

Kings Breeder 821

[Chapter 821](#)

For once in my life, I was at a loss for words.

I couldn't do more than stare at Jared, who was staring back at me. I was sure our expressions were identical, full of disbelief, concern, regret... maybe even some underlying deeply rooted longing that had led us into bed after the ball. But still, this was insane.

"That temple in the city, near the wall... it wouldn't be hard to pay off the priest. Archer and I saw him at a tavern on our first night here," Brandt continued. Now he was the one pacing. "We'd have to back-date it, of course. By six months to a year at least—"

"No," Jared and I said in unison, cutting him off.

"This is our best option," Brandt continued, tapping his fingertips on his thigh. "Our only option."

"Why would pretending to be married help our situation?" I asked, rising from the chair I'd been sitting in and crossing my arms over my chest. My hand burned from where I'd sliced it open. I winced a bit as I tucked it into the crook of my elbow, hoping the pressure would ease some of the pain. I glanced at Jared, who was looking down at me, an apologetic look on his face.

"Because a marriage contract would say you were in Jared's possession before the breeder auction. Aeris would have no case to claim you."

"This is archaic—"

"This is the Dark Realm," Archer interrupted.

"Any attack on us or our village would be direct violence instead of retaliation for theft," Brandt added as he came to a stop in front of the hearth. "It's... it's a solid plan."

"Would the contract hold up in her realm?" Jared asked, shifting his weight as he leaned against the footboard of his bed.

"No, not likely. Not unless there are Lycaonic churches in her realm."

"There aren't," I chimed in, slightly vexed that they were speaking as if I wasn't in the room with them.

Jared looked over at me, studying my face. I knew I'd dug myself into a hole the second I'd told Aeris I was Jared's wife. I felt like an i***t now, but it was the only thing I could think to say that would stop him from forcibly trying to assault me right there on the dining room table.

"I'm sorry, Jared."

"None of this is your fault."

"I was the one who said you were my husband. It sounds like my fault."

Jared turned to Archer and Brandt, both of whom bobbed their heads and abruptly left the room. He'd probably told them to leave over mindlink. Being alone with him now felt... somewhat unbearable. I felt nothing but guilt, and shame, and unease as I slowly turned to face him, the room going still.

"It would just be a business transaction," he began, absently running his fingers along the wood grain on the footboard. "It wouldn't mean anything else."

"We'd still be married according to the law of your realm."

"Yes, we would. You'd be my wife, and I'd protect and honor you as such, but I wouldn't expect you to share my bed or give me children."

I inhaled, his words hitting me like a ton of bricks.

"I can't," I exhaled, looking straight into his eyes, his dark irises glinting with amber in the reflection of the muted light of the chandelier. "I made a mistake when I said that to Aeris. I wasn't thinking. It shouldn't be your responsibility."

"You were right to say it. Brandt's correct; it's the only way. With a marriage contract signed by a priest, especially one he wouldn't know personally, we could walk out of here tomorrow. You'd be free of him, forever."

"But we'd be married—"

"Are you not okay with that?"

"I'm not okay with you marrying me because you feel like you have to. I messed up—"

"I messed up by thinking Aeris wouldn't behave like the beast that he is until he had us totally backed into a corner—"

"You can't marry me!" I cried, cutting him off.

Jared exhaled, nostrils flaring as he looked into my eyes. He pushed off the headboard, taking a few steps in my direction until we were standing only a few feet apart.

"Why not?" he asked, his tone softening.

"Because you don't want to—"

"What if I did? If it means walking out of here with you—"

"This is a terrible reason to marry someone!" I tried to take a step away from him but he closed the distance between us, his eyes flashing with sudden frustration.

"I'm marrying you to make you my property—"

My brows furrowed. He just stared at me, cold and expressionless.

"Do you want to stay here and be Aeris's breeder, to give him the heirs he so desires? Or do you want to see your family and realm again?"

"I just wanted to help you break your curse."

"And I want to keep you alive and out of Aeris's f*****g bed!"

I swallowed back whatever reply was on the tip of my tongue. I gave myself a moment to compose myself, tilting my chin toward him. We were only inches apart, looking into each other's eyes... sizing each other up, more like it.

"You're beautiful when you're scared," he said, one corner of his mouth twitching like he was holding back a smile.

"I'm not scared," I lied.

"You are," he replied, leaning in a little closer. My heart quickened despite my best efforts. He sensed this, I was sure, because he straightened up, tucking his hands in his pockets as he took a step away from me. The air around me felt chilled without his body so near. I shivered, glowering up at him.

"This is insane," I said, shaking my head. "We can't—why can't you just... buy me? Aeris believes I'm his because he purchased me at the auction—"

"That contract," he said, "trumps all contracts pertaining to ownership. This is a sacred bond designated by Lycaon himself when it's done in a church. Even Aeris knows that, and can't do anything about it once it's done. You'd be mine. You'd have the protection of my body, my name, and my people, even if it is under false pretenses."

"Isn't there anyone else you'd rather marry?" I said, a little breathless.

I hated the way my voice cracked with emotion as I spoke the words. This was a serious thing we were doing. There was no going back once it was done.

"I never wanted to marry," he said with deep regret. I swallowed painfully past the lump forming in my throat.

"I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused."

"This isn't about you, Eliza. This is between me and Aeris—"

"But I'm stuck in the middle, and now you're being forced to marry me just to save me from being a breeder. You already saved me from that fate once."

"I'd do it again, and again—"

"I can't. I won't let you bind yourself to me like this," I said, cutting him off.

"I killed for you today," he breathed, taking another step toward me. "I keep you housed, and fed, and protected. Nothing would change. It would just be a piece of paper that will tell anyone who tries to take you from me again that you're mine."

"But I'm not yours. You don't want me—"

He closed the distance between us in a single step. I pressed my back against the door, taken by surprise.

"Don't tell me what I want and don't want, Eliza. You have no idea—"

"I can't marry you. Not even if it's fake."

“It’s happening—”

“No, it’s not. You’ve done enough—”

“I’m not letting Aeris have you, and that’s final. I’m responsible for you. I don’t care what you think about it, either.”

“I’m going to leave,” I whispered. “I’m going to leave this city and find my way—”

“Where, exactly, could you possibly go?”

“Why do you care? You only need me to break your curse, and it doesn’t even seem like you’re all that interested in doing that!”

“I care,” he growled, leaning his head down so the tip of his nose brushed against mine. “And knowing Aeris put you through that tonight makes me want to rip him to shreds.”

“Why don’t you just kill him?” I asked. I couldn’t believe the words were even coming out of my mouth so easily.

“Because he’s not the worst of the Alphas in this realm. I’d be obligated to take over his pack, and the other Alphas would welcome it. I have no interest in any of that.”

“Aeris said you were the brother of the Alpha King. Is that true?”

“Why would the Alpha King’s brother be a bounty hunter?”

I pursed my lips, looking up into his eyes. The bandage on his cheek was bloody, and I could see the bruising fanning over the bridge of his nose.

But that familiarity was still there.

He looked like Xander.

But, I’d only met Xander a few times. The last time I’d seen him was at his wedding to my cousin Lena. I’d been sitting next to his cousins, two young women around my age, and their parents during the ceremony. They were all from this realm, all from the Capital. Theo was their father’s name, I was sure, and he was Xander’s uncle. He was a Dark Lord, as well.

My original assumption that Jared could be some far-flung cousin related to the royal family could be true. It wasn’t a total stretch.

Especially since I was related to the royals in my realm in the exact same way.

Maybe we were more alike than I thought.

“I swear to you,” he said, breaking me from my thoughts, “that I’ll get you out of here.”

“I know,” I replied, a little breathless. I could hear his heart beating in his chest, his body only inches from mine. The past few days had passed in a blur of activity and stress. I’d barely had a moment to think about what had happened between us after the ball. That night felt like a lifetime ago, but it all came rushing back to me as he took my hand in his, squeezing gently.

"I swear to you," he continued, "that you'll be safe with me. I'll find a way to get you home to your realm even if I have to take you there myself."

I looked down at his knuckles, bloodied and bruised.

"I don't want to go home yet."

"I know. I'm not sure I want you to, either."

I looked up at him, my heart leaping in my chest.

"This marriage is just on paper. I promise I won't... we won't, you know. That wouldn't be part of it."

"Sleep together?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, his lips pressed into a firm line.

"This is just business, Eliza."

"Are you sure?" I asked, not recognizing my voice.

Jared looked down at me, eyes shining with silent longing that he didn't try to hide. His grip on my hand tightened as he pressed me against the door, gritting his teeth like he was fighting against the same growing desire roiling in my own body.

"You're making this really hard already," he said, a soft laugh escaping his lips that instantly lifted the tension tying my body into knots.

I ran my thumb over his knuckles, gently so as to not hurt him further.

"As your pretend wife," I smiled, "is one of my duties tending your wounds?"

He kissed me so fully it took my breath away, my whole body pressed against the door as his body covered mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss and gasping for breath as fever rushed through me, making my skin ache to be touched.

He pulled away, taking several steps away from me as he brushed the back of his hand over his mouth, panting.

"Jared?" I whispered, noticing the internal struggle taking place behind his eyes. He was... fighting... fighting for control. "What's wrong—"

I took a step toward him, but he put his hand out, shaking his head.

"Don't come near me," he said frantically through gritted teeth. "N-not right now. Give me a minute."

I looked down at his feet, seeing that shadow of darkness snaking up his legs, little tendrils of pure night curling and fanning out as it wrapped itself around him.

"Get out of here, now!"

"No," I said firmly, meeting his eyes. "No, I won't. I'm not afraid."

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I reached behind me and turned the lock into place, narrowing my eyes at Jared, who was baring his teeth at me.

"I said get out!" he repeated.

"What is that thing?" I asked, ignoring the urgency in his tone.

I'd just told him I wasn't afraid. I hadn't been afraid of him the night after the ball, but this was a little different. I suddenly wondered if the intensity of our coupling had more to do with this power of his, this curse, than his own desires.

He was standing with his legs apart, his body firmly rooted as he tried to reign that shadow of power back in. I could see the desperation in his eyes, maybe even a flicker of pain as his jaw clenched, his eyes still fixed firmly on mine.

"My powers," he said after a moment. "My... dark powers. I'm losing control of them because of the curse."

"What does it feel like?" I asked, running my fingertips over the footboard of the bed as I walked toward him. He backed away from me, shaking his head.

"Eliza, stop," he commanded.

"What does it want right now?" I asked, coming to a stop a few feet away from him.

Jared ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, narrowing his eyes at me in a way that sent a burst of heat down my spine.

"You," he said, almost casually.

I pursed my lips, trying to look unaffected even though my blood was hammering in my ears. I thought of Lena and Xander for a moment, wondering if Xander's power, his shadow, or whatever they called this thing, made Xander behave like this.

The Xander I'd known was poised and polite, not a rough-and-tumble outlaw like Jared. But Xander also wasn't cursed.

"I'm flattered," I said lightly, blinking up at him.

"Take this seriously, please," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't control this thing like I used to be able to—"

"What is it, exactly?"

"Just a... pulse, something within me that should be in balance with my wolf, but it's not... not anymore, not since you showed up."

"Me? How is this my fault? I thought you said—"

"The curse," he panted, running his fingers through his hair, "is taking my wolf powers from me. Every day they get less and less. That shadow? It's stronger than ever and it's tearing at my soul with each passing day. But when I'm with you? It wants... out. It wants you. I don't know what that means—"

“So, it likes me?” I teased, but Jared wasn’t in the mood, not at all.

“It’s not some entity—Eliza, listen to me, please. That night in my study when I pushed you against the desk? These powers just... took control. It took every ounce of my willpower to reign it in.”

“After the ball?”

“That—that was me, mostly. I promise—”

“Do you remember what... what you’re doing when it takes over?”

“Of course,” he breathed, exhaling deeply as the shadow gave up and turned to fine mist before disappearing completely. “I wouldn’t let it hurt you. I wouldn’t let myself give into it like that.”

“Is it like this with everyone?”

He moved the armchair by the fireplace, tossing a log on the fire before sitting down. I could see the hair on his arms were raised with a chill, and he shivered involuntarily as he rested his elbows on the seat rest and hung his head in his hands.

“No, just you.”

I gingerly walked up to him, standing before him for a moment before dropping to my knees, taking his chilled fingers in mine.

“You’re freezing,” I whispered, curling my hands around just one of his.

He said nothing to this, but allowed me to touch him and be close to him for a moment, which felt like a win.

“I want you to stay away from me from now on—”

“No,” I grinned. “I’m not going to do that. We’re husband and wife, remember?”

“Eliza, why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I’m not afraid of your shadow demon or whatever the hell it’s called. I don’t think it wants to hurt me. I don’t think you or your wolf will let it, either.”

“If I were to hurt you, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I already told you,” I said in a breath tinged with annoyance. “You can’t hurt me.”

This was the part where I should have told him he couldn’t hurt me because I had just a pinch of White Queen blood tumbling through my veins. I’d heard the rumors of course, the talk that circulated during the weeks after Xander and Lena’s wedding. I’d met Soren and Ciana, Ciana having married Theo, one of the most notorious Dark Kings in Egoren’s history.

Ciana and Theo had been able to, uh, be together for the same reason Jared and I could.

Soren was saved from death by a drop of my great aunt Rosalie’s blood. My mother’s life had been spared by the same life-giving source by Maeve, Rosalie’s daughter.

I was one of the blessed few who carried a piece of the White Queens with me, even if I wasn't one myself.

I should probably have told him, right?

"Can I put something on your knuckles before the wounds get infected, please?" I said softly, looking up into his eyes.

He gave me a tight nod, his jaw tight with tension. I resisted the urge to reach out and cup his cheek, to comfort him. I was doing everything I could to remain calm and steady as it was.

I stood and grabbed a box of bandages off the desk on the far side of the room.

"There's alcohol on the dresser," he said, leaning back in his chair.

I glanced at him, seeing the lines of stress fading from his face. He had some color in his cheeks again, and he was slowly flexing his hands out of the tight fists that had been causing his knuckles to bleed only moments before.

I soaked a rag with alcohol and walked back over to him. He breathed deeply as I knelt between his knees and took his injured hand in mine.

He didn't even flinch as I dabbed at his wounds.

"Do you enjoy beating the living hell out of yourself on a regular basis?" I quipped, giving him a narrow-eyed look.

"More so when I have someone between my knees," he teased, bringing his legs together and squeezing me.

I pressed the rag into his skin with a little more pressure and he winced, baring his teeth at me. His eyes were soft, however.

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Liza. I... I did want to kiss you."

"You didn't have to stop."

I was in an incredibly vulnerable position down there, resting between his legs. Well, he was even more vulnerable, and we both knew it. He reached out with his free hand to brush a curl from my shoulder, his fingers lingering on my blouse long enough for his touch to send a ripple of electricity down my spine.

"Did I shock you?"

"You felt it too?" I looked up at him just as his eyes drifted back to my face. I slowly released my hold on his injured hand to reach back for the bandages, but his fingers against my palm stopped me.

Time slowed to a crawl as he gently took me by the wrist and brushed a kiss on the palm of my hand. Maybe I said his name, I wasn't sure, because he stole it with a kiss on my lips, leaning forward to meet me halfway.

I could have cried at the gentleness of it because I knew how hard he was trying to keep it that way.

I rose up on my knees, slowly, sheltered in the warmth and smell of him as he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me into his lap so I was straddling him.

The scent of leather and fresh parchment consumed me. I breathed deeply, tilting my head back as he brushed a kiss against my neck, just below my ear.

"I can't promise I won't hurt you," he breathed, one hand splayed wide over my back. "But I'll try."

"I'm not afraid of you," I said, my voice edged with a plea as he popped open the buttons of my blouse with his free hand. "I'll never be afraid of you."

He made a low, very male noise in his voice as he pulled my shirt free of my body, my breasts heavy and aching for his touch.

"Do you ever wear a bra?" he whispered against my skin.

"No," I giggled. I couldn't help it as his thumb grazed over my ribs. "That tickles!"

He tickled me on purpose, and I screeched, swatting him away.

But I stilled when I caught the fleeting look on his face, a look that had the ability to shatter my heart into pieces. It was a real smile, a boyish one... a smile that gave me the briefest of glimpses of the man Jared used to be before his curse started to chip away at him. I caressed his cheek, tears welling in my eyes as I bent my head to kiss him.

"No underwear either?" he whispered a few minutes later as his fingers grazed my inner thighs.

I didn't have the words to respond. I was already lost in his touch, my forehead resting against his as he slid his fingers through my core. He let out a soft groan, his body tensing as he slid his fingers inside of me. I stole the sound with another kiss.

My long skirt was gathered around my thighs, trailing on the ground behind me as I moved against his touch. I knew he was watching me. I could feel his gaze on my face even with my eyes closed. There was something incredibly erotic about it, if I was being honest. I reached down between us, feeling his c**k hard and straining against his pants. He sucked in his breath, whispering my name as I fought with the button and zipper until I freed him.

"I want you," I whined, barely recognizing my own voice.

He gathered me to him, kissing me so soundly I was seeing stars as he lifted me up and walked me over to the bed. I half expected him to just toss me over the footboard, but he paused, his hands running over the curve of my hips before unclasping my skirt and letting it fall around my ankles.

I reached out to finish taking off his pants but he grabbed my wrist... tightly.

I looked up into his eyes. He closed them, opening his mouth to tell me to leave again, I was sure. I could feel that shadow again. I could feel those powers roiling through his blood as I placed my hand on his chest.

"Let me lead," I whispered, swallowing back my sudden apprehension.

He'd told me to submit during our dance at the ball. Now it was his turn. I pulled his pants down, struggling with the fabric as I tried to push it down over his thick, muscular thighs. He was truly a work of art. I took a step backward, admiring him for a moment. He opened one eye, watching me watching him.

"You're in control, Jared," I reminded him, then stood on my tiptoes to kiss him.

We fell into the bed a few moments later, Jared beneath me while I straddled him. He ran his hands over my thighs, murmuring under his breath and gasping as I slid down on top of him, arching my back as white-hot pleasure blossomed over my stomach.

He guided my movements for a while, his hands gripping my hips hard enough to leave marks. I barely noticed. I was focused on his face, those dark eyes looking up at me as I reached down to rub my clit.

"Eliza," he groaned, baring his teeth, and tilted his head back as I picked up the pace.

I bent forward, balancing my forearms on his shoulders as I kissed him, my fingers tangled in my hair.

I held this position for several long, delicious minutes until we were both trembling with overwhelming desire. He was holding firm, keeping a leash on the shadow that was no doubt begging him to be released.

I slowed down to a teasing, aching slow pace, and then I finally gave control back to him, and the beast that lived within.

But to my surprise, he kept that shadow buried as he flipped me over onto my back and ground his hips against mine, every thrust tailored to where I needed him the most.

I came, and came, and came.

And when it was all said and done, I laid in his arms, sheltered by his normal fevered warmth.

"It doesn't have the power over you that you think it does," I whispered against his skin, but he was already asleep, holding me to him.

I closed my eyes, ready for whatever came next.

[Chapter 823](#)

Jared

I watched her examine the new Cryptex, turning it over in the sunlight pouring through the window. She was holding it with her hand wrapped in a towel, using the end of her toothbrush to gently prod the sides, looking for the mechanisms that cause the connective pieces to spring loose.

Watching her work was intoxicating. I'd never seen someone so wholly focused on a single task. The way she examined the Cryptex was intrinsic, practically second nature. My movements in the background didn't seem to bother her at all as I packed up our things in preparation for our journey home.

The weight I'd been carrying on my shoulders since arriving at Aeris's kingdom was lifting as the early morning hours ticked by. It was likely Eliza and I could walk right out of this place now. All I'd have to do

was tell Aeris that Eliza was my wife, and show him the contract Archer had delivered to me before the sun had come up, signed by a now very wealthy priest and undated

I'd made sure to cover our tracks.

The priest was a follower of the older church, a more pagan sect of the Church of Lycaon. Aeris wouldn't recognize the man's name, I knew that much, not when he favored the startlingly wealthy and pompous preachers of the new-wave church situated on his castle's property. The priest's temple was situated on the outskirts of the city, built against and within the wall leading to the villages beyond. I told Eliza about it as we lounged in bed before the sun rose, my fingers trailing over her bare skin.

We were safe.

Eliza sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping as she gently set the Cryptex on the table.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I shrugged on my leathers.

"It wants me to touch it," she said on a breath, shaking her head. "It won't open for me otherwise."

"Don't worry about it for now. We can deal with it when we get back to the village," I replied, hoping this was enough to break her concentration so she could get dressed and ready to go. She turned to look at me over her shoulder, a soft, somewhat sleepy smile touching the corners of her mouth in reply.

"We're getting out of here, alright? Everything is going to be okay."

I prayed I was right.

There was a sharp knock on the door, then Archer's voice broke through the air.

"Are you ready? We should get going."

I exhaled and opened the door a crack, meeting Archer's gaze. The corridor outside my bedroom was still dark, not a hint of early morning yet dancing over the marble tiles.

"The southern trail?" I asked, meeting his eyes. I could hear Eliza moving around the room behind me, the sound of fabric hitting the floor making me tighten my grip on the door as I held it as closed as possible without shutting Archer out completely.

"Passable from what I saw. The river is still running high but if we're careful—" he shrugged, a faraway look in his eyes.

"Okay, we'll try." I reached out into the corridor and gripped his shoulder.

He swallowed, his throat straining from the effort.

"Scarlett's boy," he murmured, then shook his head. "He was here recently, with his father. They were heading back east shortly before we arrived from the intel I gathered in the city. I could—"

"We'll get across the river and you can go east," I said, nodding my assent. He pursed his lips, giving me a quick nod in return. "We're going to get out of here, I promise."

Archer's cheek dimpled as he began to grin, then arched his brow at me.

"How're things with your blushing bride?"

I glowered at him as I shut the door. I heard him chuckle as he turned and walked away.

Eliza made a noise of annoyance in her throat as I turned around, finding her dressed for our journey. Aeri's maids had obviously gotten rid of the pants, shirt, and boots she'd been wearing when we arrived at his castle. I'd found her new clothes, and I found that they suited her well as she moved around the room and packed her notes and the Cryptex into a leather backpack—khaki trousers that were still far too long for her were cuffed several times, resting just above the boots she was now wearing. A leather belt was cinched around her waist, the dagger I'd given her sheathed along her thigh. Her airy white shirt was tucked into her belt, billowing out around her arms and chest, giving me a glimpse of an hourglass figure. Seeing a woman in pants was strange, but she was stunning.

Her hair was tied back from her face with a ribbon made of coarse homespun fabric, loose curls falling over her forehead and ears. She lifted the backpack, testing its weight before putting it on her back and turning to me.

"Are we ready?"

"Yeah," I said, stifling the emotion threatening to break around my reply.

She smiled up at me, her cheeks tinged a soft rose and her eyes shone like sea glass in the morning light pouring through the windows. I wanted to reach out and brush my knuckles over her skin, but clenched my hand into a fist at my side instead.

Last night had been... I couldn't describe it. Unreal? I was fighting against what I believed to be true feelings for her as I made a final round around the room, making sure we weren't leaving anything behind.

Even though she was my wife, at least on paper, she wasn't really mine. As much as it killed me, I needed to keep her at a distance until I could find a way to return her to her own people. That shadow of power within me clawed at me for what felt like hours while she was in my bed. If I lost my control of it, for good....

She couldn't be here for that. She had to go home. I had to let her go and it was killing me.

"We can get breakfast in the city before we take to the road," I said as I led Eliza out of the room and through our wing of the castle.

I heard Archer and Brandt's voices drifting up the stairwell as we turned and began to walk to the center of the castle, planning on walking right out the front door.

"Leaving so soon?" Aeri's voice cut through the air behind us as we reached Archer and Brandt at the bottom of the stairs.

My fingers knitted in Eliza's as I gently pulled her into my side, turning us around to face him as the Alpha started down the stairs.

"I had a whole day planned!"

"It's time for us to go," I said firmly, unease rippling in my chest as I felt Eliza go rigid beside me. "Thank you for your hospitality, Aeri."

“We’ll discuss this on the way to the Spring Festival,” he said with a wave of his hand, heated annoyance playing over his face as his strange eyes focused on mine. He glanced at Eliza, then back to me, his eyes narrowed. “Come, walk in step with me, Jared. Your companions can show Eliza the way.”

I gritted my teeth into a smile of assent and gently pushed Eliza toward Archer. She stumbled, Archer catching and steadying her. She looked up at me with a look that made my throat contract. I saw fear.

“Come, Jared. We have matters to discuss.”

I tore my gaze away to meet the eyes of Archer and Brandt. The expression on my face was enough to convey my own silent thoughts. If anything happens, get her out. Get her out and run.

I fell in step with Aeris as we walked out into the front garden, the gates leading into the city looming in the distance. I could see tents and a crowd beginning to gather. Eliza and my men walked ahead of us, getting further and further away with every step that they took.

“What did you want to discuss?” I asked as Aeris as I walked slowly toward the gate. I chewed the inside of my cheek as Eliza fell out of eyesight. I didn’t like this, not at all.

“You really thought I’d just let you walk out of here with her?”

“What else would I be doing?”

“Eliza’s my property,” he said as he reached the gate, but he leaned against it, preventing me from passing through. “I’d hate for this to get bloody, Jared.”

“I’d appreciate it,” I said in a clipped tone that made Aeris stand a little straighter, “if you’d stop calling my wife your property.”

“Wife?” Aeris said, his eyes going wide, then narrowing on mine. “Don’t play games with me—”

“Do you think I would have risked bringing her here by playing games, Aeris? My wife is more educated than any of the historians employed by your church. That scroll was a fake. She knew that before even opening it. I needed her to get close to you so you’d give her access to your vault to prove my suspicions about your worthlessness to my cause. Now, we’re going home. You have nothing else to offer me. I have nothing else I need or want from you.”

“She is not your wife—”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the marriage certificate, which was crumpled and folded to prevent him from seeing the end of the page where our signatures would be. Archer and Brandt had crinkled it, rubbing dirt into the parchment to make it look worn. It wasn’t signed, of course. But it would be if Aeris had the gall to follow us back to my village, I’d make sure of it. Aeris’s nostrils flared as he looked up at me, his face turning a vivid red and twisting with rage. I held it just out of reach as he tried to snatch it from me, giving him a devilish grin.

“Good luck finding your breeder. You’ll have to hire a different crew for that bounty, I’m afraid. Goodbye, Aeris.”

“This isn’t over!”

I was already walking away, crossing through the gate to freedom, to home.

To Eliza.

“What do you think? Three loaves?” Brandt eyed the fresh bread piled on a table in one of the market stalls as we passed through the busy street leading toward the main gate. I relinquished my desire to bolt from the city right away in lieu of having food for what would be a two-day journey back to the village. Brandt pressed a few coins into the baker’s open palm, then tucked three of the loaves into his backpack.

Eliza was standing behind me, her eyes wide with wonder as she looked around, her hands clasped around an egg and bacon sandwich. I smiled to myself, losing a breath as I turned around and followed Brandt through the street as he bought supplies. Archer was walking with Eliza, their voices muffled by the swelling crowd.

“We should get going if we want to make it to the river by nightfall,” I said as Brandt exchanged coins for a bundle of jerky wrapped in brown paper.

Brandt nodded, and we had just turned around to alert Archer and Eliza we were ready to leave when a commotion rippled through the crowd. I grabbed Eliza by the collar of her shirt and pulled her against me as people began to push and shove for a better view of the platform in the center of the market square, where none other than Aeris was walking up to a podium.

“f**k,” I growled, backing away with my grip still firm on Eliza. “Come on, we need to go—”

Archer sucked in his breath beside me, a low growl leaving his lips as a blonde woman was hauled onto the podium, her face obstructed by her long, pin-straight hair.

I let go of Eliza, a feeling of absolute dread crawling from my fingertips to my chest.

“An execution—” someone said behind us as people continued to shove into us, trying to get a better view.

Aeris was speaking over the crowd, but I wasn’t paying attention to his voice. I was numb, and the world seemed to move in slow motion as the woman looked up into the crowd, her hair falling away from her face.

A face I hadn’t seen in years.

“Take her,” I said to Brandt, pushing Eliza into his arms. “Go, now!”

I turned to Aeris, who was looking right at me, his mouth twisted in a delirious, knowing smile.

Archer was already moving through the crowd toward the platform.

“Jared?” Eliza asked, her voice a faint echo in my ears.

“Jared Crimson,” Aeris sang, laughing around the words. “A trade. What do you say?”

My blood ran cold as I locked eyes with Carmen, who was panting and flushed with fear as a warrior secured a rope around her neck.

I looked back at Eliza, seeing the lines of confusion creasing her brow.

I turned and shoved my way to the platform, leaving Eliza behind.

[Chapter 824](#)

Eliza

“A trade,” Aeris’s voice echoed in my ears as I looked frantic after Jared, who was stuck in place with shock. The young woman on the stage turned frantic eyes on Jared, and the look on her face...

Something snapped in my chest.

A trade. A trade... Me, for that woman.

“You can have her back,” Aeris boomed, a hush falling over the crowd. “If you leave Eliza behind, with me.”

Jared looked back at me, his eyes cold and void of expression as he looked me over. I opened my mouth to say his name. It was the only thing I could think to say.

But then he turned and pushed through the crowd.

He’d gone to her.

“We need to go, now,” Brandt hissed in my ear, his brutal tone sounding so unlike him as he grabbed me roughly by the arm and started to pull me out of the crowd.

I tasted acid in my throat. My mouth was dry as I tried to swallow. My heart was shattering in my chest as jealousy and confusion roiled in my stomach.

“Who is that woman?” I tried to say, but Brandt broke into a sprint, practically dragging me behind him.

We darted between buildings, our bodies cast in shadows as our feet pounded the cracked pavement still wet from last night’s storm. Brandt came to an abrupt halt, his chest heaving with effort as he peaked around the corner of the building, then pressed himself back into the alleyway, shaking his head.

“Aeris has warriors stationed at the main gate—”

“Because he just offered Jared that woman in exchange for me!” I hissed, digging my fingernails into his forearm. “What the f**k is going on?!”

Brandt was in no mood to explain anything to me, that was clear. He slammed his arm into my chest, flattening me against the wall as three warriors passed us on the street, running towards the gate.

“Come on,” he said under his breath, taking me by the hand as we ran back down the alley. My shoes and pants were already wet from stomping through puddles and other muck I didn’t even want to think about. We were well outside of the city proper now, weaving between the run-down buildings along the inside of the wall. I knew where he was taking me. It was the temple Jared had told me about.

It led outside the wall.

Brandt and I ran up the steps without glancing behind us. I was panting, my legs burning from the exertion of sprinting through the massive city. I tried to catch my breath for a moment while Brandt pounded on the door.

A woman opened the door wide enough for us to pass through. She yelped in surprise as Brandt shoved through a second door leading into the temple, the woman's voice lifted in an exclamation I didn't catch.

"Eliza, we have to hurry!" Brandt cried as I caught my toe on a cracked stone paver and fell to my knees.

Pain ricocheted up my legs and settled in my hips as I grunted, clawing Brandt's arm to get a better grip on him as he hauled me to my feet.

"Guards are everywhere!" a priest shouted as he stepped out of the shadows and hurried over to us.

"I f*****g know that!" Brandt snapped, tugging me toward him as the priest approached.

"There's a tunnel, right through that doorway. Turn left at the end of the hallway—" the priest began, but Brandt and I were already running toward the door at the far side of the temple. Darkness blanketed us as we crossed through the doorway. A chill licked up my spine as Brandt led me down the stairs and into a narrow, damp tunnel that seemed endless.

"Brandt!" I cried, trying to pull him to a stop.

It must have been the only moment we had to catch our breath before bursting out the other side of the tunnel and into the world beyond the city. "Who is that woman? Please!"

Brandt was struggling to catch his breath. He let me go, resting his hands on his knees for a moment. I could barely see him. The only light in the entire tunnel came from a single torch burned down to nothing more than a smoking ember at the far end.

"Carmen," he panted. "Her name is Carmen."

"Is she one of the women—"

"She was Jared's—Jared's lover. His girlfriend, for a long time."

I opened my mouth to reply but couldn't find the words.

"We need to get out of here. I feel like the walls are closing in on me," Brandt whispered through a heaving breath. "I'm sorry, Eliza."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I breathed, running my fingers through my hair. The ribbon holding my hair away from my face had come loose and was tangled in my curls.

"He didn't—he didn't feel what he feels for you—"

"Don't," I said firmly, my voice dropping an octave as I walked past him toward the end of the tunnel.

I heard him curse under his breath as he straightened up, his heavy footsteps echoing on the dirt floor as he followed behind me.

“Eliza, listen to me!” He grabbed my arm and whirled me around to face him. The torch sent an amber glaze over the sharp planes of his face as his eyes bored into mine. “She left him, okay?”

“I don’t care, Brandt!”

Truthfully, I was on the verge of tears. I was deeply embarrassed by the feelings of jealousy that were twisting my stomach into a knot.

“Do you really believe for a second he was going to trade you in for her?”

“How would I even know? He never mentioned anything about her, or anyone else he was involved with for that matter! He went to her, though. He turned from me and went—”

“I’m getting you out!” Brandt practically screamed, the two of us nose to nose. “I’m getting you out. Jared told me to get you out. He wasn’t going to leave you behind! You are his WIFE!”

“Only because we thought it would stop Aeris from laying a claim to me, and now look what’s happened! It didn’t even matter! It didn’t work!”

Shouts echoed in the distance, coming from the temple’s end of the tunnel.

“We need to go,” Brandt whispered, gripping my arm.

I let him lead me out of the tunnel, helping him push open a trap-like door that showered us in sunshine once opened. He helped me climb up and out, and I crawled on my hands and knees away from the wall surrounding Aeris’s fortress, free at last.

“We can’t wait for them,” Brandt said hoarsely as he tossed his backpack on the ground and began taking off his clothes.

I gathered his clothing in my arms as he shifted, a startling beautiful brown wolf with piercing blue eyes looking me over as he stretched and shook out his fur. Both of our heads snapped in the direction of lifted voices coming our way.

Warriors, many of them, were rushing along the wall, heading right toward us.

I barely had time to scoop up his backpack off the ground before I swung a leg over his back. I gripped his body with my thighs and leaned into him as I adjusted his belongings, trying to free up a hand to hold on to him.

I didn’t know which road would take us along the southern trail, but I knew for a fact it wasn’t the way we were currently going. We passed the place Aeris’s warriors had roughed us up when we’d first arrived. The grass still had imprints from where the heavy bags of pilfered treasures from the witch’s house once rested.

I briefly wondered if the men had gone back for those riches over the past couple of days, but the thought was gone in a flash as the Dark Forest loomed in the distance, nothing but a black shadow surrounded by rolling hills of pale green spring grasses.

“Why are we going to the forest!” I cried.

Brandt made a low guttural growl in his throat in response, a noise I couldn’t decipher.

I gritted my teeth and held on for dear life as Brandt continued to barrel through the hills like a rocket, his feet barely touching the ground.

But I heard wolves closing the distance. Their howls pierced the air as Brandt turned and skirted the treeline of the sparse outer edge of the Dark Forest. He was panting hard, his feet thundering across the grass as two dozen wolves crested a hill and came sprinting down after us.

I prayed to whoever was listening that he wouldn't turn and run into the forest. I could feel the forest's pull already, the darkness beckoning me to come to it, to let it embrace me.

"Brandt!" I cried as he leapt over a fallen tree, his body not touching the ground for what felt like several seconds, just as the first of the other wolves closed in on us.

Brandt snarled in frustration as he wove between the trees, the forest getting more and more dense with every step he took. A searing heat pierced my calf as a wolf clamped down on my leg. I screamed loud enough to spook the birds from the trees overhead as I kicked at the beast, who reared back and yelped when the toe of my boot firmly met its teeth.

"f**k you!" I screamed, kicking wildly until the wolf cried out in pain and retreated. I caught my breath, but then lost it again as another wolf leaped over us, curling its claws over my shoulder.

Then I was falling, and falling, and falling. I hit the ground, the air rushing from my lungs and my vision blurring as I started to roll head over feet down some kind of embankment.

I had a split second to gasp as I rolled right into rushing water, then was fighting against the frigid pull of a swift current.

I broke the surface of the water, gasping and crying out before being sucked under once again. Submerged logs and sharp rocks shredded my legs as I fought to the surface, the river fighting against my every move.

I was drowning.

"Help!" I screamed before being sucked under again, my body slamming against a huge rock that broke the river into a fork.

The impact was enough to temporarily stun me into stillness, my eyes open to the riverbed below.

It was... calm. I must be dead. What a relief.

I floated on my belly in the water until something brushed against my head, something sharp digging into my scalp.

"Ahhh!"

The pain was enough to shock me back to reality and I screamed for breath. I lifted my head, fighting for air as I blinked frantically to clear the water from my lashes. I was floating along the side of the river, the current ripping past me only a few feet away.

My backpack was caught on a tree branch, the only thing keeping me in place.

I clawed my way to the bank, my fingers slipping over rock and wet branches until I felt my fingers sink knuckles-deep in a bed of moss. I cursed like a sailor as I hauled myself out of the water, choking and snarling as I fought to clear my lungs.

I laid down, looking up into the darkened canopy of trees over my head. The forest whispered my name, the new spring leaves rustling in a stiff breeze.

“Who are you?” came a small voice behind me, just out of my line of sight. “And why do you have my Cryptex?”

[Chapter 825](#)

He couldn't have been more than eight. Long black hair fell in loose waves over his shoulders, totally unruffled and gleaming in the sunlight drifting through the thick canopy of branches above our heads. He peered down at me with dark gray eyes, black lashes brushing against his cheeks every time he blinked.

What was a kid doing out here? And alone?

I rolled over onto my belly, coughing and spitting up water as I got up onto my knees. I was still trying to process what he'd said to me. His Cryptex? No, definitely not.

The boy made no moves in my direction as I wrung out my shirtfront between my trembling hands and reached up to remove my backpack.

Everything inside would be drenched. I winced at the thought of the map and scroll, wondering if they were ruined and beyond repair.

“Where are your parents?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him against the glare of the sun that seemed to illuminate him from behind, casting most of his small body in shadow.

He shrugged, picking the bark off a stick with his fingernails.

“Where are you parents?” he mimicked, then gave me a smirk that could have belonged to a man three times his age. “Far from here, I assume. But you're not a White Queen, no. That, you are not. But you know them, don't you? Was it your mother Gemma who was resurrected from the dead by Maeve? I can feel the moonstone in you.”

He spoke like a well-educated diplomat... or an Alpha. I slowly straightened my back, a ripple of gooseflesh prickling up my arms as I met his eyes. They were the color of dark mist, like a thick fog reflecting moonlight. How did he know all of this? Why would he know? That had all happened before I was born.

“Where is your Dark Lord?” he asked, his mouth twitching into a devious smile.

I couldn't answer. I didn't know how. I reached up and rubbed my head, thinking maybe I'd smacked it on a rock or something and was losing my mind.

“Does he really think he can put my Cryptex back together again?” the boy asked, crunching a twig beneath his foot. His shoes were made of fine fabric, practically slippers, and as I slowly looked him up and down I noticed his clothes were simple, but dated, and in absolutely perfect condition.

He didn't look like a child lost in the woods.

In fact, he didn't look like a child at all. He was... something else.

The sunlight trickled over his skin, glimmering in a ghost-like fashion.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice strained and hoarse from nearly drowning.

"Draven," he replied, his eyes meeting mine. "And you're Eliza."

"How do you know my name?"

"I didn't expect... you," he said slowly, and for a moment looked almost angry, but his expression was blurred by curiosity as he scanned my face. "Sea-glass eyes... such a unique color. I only knew one person with them, long ago."

He tilted his head to the side then took a few steps in my direction before coming to a stop. The river was to my back, so I had nowhere to go as he slowly reached his tiny hand out to brush his fingertips over my cheek.

But I didn't feel his touch. I looked up at him, seeing that same dark shadow that sometimes followed in Jared's wake billow out around the boy.

I screamed.

In a flash, he was gone, the forest trembling and sending a blanket of last season's leaves over my head.

I heard a distant thundering and the sound of low-lying branches being ripped from the trees as something large moved in my direction. I turned my head to the sound of splashing water, and then Brandt was at my side, his dark brown fur sodden and pooling water all around us.

I gaped at him, then looked back into the forest. The trees grew thick here, the sunlight barely penetrating the darkness within.

Brandt dropped his backpack on the ground in front of us before sitting back on his haunches, his tongue lolling out of his mouth as he fought to catch his breath. He'd just crossed the river with his backpack clamped between his teeth.

"I just met the person who gave Jared the Cryptex," I said, my voice sounding so distant, distorted by the thrumming of the blood rushing in my ears. I knew that I had. I knew it with every shred of my soul.

"Draven is his name."

Brandt turned to look at me, his blue eyes bright against the deep color of his fur. I slowly met his gaze, holding it there for a moment before I let myself slump to the ground and closed my eyes.

"We'll rest for another hour," Brandt said over the fire, his knees tucked into his chest as he met my eyes. "But then we need to go. We'll have to travel through the Dark Forest. The southern trail is too risky now, with Aeris's warriors."

I nodded, hugging myself against the chill as rain pattered over our heads. We were still soaked. All of our clothes were wet and nothing had had a chance to dry out before the rain came. Brandt had built a fire in a small cave we'd found, but the cave wasn't large enough for either of us to fit inside. Still, we'd been able to warm our hands and cook a rabbit over the struggling embers, which would have to be enough.

"Do you think Jared got out?" I asked, my mouth going dry around his name.

"Yes," Brandt breathed, his eyes set on the fire. "He wouldn't have let Aeris take him back to the castle. I just don't know... I don't know what he offered in return for his freedom, or if Carmen..." He tapered off, shaking his head.

I exhaled deeply, closing my eyes for a moment.

"Draven," Brandt said as he poked the embers with a stick. "That's a very old name, Eliza."

I was thankful for the change of subject, even if it meant telling Brandt what had happened before he'd found me. We'd spent the rest of the day putting distance between us and Aeris's territory, and now we were deep within the Dark Forest. Brandt had said Aeris's warriors wouldn't follow us here, and he was right. We were utterly alone.

"That's what he said his name was, and he knew mine." I told him about the child I'd seen, my voice trembling over his ghostlike appearance. Maybe I hadn't seen things correctly.

"The mythology about Lycaon during the dawn of our realm is... up for debate, even within the Church. Draven was said to be a son of Lycaon, the first of his children to be born in this realm."

"Then I did see a ghost," I said to myself.

Brandt chuckled, shaking his head. "Maybe, maybe not. Could've just been the forest playing tricks on you. But it is interesting that you'd just know the name Draven. I didn't think anyone from the Realm of Light knew about him."

"The Church of Lycaon has been pushing back against the Church of the Moon Goddess," I said, knitting my fingers over my knees. "Even with your Alpha King's permission for the Churches to share their artifacts and texts for research purposes. Lycaon and Morrighan were enemies, you know. Some people think it should stay that way."

Brandt nodded, considering, then took a deep breath. "Do you know the story of Draven, then?"

I shook my head, meeting his eyes.

"Well, legend says Draven was a son of Lycaon, born shortly after this realm was created. He was a twin, and was cast out of his father's house because Lycaon was wary of twins, being one and all. Draven was Lycaon's first enemy in this realm." Brandt sighed, scratching his temple. "I hope I'm telling this correctly. It's been a long time since I learned about it in school."

"It's okay," I said with a soft smile. I was looking forward to the story, honestly. Brandt's voice was the only thing keeping the forest from consuming us in silence.

“Draven was said to have taken up residence in one of the northernmost territories of our realm, an old city once called... Myrel, I believe. No one has ever found the city, but this is just myth—”

“It’s okay, Brandt, I know,” I assured him, leaning forward in anticipation. “What happened to him?”

“It’s said he tried to overthrow his father, and left his pregnant mate behind while he was on that quest. He was said to have been the most powerful of his siblings, more powerful than Lycaon according to some interpretations of the legend. He killed everyone in Lycaon’s court but Lycaon fled... which explains why his tomb is in your realm. But when he returned to Myrel victorious, he found his mate dying in childbirth. His powers were no help at all. He lost both his mate and unborn child, and was so shredded by grief that he took his own life to be with them. So, his death marked the end of the gods ruling Egoren.”

“It’s said that the only surviving member of Lycaon’s court was Lycaon’s youngest son, who wasn’t born until after he fled. Jonis—he was the first Dark Lord, the first Alpha King of Egoren. That’s supposedly where the Dark Lord’s power comes from.”

“And Jared is related to them somehow?”

Brandt’s eyes flashed with understanding. He nodded gravely, nudging an unassuming rock with the toe of his boot.

“What’s interesting about Draven is that his mate was said to have been a witch, and after their deaths, many of the witches in our realm have worshiped and called to him when they’re in need. He’s said to appear in different forms, always showing up as something his followers want, or need, the most... tempting them to make a bargain.”

“If it was Draven I saw,” I whispered, a chill running up my spine. “Why did he show up to me as a child?” Part of me believed I’d just dreamt it, or that I was seeing things. But the other part of me?

A whisper of wind drifted through the trees above us. The sky was turning a pale violet as the first hint of morning wove itself into the stars.

“Maybe you want kids? I don’t know,” Brandt smiled with a shrug.

“Do you know... do you know any witches, any good ones? Not the kind that have fish teeth and eat people?”

Brandt gave me a look, then smiled, shaking his head.

“Am I going to regret telling you all of this?”

“Brandt, come on. Draven came to me and asked me why I had his Cryptex. Do you know why? Is there anything from his legend that mentions anything like Jared’s curse or the Cryptex? If Draven was the man who gave the Cryptex to Jared in the first place... if the witches would know, shouldn’t we find someone who can help us?”

“It’s up to Jared, Eliza. You’d have to talk to him.”

I chewed my lower lip, considering what Brandt had just said.

“Look, I know you’re mad at him. He wouldn’t have told you about Carmen because he... well, they were terrible for each other, for one. And trust me when I say none of us ever liked her very much—”

“That’s not it at all,” I cut in, but I wasn’t all that convinced it was true. “Jared isn’t... he isn’t mine. We didn’t sign the certificate, you know. We were going to try to just get out and sign it as a last resort.”

“He told me,” Brandt replied. “Then what is the matter? What’s going on between you two?”

“He doesn’t really want to break the curse, does he?”

Brandt stilled, his eyes focused on the dying embers.

“We should get going. We could make it to the village by sundown if you ride on my back.”

Brandt got up and began to undress. I looked away, my eyes focusing on the darkness surrounding us.

Back to the village.

Then what?

[Chapter 826](#)

Brandt didn’t stop running, not even once, until we reached Jared’s village. The Dark Forest passed us in a blur of shadow and rain. Maybe he felt the same crushing weight I felt as the trees whispered and rattled, maybe he saw the same shadows that lingered in the darkness, little flecks of light dancing against the tree trunks, like stars... or eyes.

We were never alone in the Dark Forest. Whatever else was there with us obviously didn’t think we were worth pursuing. Maybe those indescribable beings who called the forest their home sensed that we were rushing—broken, tired, and scared—and let us be.

I was thankful for it, and I was more than thankful to hear the sound of wind chimes rustling in the spring rain as we broke through the trees near the Healer’s cottage, the village rising in the distance.

Home—I felt it with overwhelming certainty.

Brandt nearly collapsed as he skidded to a stop next to the sparring ring. I slid off his back, my knees buckling and legs tingling painfully from gripping his back with my thighs for an entire day. People were running toward us with blankets, shocked faces blurred by the downpour that pounded the top of my head and my face as I looked up to see a hooded Giselle, her eyes alight with worry.

“Jared?” I croaked.

“Not here—” Giselle began, but Brandt’s voice cut through the rain, strong and demanding.

“Five scouts, two along the southern trail and three in the Dark Forest. Don’t be seen,” he said to the men beginning to gather around him. I glanced at him as Giselle helped me up, seeing him wrapped in a blanket and shivering with exhaustion and cold. “Jared might be alone, or he’ll be with—with Carmen. Archer was meant to be heading east, toward the capital.”

Giselle furrowed her brow, mouthing “Carmen?” with a look of shock flashing behind her eyes. Brandt stalked off as several of the men convened next to the ring, one of them barking orders as the rest began to shift.

“Where’s Miriam?” I said through chattering teeth as Giselle wrapped her arm around me and walked me toward the house.

Lights twinkled in the windows, and several people were standing on the porch, watching as we approached. It was well into the night now, and muffled voices poured from the open door of the house as people were roused from sleep by the commotion we’d caused.

“Let’s get you into a hot bath first,” Giselle whispered, rubbing my arm as she guided me up the front porch steps, glaring at everyone nearby.

Miriam met us at the door, looking more than concerned.

“Oh, my dear,” she breathed, taking me into her arms and holding me to her chest. “I am so happy to see you again.”

I slept well into the next day, curled up in my old bed. Scarlett and Giselle had fussed over me for what felt like an eternity until I’d fallen face-first into my bed, asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Gray daylight drifted through the open window between our beds, lace curtains dancing in a humid breeze. I rolled over, rubbing sleep from my eyes to find Scarlett’s bed made, and empty.

I had no idea what time it was. No one had roused me to start another day’s washing and mending. It took me a few minutes to come to terms with the fact that I’d spent the last two days sprinting through the Dark Forest in the rain, and before that... close to a week in Aeris’s kingdom.

Now that I was back in Jared’s house, all of that felt like a dream—a nightmare, especially since Jared hadn’t made it home, not yet.

I was worried about him, of course. I rolled over in bed to face the wall, clutching the sheets to my chest. I bit down on the feelings of fear, jealousy, and despair as I tried to focus my mind on what needed to be done today.

Giselle had emptied out my soaking wet backpack the night before, not saying a word about the map, the scroll, or the Cryptex as she laid out everything to dry on top of the dresser. I’d wrapped the Cryptex in cloth before packing it. Rain wouldn’t ruin it... but the map?

I swung my feet out of bed and padded across the room. The map wasn’t there. I cursed under my breath and swiped the scroll, which was falling to pieces in my hands, and the Cryptex off the dresser before leaving the room and heading for Jared’s study.

It was unlocked, of course. I didn’t dwell on why. He obviously trusted everyone here enough not to go through his things while he was away. I sat down at his desk, huffing a dusty breath as I carefully unrolled what was left of the scroll and looked down at it, my chest tightening as the paper fell away in half-dried clumps.

The ink was fresh enough that the moisture had caused it to bleed and soak through the rough parchment, blurring it considerably. I ran my hands over my face, cursing under my breath as I scooped it into my hands and balled it up before tossing it toward the door. It landed with a wet splat, even more useless than it had been when Aeris gave it to Jared in the first place.

I stared at the Cryptex for a long moment.

There was nothing I wanted to do less than mess with it right now, not when my body was also tense with overwhelming anxiety.

Where the hell was he? Had he made it out of Aeris's kingdom? Was he okay?

I wiped hot tears from my eyes and blinked back the memory of us tangled in his sheets, his fingertips roving slowly over the curve of my hip as he spoke to me in a low whisper. We'd joked about pretending to be husband and wife, coming up with silly little scenarios to distract us from the act of having to leave Aeris's castle the next day.

"I expect dinner to be on the table every evening when I'm back from the sparring ring," he'd said, flashing me a devious grin.

"Take that up with Miriam," I'd replied. "She won't allow me to step foot in her kitchen."

That conversation had been so easy, so unlike anything I'd ever experienced with him so far.

I had so much I wanted to say to him, that I needed to say. That I should have said.

And now... if he didn't come back, what was I supposed to do... just sit here?

I opened a few drawers, finding a stack of paper and a few quill pens like the one he'd gifted me when he gave me my journal.

That journal was long gone now, lost with the rest of the supplies when the witch's familiar had stomped all over our camp.

I smoothed a piece of paper down on the desk, staring at it blankly for several aching minutes. I should have done this the moment I found safety in this realm.

My parents knew I wasn't dead—at least, I hoped they didn't think that. I'd been jetting across our realm for the past two years, gone for weeks at a time on expeditions related to my studies. They were used to not hearing from me. But I'd taken off this time with no itinerary, and all I'd left behind was a letter for my brother George, telling him I was going on an adventure and not to touch anything in my bedroom at his house in New Dianny, or else.

I found it likely that by now my family had assumed I'd snuck onto the trade ship—the trade ship would never make it to its destination, lost at sea, no one left aboard to tell the story of what had really happened.

'Sorry Mom,' I scribbled, unsure of what else to say other than I was alive, and safe.

Maybe safe, I wasn't totally convinced about that part yet. Mom was sure to hit the ceiling with rage if this letter ever got to her. Dad would just be happy I was out enjoying myself.

I wrote the letter to the best of my abilities, trying to keep my emotions in check. 'I'm fine. I'm safe. I'll be home, eventually. I have a lot to tell you, a lot I've seen and experienced. It was worth it, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

I folded up the letter and set it aside, moving on to the next.

I sucked in my breath, scribbling one single line of my signature sloppy text.

'I'm here, somewhere out west. But I'm fine. I met someone, and I think—' I paused, the pen hovering over the paper. 'I think I might stay.'

I think I might stay. I think I might....

I folded up the letter and rummaged through his desk for envelopes, finding a few that were yellowed with age and rather stiff. I wondered if this realm used stamps at all, but I figured I could ask Miriam that question when I found her.

I glanced at the Cryptex once more before rising from the desk and leaving the room, locking the door behind me.

It was later afternoon when I left Jared's study. The kitchen was busy preparing for tonight's meal. I peeked into the laundry room, finding Scarlett with her back to the doorway and an unfamiliar woman stirring one of the tubs, her eyes lifting to meet mine as she bobbed her head in greeting.

Scarlett whirled around, giving me a relieved smile.

"Hey," I smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't come down to work this morning—"

"Oh, don't be. Miriam has other plans for you, I think."

I furrowed my brow, watching an expression I couldn't read spread over Scarlett's face.

"What kind of plans?"

"I have no idea, but you can ask her. She's been sitting on the front porch for hours now, waiting for the scouts to come back." Scarlett's voice wavered a bit, her eyes flashing with stifled emotion. She was thinking about Archer, no doubt.

"Archer is going to the Capital," I said, glancing at the new laundry maid, who seemed too busy with her chores to pay us any mind. "Follow a... lead."

Scarlett's eyes widened momentarily, her face flushing, but then regained her composure and nodded. I gave her a knowing smile as I slipped from the doorway and headed down the hall towards the front door.

Miriam was, in fact, sitting on the front porch. She looked up at me as I walked out onto the porch, my letters in my hands.

"Can I help you, dear?"

"I was wondering if... if it's possible to send a few letters?"

“A postman comes once a week. He’ll be here on Tuesday, so a few days from now. Is it urgent?”

Kind of. Maybe? I ran my thumbs over the letters, shrugging.

“Is it possible to send a letter to the... uhm—”

“The Realm of Light?” she asked, her eyes glimmering with understanding.

I nodded, pursing my lips into a tight line.

“Possibly. It would have to go through the Capital. It will take a while—”

“That’s alright, because this one has to go through the Capital as well,” I said a little sheepishly as I handed her the letters. She glanced down at the addresses. Winter Forest was clearly marked, but I doubted she knew where that was. I didn’t know the exact address of where Xander and Lena lived, but I figured “The Castle of the Alpha King” would be enough.

Lena’s name was written boldly on the letter, but not Selene, or Luna. Just Lena.

That way she’d know it was from the family.

Miriam smiled softly to herself as she met my eyes.

“I—” I began, feeling the sudden urge to tell her everything, when there was a shout from the far side of the village where the sparring ring was just visible from the porch.

Miriam and I turned just as a pair of wolves came into view.

One was flaxen, and one was black as night.

I sighed heavily, having to steady myself on the porch railing.

Thank the Goddess.

[Chapter 827](#)

I’d been so caught up in my relief that Jared was still alive that I’d completely forgotten the pale yellow wolf beside him was not Archer.

I felt a jolt of shock as Carmen shifted into her usual form, her long blonde hair nearly touching her waist as she stood naked, hesitating before accepting a robe from one of Jared’s men. She... smirked, from what I could tell, and very slowly pulled her arms through the robe while looking over at Jared.

Jared was dressing quickly, however, and didn’t wait for Carmen to get her bearings before he was charging toward the house, wearing only a pair of pants and a shirt crunched in his fist. He pointed at me.

Miriam squeaked in surprise as Jared shouted my name, and not kindly. I squared my shoulders and backed into the house. What the hell was his problem? I was the one who should be upset.

“Upstairs, now,” he said with cold firmness as he climbed the front steps, not even stopping to say hello to Miriam.

The broad muscles of his chest and shoulders were flexed and rigid with tension as he motioned for me to walk ahead of him. He didn't look over his shoulder at Carmen, who was walking briskly toward the house, her sheet of blonde hair billowing out behind her.

I caught her eye before I turned to walk up the stairs. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth tilted upwards on one side.

It was a knowing look edged with silent challenge.

I didn't like the jealousy roiling in my gut. I especially didn't like the smug grin on this stranger's face as her eyes left mine and settled on Jared's back.

Jared wasn't really mine. We'd never talked about what we actually were to each other.

But I sure as hell wasn't okay with this woman trying to assert her dominance over me.

"Have Eliza's things brought to my room," Jared said to Miriam as I began to climb the stairs. Miriam, who was currently watching Carmen close in on the house, looked up at Jared with a look that conveyed exactly what she was feeling—utter shock, disbelief... maybe even a hint of annoyance.

I didn't question him, not yet, not in the company of others. I half expected Carmen to follow us, but when we reached the third story and his wing of the house, we were alone.

He stepped in front of me and walked to his bedroom door, opening it wide. I followed him inside, my body tightening as he closed the door behind me.

It wasn't a large room by any means, but it housed a four-poster bed and several other pieces of what looked to be antique furniture. A red quilt covered the bed, the edges slightly frayed. I found myself staring at it for whatever reason as his footsteps sounded behind me.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to compose the conflicted feelings rushing through my mind.

"No. I'm not," I said, slowly turning to face him.

He was buttoning his shirt, his fingers working deftly at the buttons as he kept his eyes locked on mine. He looked like hell. He looked tired, and stressed. He looked me over, going as far as to reach out to turn me from side to side during his inspection, as if he didn't believe me.

"I said I'm fine!"

"What route did you take?"

"We went through the Dark Forest."

Jared clenched his jaw, shaking his head as he adjusted the fit of his shirt. It was odd seeing him back in his usual sparring garb compared to the tailored pants and jackets he'd worn at Aeri's court. He looked... like himself again, and with the same fire burning behind his eyes. He was furious about something.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that a second time—"

“Brandt didn’t stop running until we reached the village. The journey took a little over a day,” I said, knitting my fingers together behind my back. I was still in the loose-fitting cotton pajamas I’d changed into after my bath last night. I scrunched the fabric between my fingers as I waited for whatever he was going to say next. He was silent, however, just staring at me. “Why did you tell Miriam to bring my things here?”

“Because you’ll be sleeping in here with me from now on.”

“Why?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” he said, crossing the room to throw open the curtains.

“Because we’re not—”

“We’re married according to Aeris. I don’t care that we didn’t sign the contract. He thinks we did—”

“What about Carmen?” I asked without meaning to. I bit down on my lip as he turned around to face me, leaning against the windowsill.

“What about her?”

“Brandt said they two of you were a thing once. What happened and why is she here?” I didn’t mean for the words to come out so harsh, but they did.

“I’ve done a lot of f****d up things,” he breathed, crossing his arms over his chest. “I didn’t want to add letting an innocent woman die to the list.”

“Why was she there in the first place?”

“She’s a thief. She used to be a good one, but it would seem her luck ran out.” He looked as if he was about to smile, which infuriated me. He noticed the color heating my cheeks and had the audacity to ask, “What? Are you jealous?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I snapped, my hands fixed firmly on my hips. “I have no right to be upset that we finally got out of Aeris’s clutches only for you to run back into his trap to save your ex-girlfriend!”

One corner of his mouth twitched into a smile, his night-dark eyes softening on me. “You are jealous,” he murmured to himself, looking exceedingly pleased.

I saw red.

“There is something seriously wrong with you!” I practically screamed, throwing my hands in the air.

“Yeah, I know. I’m cursed.”

“Jared, are you kidding me—”

“What do you want me to say, Eliza? I’m sorry, alright. I’m sorry you and Brandt had to take off like that. I’m sorry you are caught in my mess. I’m sorry you refuse to let me take you home—”

“Hey!”

"I'm sorry," he continued, kicking off the wall and striding toward me, "that as long as you stay, we have to play house, especially now that Aeris believes that we're married."

"Why would that matter here?"

Jared's expression darkened, his shoulders loosening as he glanced down at his feet.

"I gave him what he really wanted," he said, taking another step toward me. "We're playing the long game now."

"What are you talking about?" A rush of dread prickled over my skin as I met his eyes, the crimson and amber flakes shining against his black irises like burning embers.

"Eliza—"

There was only one other thing Aeris had wanted, something Jared had sworn he'd never do.

"Don't tell me you offered to—to help him overthrow Xander and Lena—"

The world ceased to spin as my words shattered on the floor between. Jared furrowed his brow as he slowly straightened to his full height.

I hadn't meant to say their names... not like this, not now.

"Xander and Lena? Why—"

"I can explain," I said quickly, swallowing back the sudden despair tying my throat in a knot. I wrung my hands, fidgeting so badly I had to clasp them behind my back and squeeze them together to stop myself from trembling. "Don't hurt them—"

"You're on a f*****g first name basis with the Alpha King—"

"Lena is my cousin!" I cried, hot, furious tears welling in the corners of my eyes. "She's only two years older than me. Please, Jared—"

His jaw dropped, then closed tightly, his teeth bared at me as fire flamed behind his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me this when I first found you?"

"Are you serious? You think I would have told you about being so intimately connected to the royal family in the Realm of Light after what I went through?" My initial panic turned to absolute desperation as I took a step away from him. "The first thing those monsters who boarded the boat wanted to know is if they could ransom me. They beat me senseless when I didn't give them any answers. I woke up at the breeder auction. I didn't trust you, Jared. I still don't know if I can, especially now—"

"You don't trust me? What have I done—"

"They have two daughters and are expecting a third," I cried, holding my hands out in surrender.

"Please, please don't agree to this. They are good people. Lena is my friend—" I choked on the words, every feeling of fear and heartbreak and uncertainty spilling over and rolling down my cheeks as tears. "I will go back to Suncrest and be his breeder. Please, Jared—"

“Eliza,” he breathed, looking shocked and deeply concerned more than anything. “Who the f**k do you think I am?”

“I thought I knew—”

“Do you think I’d ever bend to Aeris’s will? I didn’t let him have you, did I? I just said we’re playing the long game now, buying time while we figure out how to break this curse. That—” he paused, taking another cautious step toward me, “means we pretend to be man and wife... live like it, make people in this village believe it. Aeris will come here, likely soon, because to spare Carmen’s life I had to agree to help him overthrow the Alpha King.”

“How could you do it?” I said, my voice breaking around the words.

“Because I’ll be dead by the time he has an actual army thrown together.” His tone sliced through me, butchering my heart into pieces. He took another step toward me, slow and easy, like he was trying to stop me from bolting through the door at my back. “That gives us time, okay? We have a few months to find a way to get you home. I can have one of my men take you to the Capital, to your cousin—”

“No, I won’t let you go near them!”

“Eliza,” he said firmly, his tone taking on that of the Alpha he refused to acknowledge that he was. “I have no reason to hurt anyone in your family—”

“Yet you agreed to help a mad man overthrow them!”

“Aeris barely has the support of his own pack, let alone the support of other Alphas,” Jared hissed. “I had to say I was going to do this, I never meant to actually—”

“You agreed to help kill people that I love to save Carmen,” I whispered, and hated myself for it. It was an incredibly selfish thing to say. Did that woman deserve to die because her very existence made me uncomfortable? Goddess, what was wrong with me?

“I lied to him,” he bit out. “I already told you I have no interest in being the Alpha King. This was the only trick I had left to get all of us out from under Aeris’s thumb—”

“You have to warn them!”

“I can’t—”

“Why the hell not?” I grabbed his arms, shaking him. “Jared!”

He pushed me away, taking several steps across the room and pouring himself a drink from a bottle of dark liquor sitting atop his dresser. An ornate mirror hung above the dresser, and he met my eyes through his reflection.

“Because I’m the Alpha King’s brother, Eliza. He doesn’t know I exist, and I have no desire to make that connection known.”

[Chapter 828](#)

Jared

Eliza didn't seem to be breathing.

I wasn't sure what kind of reaction I'd expected out of her, to be honest. I hadn't ever planned to tell her I was Alpha King Alexander's brother. It hadn't seemed necessary.

"Seeing as you're finally being honest with me," I said carefully, stretching out my arm to lean against the post of my bed, "I figured I could be honest with you as well."

What I really wanted to say was, 'Why the f**k didn't you tell me you were related to the White Queens?' But, I bit my tongue, preventing the words from slipping out.

She blinked a few times, then shook her head.

"He doesn't have any siblings," she said blankly, a distant look in her eyes.

It wasn't often that Eliza was at a loss for words. It was even more rare that she was stunned into near silence.

I wasn't sure I liked it.

She looked a little pale all of the sudden, like she was going to faint.

I caught her before she pitched forward, her eyes nearly rolling back in her head.

"This is very dramatic," I mumbled, scooping her into my arms and laying her on my bed—our bed, if we were being technical.

She heaved a breath, choking on what could have either been a laugh, or a sob. "That makes so much sense," she whispered, reaching up to rub the tears from her eyes. Her fainting spell seemed to have broken through her panic and rage, sending her into a stupor. I sat on the edge of the bed, watching her closely as she whispered to herself, covering her eyes with her hands.

"What?" I asked, unable to hear what she was saying.

"Your shadow likes me," she said, dropping her arms on either side of her and staring up at the ceiling. "I was able to help you reign it in—"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I can feel those powers in the Cryptex when others can't, and it responds to my touch, opens to me—"

She was doing it again, saying her thoughts out loud. I don't think she'd ever realized she was doing it. I'd seen her get into almost a trance-like state a few times since I'd met her, the first time when I brought her to the stones, the second the morning before we left Aeris's castle. She'd be sitting there with the new piece of Cryptex in her hands, going over each symbol and marking out loud, as if it was the only way to untangle her thoughts.

I'd give anything to be able to see into her mind for just a day.

"I'm not a White Queen," she said. "But I know about Theo and Ciana. Ciana was like me, I think. Her father is a distant great uncle of mine, somehow... through Soren." She was peering at me now, but

made no moves to get up from the bed. She lay splayed with her legs and arms outstretched, totally prone.

My fingers prickled with heat, wanting nothing more than to reach out and touch her. I broke from her gaze and looked blankly at the far wall, steeling my expression. I'd been frantic in my efforts to get home, not knowing if she'd made it or not. Had I not had the baggage that was Carmen dragging me down, I would've arrived early this morning, only hours after she and Brandt had made it back to the village.

"Thank you for finally telling me the truth about who you are," I said, risking a glance at her.

She was looking up at me, flexing and clenching her hands into fists as she mulled over whatever biting commentary she meant to unload on me.

"I don't consider myself a prince by any means, just so we're clear. I have no plans to act on Aeris's plans."

"But you are a prince, aren't you? When Aeris called you the lost prince—"

"Some Alphas assume, but I've never admitted it. Those that knew Justin, my... father, if you can even call him that, have said I'm his spitting image, that the resemblance is uncanny. I let them run with the rumors. I didn't care. Alexander supposedly looks like our mother, but I've never met him."

"Do you feel the same way the other Alphas do about a White Queen on the throne of Egoren?"

"No," I said, and I meant it. "I couldn't care less. It doesn't affect me in the slightest, and I mean to keep it that way."

It was silent for several long moments. I looked down at her, watching as she picked at the frayed edge of the blanket, her eyes focused on something across the room.

"Carmen," I said on a breath, then paused. There was nothing I'd rather talk about less than Carmen, but it had to be done. "Carmen and I were together at one point... though I wouldn't call it totally exclusive. She turned twenty-one a few months before I did. I was... young, and stupid. I didn't know about the curse yet and I was living out my dreams of drinking, fighting, and f*****g. There was a point in time when I thought she might be my mate. But I turned twenty-one and the curse snapped into place, not the mate bond."

Eliza rolled over onto her side, propped herself up on her elbow.

"Carmen didn't like who I became, at least, that was her reasoning for... what she did."

"What did she do?"

There was a sharp knock on the door, a knock I knew well.

"Come in, Miriam," I said as I ran my hands over my face and turned to face the door.

Miriam slowly opened the door and peeked her head inside, scowling at me.

But her face softened as Eliza sat up, her lips spreading in a smile. Miriam sighed with relief as she entered the room, carrying nothing but the journal I'd given Eliza.

"Scarlett said this is all you had, other than your uniform, which I assume you won't be needing anymore," Miriam said softly, but I caught the hint of annoyance in her tone as her gaze leveled on mine. "I'll ask why another time."

"I'll speak with you shortly," I said as kindly as possible.

Miriam nodded, her lips pursed in a thin line as she set the journal on the side table by the door. I stared at the journal, my chest squeezing painfully. That was all Eliza had in this realm, and I'd given it to her.

"Are we giving our guest a room?" Miriam asked, her hand on the doorknob.

"Not in the house, no. She can stay in the village, but I want her gone in the morning," I replied, acutely aware of Eliza shifting her position beside me. "She is not our guest. Don't treat her as such."

Miriam only nodded, her eyes softening as they drifted from mine to Eliza, who smiled at her.

"What did Carmen do?" Eliza asked before Miriam had even shut the door behind her.

I gave her a look, rolling my eyes as I stretched out on the bed with my ankles crossed along the edge and my back against the footboard post, facing her.

"Stole from me," I said coolly. "From my study."

This piqued Eliza's interest.

"How dare anyone go into your precious study," she teased, pinching my leg.

"I kicked her out of the village and that was that."

She frowned, rolling back onto her back and crossing her hands over her chest. "You didn't kick me out of the village—"

"You never stole from me," I noted, nudging her shoulder with my foot.

Her eyes shot to mine, narrowing into cat-like slits. "I was going to steal your map, but you caught me everytime."

"I know you were. I left it on my desk on purpose to test you. You failed, obviously, but you were too useful to me to just dump you in the woods and go about my life." I chewed the inside of my cheek, watching Eliza continue to pull threads from the blanket. She was always doing something with her hands, always messing with or dismantling something.

"What did she steal from you?"

"A locket that belonged to my mother," I said, narrowing my eyes as she ran her fingertips over the frayed edge of the blanket. "Are you alright?"

She tucked her hand between her thighs, a slight blush rising in her cheeks.

“I’m stressed, if you really care to know. I’ve been stressed out and frantic ever since you turned your back on me and I had to run off into the Dark Forest with Brandt. I almost drowned—”

“What?”

“I fell into a river.” She shrugged, laying her head down on her arm. Her eyes focused on the corner of the room, looking at everything and nothing at all. She had a distant look in her eyes that made me suddenly uneasy.

I sat up a little straighter. I hadn’t had a chance to talk to Brandt about what had happened. “What exactly happened to you?”

“I know who gave you the Cryptex,” she said, her eyes flicking to mine. My breath caught in my throat as she held her gaze. “Draven is his name. I need you to take me to the witches once I combine the pieces of the Cryptex that we have.” It was a command, not a request.

“Eliza,” I said, leaning forward. “What the f**k are you talking about?”

“Draven,” she repeated. “From the legend. He told me it was his and he was kind of confused about why I had it. The scroll is ruined, Jared. I think Scarlett took the map to be mended, I hope. I couldn’t even think about the Cryptex because I was too worried about you to focus—”

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it. I could barely focus on what she was telling me right now, not with tears welling in her eyes again. “This is why I want to try to take you home.”

“I’m not going home,” she said with conviction, her eyes meeting mine. “I’m not going to sit back and watch you die because you can’t break the curse. I’m not going anywhere until I know Lena is safe. I’m not letting you leave me again.”

The tone of her voice was enough to shatter me in a way I didn’t think I could break. I knew what this was. I knew what I’d felt the very first time I saw her was something more than I’d bargained for and the very reason I’d taken her home with me.

I’d selfishly put her in danger again and again because she had the ability to track down this man and potentially break the curse.

Aeris wasn’t the threat I was worried about. The horrors in my lands weren’t the issue.

That shadow of power roved through me, twisting and curling and clawing as it pleaded for me to let it loose on her. It was always there, always chipping away at the wolf who was desperately trying to keep it in check.

The wolf who was desperately trying to protect its mate.

The real threat to Eliza was me.

“I’ll be back,” I said, then left her to go deal with the only pressing threat.

Carmen.

[Chapter 829](#)

The house was alive with the sounds of chatter and clanging pots and pans as I neared the kitchen. Miriam would be overseeing the dinner preparations now. She ran the house like a ship, every meal always right on time, every surface dusted and the floor swept and mopped before anyone even thought of going to bed.

Most of the snow had melted and the air was warm enough to start the spring gardening. I'd noticed those changes already being made when I first arrived back home.

I might own this house and village, but Miriam was the real boss around her, and everyone knew it.

The look she'd given me before retreating out of my room was enough to make me want to cower like the young boy I'd been when I first met her. No one had that kind of power over me but her.

But, she was getting older. She hadn't cuffed my ears in years. Seeing her soften to Eliza had been shocking, and I was somewhat disappointed Eliza would never witness her wrath and iron fist.

"Miriam," I said from the doorway into the kitchen.

She looked up from the roast turkey she was dressing with fresh spring greens and last fall's cranberry jelly. She let out her breath, a look of sheer annoyance drifting over her face as she straightened up and motioned for one of the kitchen maids to take over.

In the corner of my eye I could see Giselle, who was peering at me with marked curiosity. I didn't give her the satisfaction of meeting her gaze.

I'm sure rumors were already swirling about why Eliza was being moved to my room. This is what I deserved for having a house full of women under my care, I guess.

Miriam bustled over to me, untying her apron and hanging it onto a hook before walking out into the kitchen garden. Two of my men were turning the soil, preparing it for the planting taking place in a few days, right on schedule.

We walked a few paces away from the house, enough to give us some privacy. Miriam always had the first and last word, so I tucked my hands behind my back and smiled down at her, waiting.

She gave me a motherly look of disapproval, tilting her chin as she said, "Eliza is a sweet girl."

"No, she's not," I replied wryly, arching my brow.

"I don't agree with you sharing a bed with her, Jared. You'll ruin that sweet angel—"

"That demon," I corrected, "is my wife, from this moment forward."

Miriam's mouth formed a perfect O as she looked up at me, her eyes going wide with surprise.

"You eloped—"

I cut her off with a wave of my hand, noticing her disappointment. I extended my arm to her and guided us over to a bench butted up against a tall tree covered in bright green leaf buds. A warm, humid breeze whispered through the branches carrying the smell of rain as I told her everything that had happened.

Her expression went through several changes as I described what Aeris had wanted Eliza for, what we'd done to get her out of his kingdom. She gasped audibly many times and went as far as to say a few prayers to Lycaon.

It was rather dramatic, but that was Miriam.

"So you haven't actually married her?" Miriam said when I finished my explanation of the events leading up to my arrival at home. I shook my head, meeting her eyes.

She pursed her lips, shaking her head and scoffing as she slapped my arm.

"What's your problem? I plan on having her sign the certificate tonight."

"Jared!" she exclaimed, her hand falling over her chest. "This is heresy!"

"Miriam," I said, choking on a laugh. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Lycaon will smite you dead for marrying that sweet girl outside of the church. Paying off a priest.... How could you? Now you'll damn her soul—"

"She's related to the White Queens in the Realm of Light, Miriam. She doesn't follow the church of Lycaon, and neither do I—"

"Sharing a bed before marrying properly, no less," she continued, completely ignoring me. "This won't do." She knitted her fingers in her lap, tapping her foot impatiently before rising from the bench. "We'll do this proper or not at all, Jared. Giselle and I will start the planning—"

I stood up, c*****g my brow as I looked down at her.

"No—"

"She deserves to have flowers in her hair and a nice dress—"

"This is not—not what Eliza and I agreed to—"

"Then you plan on just playing house with her and letting her warm your bed? What about the babies, Jared? Born out of wedlock—"

"Babies?" I choked, then ran my hands over my face. "Miriam—"

She pointed her finger at me, her eyes narrowed into slits.

"Lycaon already takes issue with you, and that's why you're cursed. I told you those years you spent getting piss drunk and chasing tail would catch up to you. Now you have sweet a girl with a big heart—"

"A big mouth, you mean—"

She pinched my arm and I winched, taking a step away from her.

"A big heart and an even bigger brain who could help finally solve this curse, and you want to let that slip through your fingers? Having her sign a marriage certificate, bah!" She turned away from me, hiking up her skirts as she hustled toward the house. She paused, looking at me over her shoulder. "You don't deserve her, Jared. You're better off carrying on with Carmen—"

“Hey!” I snarled. “That’s uncalled for—”

“Yet you bring them both back here. Does Eliza know who she is? Everyone is talking about it, Jared.”

“Do you think I give a f**k if people are gossiping about me?”

“Don’t you use that tone with me,” she snapped, taking a few steps toward me. “I let a lot of things slide, but I’m putting my foot down on this. I understand you’re doing this to keep Eliza safe, but she deserves a man who will actually marry her the right way.”

“That’s not what she wants—”

“How do you know?”

That gave me pause. I hesitated, my mouth slightly ajar as I stared at Miriam, who was red in the face.

“I’ve never asked her about it,” I admitted, guilt tightening my chest. “I don’t know—”

“You say she’s still here because she wants to help you,” Miriam cut in, wagging her finger accusingly at me. “What about her family, hmm? What would her father say about all of this?”

“I’ve never met the man and likely never will. She agreed to go home once we broke the curse.”

“And you’d let her? You really think you’d be able to let her go? Your own wife, as you want to call her?”

“I’m doing this to protect her—”

“You’re being selfish, Jared, to her and to yourself. Did you not think I noticed the way you look at her? This is all I ever wanted for you, finding your mate. Now she’s here and—”

“Don’t ever say that again,” I said coldly, my entire body tightening.

Miriam exhaled through her nose, nostrils flaring.

“Keep denying yourself, Jared. Play pretend if it makes you feel better. But you’re using that poor girl. You’ll break her heart and I’ll never forgive you for it.” With that, Miriam whirled around and stalked to the house, disappearing through the garden door.

I tucked my hands in my pockets, sighing as I kicked a pebble with the toe of my boot.

Eliza and I hadn’t talked about what was happening between us. Maybe it was selfish, but I did feel like I was protecting her by keeping her at arm’s length.

But I wanted her in my life. I wanted her by my side. I wanted her in my bed.

And that went beyond needing her expertise to break my curse. It went beyond surface-level wanting, too.

Maybe I should tell her how I felt... what I thought we were.

But how was the idea that I could be gone in a few months’ time, leaving her stranded and at the mercy of my realm, any less selfish than refusing to acknowledge that I was...

Falling in love with her?

I was sure Miriam was scowling at me from the kitchen window, but I didn't pay her any mind as I started walking back to the house. I had no real plan of action. I probably owed Miriam an apology, but that was easy enough. This gutting conversation with Eliza could wait—we needed to talk about the Cryptex, determine what we knew and what we still needed to discover.

“Are you going to ignore me forever?” Carmen's voice cut through the air and I froze.

“Yes,” I said, slowly turning around to face her. She was dressed plainly in a homespun pants and a loose-fitting brown top with wide, flowing sleeves. She had her hands on her hips, her head tilted to the side and a devilish smile on her face.

Carmen's beauty was legendary, that I could readily admit. There had been a time when my claim on her had put me in a position of power amongst the men, before I became their leader. Having her on my arm, the most desired woman in all of the village, felt like some prize.

Until I realized who she really was.

“Come on, Jared,” she coaxed. “You're not really going to banish me to the woods again, are you? I barely survived the first time.”

“If you're not gone by tomorrow morning,” I seethed. “You'll wish for the forest, I assure you.”

“You haven't changed a bit,” she pouted, but there was a smile behind her eyes. “Always so tough, so... scary, so bossy and commanding. Eliza must like that about you—”

“Don't ever speak her name again,” I said sharply. “Don't approach her. Don't even look in her direction—”

“Or what?” she challenged, her eyes flashing with menace. “What am I going to do, Jared? Tell her who you really are? I was right when I said people like us were meant to be together. Like calls to like, right? You always used to say that to me. Do you not remember?”

“You should be on your knees thanking me for saving your f*****g life,” I spat, walking toward the gate to the garden.

“That could be arranged...”

She twisted a lock of her hair around her finger, the thin strands like golden silk. I looked back at her, taking her in. Some of that beauty had faded over the years. Her cheeks had lost their youthful roundness, her eyes now lined with dark circles. She was too thin, her mouth pressed into too tight of a line.

“I'll kill you if you come near her. This is your only warning.”

“So wound up,” she purred, her pale-brown eyes roving over my body with a hunger that left me feeling slightly sick with rage. “Obviously she's not taking care of you, not like I can. Tell me, why did you even bother to spare me? Why give yourself to Aeris like that? Was it really to protect that twit? Or are you finally accepting your fate as the true king?”

The men who were working in the garden were standing now, watching the confrontation. One of them leaned his rake on the fence, clenching his fists as he glanced at me. One single motion of my hand and both men would have Carmen flat on the ground, her life in my hands.

“Why bring me back here if you still don’t want me?” she pressed.

I turned my back on her and walked into the garden.

“She’s not allowed in this house,” I said to the men. “She can sleep outside tonight like the rat that she is.”

I didn’t glance over my shoulder as I stepped into the house. Brandt was leaning in the doorway of the sitting room, his arms crossed over his chest.

“We need to talk,” I said, tilting my head toward the stairwell.

[Chapter 830](#)

Eliza

Jared was gone for the rest of the day, leaving me alone in his huge bed. It was quiet in the house, and out the windows that lined the far wall of his bedroom, I could see people working in the gardens that circled the old manor. Large puddles of muddy water covered the village, reflecting the lights spilling from the cottages and shop fronts that wove along the well-beaten trail weaving through town.

I had no idea what Jared was up to. I also had no idea what exactly he wanted me to be doing right now.

I went through his dresser, trying to find something that would fit me other than the cotton pajamas I’d been wearing all day. All I had to my name was my journal, my pajamas, and the gray dress I wore during my job as a laundry maid... which Miriam hadn’t brought with her when dropping off my “things.”

I pulled out a soft, cream-colored long-sleeved shirt from his dresser, snapping it through the air to shake out the wrinkles. I changed into the shirt, which hit me mid-thigh. I rolled up the sleeves to my elbows and continued to rifle through his dresser, opening every single drawer until I found a pair of thick wool socks and a pair of thermal leggings that looked like they would have fit Jared when he was a child.

“Perfect,” I said, holding them up to test the length. I’d have to ask him for new clothes, I thought as I looked at myself in the mirror above the dresser. I ruffled my hair, grabbed my journal, and walked out of the room.

His study was just down the hall. I figured the best way to pass my time as the pretend lady of the house was to go through every book and artifact in his study and start to piece together the mystery of the Cryptex.

I closed the door behind me and looked around.

Dusty rays of muted daylight poured through the gaps in the shuttered windows. The bookshelves touched the ceiling on the far side of the snug room, some housing glass globes and crystals. It smelled like him in here, leather and parchment. I loved it, but also couldn’t work in conditions such as these. My

mind was a tangled web in ordinary circumstances. I needed to do a little organizing, cleaning, and cataloging before any work could be done.

I knew Jared was going to be pissed I was touching his stuff, but I didn't care. Wifely duties, right?

I walked to the windows and pushed open the shutters one by one until the room was filled with gray afternoon light, the smell of rain filling the room.

I set to work pulling books from the shelves, writing their titles and a brief description of their contents in my journal. I worked through a pile of books taller than me for what felt like several hours. I moved them into new homes, organizing them in sections by topic and content. He had quite a collection of lore and mythology, which would prove useful to us, I was sure, but I resisted the urge to start researching Draven and the Cryptex.

I needed to know everything he had in his collection and exactly where to find it, first.

Soon I'd gone through every single book he had in his study and cataloged every single one in my journal. This was a start, and a good one at that. Tomorrow morning I could wake up and get to work. I was impressed by the work I'd done today, smiling at myself as I looked down at his spotless desk and tidy shelves.

But I was impressed by him most of all. Some of his collection was just... unreal, a dream.

I couldn't wait to talk to him about it the next time I saw him.

Another hour passed as I walked around the room, cataloging his collection of artifacts. By the time darkness fell and the room was cast in shadow, my journal was bursting with notes, and his study had never been so clean and organized.

I was just packing up to leave when I heard soft footsteps in the hallway outside the study, someone walking back and forth.

"Eliza? Are you up here?"

I opened the door to find Giselle and Scarlett standing in the hallway, both of them looking a little worried.

"What's the matter?" I asked, stepping out of the study with my journal clutched to my chest.

"We're not supposed to be up here," Giselle whispered. "But you missed dinner, so I thought we should come check on you."

Scarlett nodded in agreement. I let out the breath I was holding.

"You both looked like someone was seriously hurt, or dead!" I whispered.

"So... you really are married to Jared," Scarlett whispered back, looking up and down the hallway before meeting my eyes.

I didn't really know how to reply. "Uhm, kind of?"

“We should go to the tavern to talk about this!” Giselle whispering, nudging Scarlett. “Effie’s apricot wine is ready. I want to try it!”

“The tavern is for the men—” Scarlett began, but Giselle waved her hand in dismissal.

“I’ve been there plenty of times! Come on, it’ll be fine!”

Scarlett looked unsure, but Giselle turned her gaze to me, smiling broadly.

“I’ll definitely go,” I chirped. “I’ve never been—”

“Let’s go then, it’s getting late!”

I followed Giselle and Scarlett through the house, the three of us speaking in low whispers as people went about their evening routines. Giselle rifled through the coat closet, handing me the same jacket I’d worn to Tommy’s birthday party a few weeks ago.

“Is Jared here at all?” I asked.

Giselle shook her head as she pulled her arms through her jacket. “I didn’t see him or Brandt at dinner, and several of his crew were missing too.”

Interesting.

I glanced around the village as I walked arm in arm with Scarlett and Giselle. Lanterns lit the trail as we went along, our boots squelching in the mud and faces numbed by the mist-like drizzle.

We finally reached the tavern, which was a modest two-story building tucked in the center of the village, the largest building in the village other than the house it would seem. Its windows were well lit, shadows moving against them as we walked up under a covered porch and Giselle held the door open for us.

Inside was cozy and warmed by a fire roaring in a fireplace that took up half the room. A bar stretched across the far side of the tavern, several people leaning against it as a middle-aged woman with curly strawberry-blonde hair served pints of beer.

I looked around the room, wondering if I was going to run into Jared here, but I didn’t see him or any of the men I would have recognized from his crew.

Giselle skipped up to the bar, leaning against it and speaking with a man I didn’t recognize while Scarlett and I sat down at a table next to the window, overlooking the front porch and the village beyond.

“Was Archer... alright, when you saw him last?” she asked after a moment.

I turned to look at her, noticing the lines of concern etched into the corners of her eyes.

“Yeah, he was fine. Ready to get home,” I said with a soft smile.

Her cheeks colored a bit as she turned her gaze back to the window.

Giselle set three glasses on the center of the table, the pink-hued liquid bubbling lightly as she grinned at us. “It sparkles, like champagne!”

I took a sip, marveling at the sweet flavor. Whoever Effie was, well, she could make a glass of wine, that was for sure.

An hour passed in easy conversation with Giselle, and Scarlett retreated back to her usual quiet reflection. I told them everything I could about my experience at Aeris's castle without giving too much away. I knew I could trust them, but I wasn't sure how much they knew about Jared in particular. I did explain the certificate, and how Brandt and I had had to run for our lives out of Aeris's kingdom regardless.

It was getting rather late by the time we'd finished our glasses of wine, and Giselle got up to take our glasses back.

I heard a squeal from the other side of the room as I was putting on my jacket and looked up to see Tommy spinning Giselle in a circle, planting a kiss on her lips.

"I think she'll stay for a while," Scarlett breathed, the corners of her mouth tugging into a smile as I met her eyes.

"Are they mates?"

"I don't know; I think so. Giselle never mentioned whether or not the mate bond clicked into place after his first shift."

I held the door open for Scarlett as we exited the tavern, glancing over my shoulder and smiling as Giselle whispered what I assumed were sweet nothings in Tommy's ear.

Scarlett pointed in the distance as we walked, and I followed her gaze to the sparring ring, where a group of men was assembled and cast in shadow.

"Well, there they are," I said lightly, making out Jared's form in the group. "I wonder what they were doing—"

"We haven't had a chance to meet," came a feminine voice behind us.

Scarlett let out her breath as we turned around to face the voice, which belonged to none other than Carmen. She wasn't dressed for the chill, and her face was pink with the cold as she tilted her chin, looking down at me. She was several inches taller than me, but I squared my shoulders nonetheless.

"Can I help you?" I asked, not a single shred of politeness in my voice.

"So you're Jared's blushing bride," she said, clicking her tongue as she looked me up and down.

"Interesting."

"Go away, Carmen," Scarlett said so forcefully it gave me a start. I'd never heard her raise her voice like that before. Carmen arched her brow, looking Scarlett up and down.

"Little Lettie is all grown up, I see," Carmen said with mirth, rolling her eyes back to me. "Did you know she was a breeder? Poor thing... had her baby taken away. I heard she was more upset about the ancient Alpha who shared her bed for more than two years dumping her in the forest to die afterward—"

I shoved Scarlett behind me and swung, my fist missing Carmen's face but hitting her dead center in the throat. She screamed, holding her neck and staggering backward, gasping for air.

"You little b***h," Carmen croaked, her eyes flaming. "I'll f*****g kill you!"

"I'd like to see you try," I snarled, shrugging out of my jacket. "Why the f**k are you here?"

"Because your husband," she hissed, lingering on the word, "didn't want to leave poor ol' me behind. He has a soft spot for weak females, you know. You're not the first and you certainly won't be the last!"

"You're not supposed to be in the village!" Scarlett cried. I glanced over at her long enough to see the tears welling in her eyes. "You were banished years ago!"

"Shut up, Scarlett!" Carmen barked. "I don't talk to used-up breeders—"

I loosed a growl of fury as I launched myself at her. I don't know what came over me, but from that moment forward, anyone who even looked at Scarlett the wrong way would answer to me, and I couldn't guarantee it would be pretty.

We rolled through the mud until I was on top of her, trying to hold her down.

"That's my friend's mate," I snarled as I forced her wrists into the mud. "Apologize to her right now!"

"Tell me, Eliza," she drawled, still fighting against my hold on her. "Is Jared still as bossy in bed as he used to be? Does he call you his good girl—"

I picked her up and slammed her into the ground, but she wrapped one of her legs over mine and flipped me onto my back before I could even catch my breath.

Then she punched me, right in the nose.

Stars filled my vision for a moment, followed by male shouts. I felt Carmen's weight ease up as she rose, victorious.

I got to my feet, swaying a bit as Carmen turned to the group of men closing the distance between us.

"Such violence over her?" Carmen chuckled, pointing a thumb at Scarlett, who was stone-faced and pale. "Worthless, all of you women are just worthless."

I shook my head, spitting blood.

"Say that again," I challenged.

She turned me just as Jared came into view, his face a mask of ice.

"You are worthless. She is worthless. That's why Archer used to warm my bed instead of hers—"

When I punched her this time, I didn't miss.