked, desperately trying to keep my voice level. I might have taken this too far, but what else could I say?

He bared his teeth at me, looking absolutely feral.

I turned and darted for the door, sure he was hot on my heels. But he hadn't followed. My shoes clacked against the marble floor as I ran for our wing of the castle, little droplets of blood falling from my hand.

s**t, s**t, s**t.

I was shaking with mingled shock and fury as Brandt deftly wound a bandage around my hand. Jared was pacing back and forth across his bedroom, his arms crossed and head bent as he mulled over my retelling of what had happened over dinner.

Brandt tied the bandage a little too tight, pinching my skin.

"Ouch!" I hissed, swatting him away. Tears welled in my eyes as I took a choking breath. "Why the hell did you make me do that? Why send me there alone?"

"We were a bit busy," Archer replied, his voice graveling like he'd recently bitten down on his tongue.

All of the men looked like hell and were covered in mud and soaked with rain.

"What exactly were you up to while I was fighting for my life? Hm?" I spat, rage blurring my senses.

Jared stopped pacing and gave Archer an exhausted glance, shaking his head as if commanding him not to tell me.

"Start talking, now!"

Jared turned his gaze to me, his eyes shining in the firelight. No one spoke.

I heaved a breath, running my tongue over my bottom teeth as I shook my head.

"It doesn't matter. We're leaving tomorrow," he said, breaking the uncomfortable silence as I continued to recover from my shock.

"What exactly are you trying to accomplish here, Jared? Do you know what he told me? He said you were the Alpha King's brother, and that he wanted you to overthrow the King because you're the rightful heir to the throne. He wanted to make a deal with me so you'd do it. He said he'd let me go if you agreed. This is all too much."

I expected him to be shocked and offended, but he only looked at me, his face void of expression.

"And what did you say to that?"

"I said no, of course. Because you're not—you're not the Alpha King's brother." I didn't sound all that convinced of it myself. I looked at him like I was seeing him for the first time, remembering how I'd found him so familiar when we first met... the eyes, the golden skin... the hair.

I flushed, my heart beginning to thunder in my chest. But before I could summon the courage to ask if it was true, he took a step toward me, furrowing his brow.

"Then what happened?"

“He told me he had proof I was on the boat. He has a witness, apparently.”

“We killed his witness. Lou, the man from the breeder auction, and his cronies. That’s what we were doing. We just got rid of his body,” Archer said so casually it made me sick to my stomach.

“He has another witness, someone from the boat, someone who could identify me.”

“And?” Jared said, and while his face remained a mask of calm reserve, his eyes were alight with apprehension despite his best efforts to hide it.

I pursed my lips into a tight line.

“I told him you were my husband.”

A hush fell over the room, broken a few seconds later by a choking laugh from Archer.

“Why would you say that?” Jared asked, his tone clipped and deathly serious.

I opened my mouth to explain in whatever way I could, but it was Brandt who spoke next.

“That’s brilliant,” he murmured, his blue eyes glassy as he lost himself in thought for a moment.

“What?” Jared snarled, his eyes settling on Brandt for a moment before turning back to me.

I felt a wave of heat rush down my spine as he held my gaze.

“That’s—that’s actually how we’re going to get her out of here, Jared... marriage... a marriage contract.”