

Kings Breeder 831

[Chapter 831](#)

“HEY!” Jared’s voice boomed through the area, ricocheting off the nearby buildings as I brought Carmen to her knees. She looked up at me, her eyes glowing with the first hints of transformation.

Jared yanked me backward by the collar of my shirt, dragging us apart while Brandt took Carmen roughly by the arm and led her in the opposite direction. She was screaming profanities that would have made even the most hardened pirate blush. I would have been impressed if I hadn’t been absolutely burning with rage.

“What the f**k is going on?” Jared snarled, turning me to face him.

I fought out of his grip, pushing him away. Adrenaline was pumping through my veins and I was panting, totally unable to control my breath. I swatted him away again as he reached out to me, but he didn’t flinch. He took my face in his hands, turning me from side to side as he inspected the damage I couldn’t yet feel.

“She called Scarlett a used-up breeder,” I said as I fought for air. “I didn’t like that.”

“I could tell,” he said in a low whisper, running his thumb over the bridge of my nose.

I hissed in a breath, meeting his eyes. “That hurts—”

“It’s not broken,” he said, a wry smile touching his lips. “You might have broken hers, though.”

I peer over his shoulder at the group of men lingering behind him, all of whom were chuckling and talking in low voices about what had just happened.

“I didn’t know you could fight like that,” Jared said, dropping his hands.

“I’ve never punched anyone before,” I admitted, flexing my hands. The knuckles on my right hand were raw, likely split open from the impact with her jaw. I was starting to feel it now, every bruise and scrape. I’d feel it for days.

The pain ignited some deep within, a buried fury that I’d been trying to stifle since the day we left Suncrest. I stepped away from him, glaring as I slowly turned to Scarlett, who was hovering nearby, hugging herself.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

She only nodded, looking more pale than usual.

I turned back to Jared, letting every raw, unfiltered emotion show on my face. “I’m going inside,” I said, and walked away before he could protest.

I put my arm around Scarlett’s shoulder as the group of men parted to let us pass.

“Thank you,” Scarlett whispered, her voice quivering.

“No one gets to talk to us like that, okay?” I replied, meeting her eyes.

She nodded, giving me a soft smile as we neared the house. Miriam appeared on the front porch, her face washed with frustration as she tied her robe around her middle.

“Oh, for the love of Lycaon, what happened now?”

I could hear Miriam ripping into Jared from behind the bathroom door. I sank lower into the bathtub, drowning out the sound of their lifted voices as the water swirled around me. Everything hurt. I was going to feel like hell tomorrow.

I felt like hell now, and knowing I was about to get an earful from Jared only made it worse.

He opened the bathroom door, staring down at me as he lingered in the doorway. I slumped into the water until I was consumed by it completely and held myself there for several seconds, opening my eyes beneath the surface and watching as his distorted figure moved across the room to lean on the vanity, his arms crossed over his chest.

“You’re absolutely feral, you know that?” he said as I dramatically broke the surface, smoothing my hair away from my face. “She could have killed you.”

“If she’s so dangerous,” I said tersely, grabbing a bar of soap off the side of the tub, “then why is she allowed to roam freely around the village?”

Jared flexed his jaw, tapping his fingers on his arm as he looked me over. I hadn’t bothered to look in the mirror. I could only imagine what I looked like right now. I could feel my heartbeat in my nose, for Goddess’s sake.

“I think she was planted by Aeris, a spy. That’s part of her skillset and—”

“Well, obviously,” I snapped, roughly soaping up a rag. “Are you just figuring that out?”

“Eliza—”

“I’m not even going to repeat the things she said to me,” I cut in, struggling to swallow past the painful lump in my throat. I’d only half convinced myself that I’d gone berserk on Carmen because she was incredibly mean to Scarlett, not because I was jealous of her past relationship with Jared.

She’d picked up on that, though. She knew exactly what to say to make me angry.

“If I had known you were going into the village—”

“You would have told me I couldn’t go, right? Because you don’t trust me—”

“This has nothing to do with trust!”

“Then what the f**k is going on, Jared?”

We stared at each other for a moment, a blanket of tension settling over the room. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, his eyes narrowing before he finally surrendered and kicked off the vanity, pulling a stool next to the tub.

“Carmen was here when I first arrived in this village, looking for work.” he sat down, resting his elbows on his knees. “She was the daughter of an Alpha but ended up working here, in the house, for Miriam.” He dipped his fingers in the water, swirling the bubbled surface. “I was fifteen when I came here. I had nowhere else to go, no way to take care of myself. I was hungry, tired. I proved myself in the ring and joined the crew.”

“What does this have to do with Carmen?”

“I’m getting there,” he said, flicking me with water. “Carmen was a kitchen maid and notorious with the younger men who lived in the village, the ultimate prize. She’s a couple years older than me. I didn’t give in for a while, but like I said... I was young, stupid, starving for attention and glory. She... used me in a lot of different ways, took advantage of me when I started climbing the ranks and eventually took over the pack and the village. I started to use her skillset, taking her on bounty hunts. She is responsible for securing half my collection of artifacts.”

I rested my chin on my knees.

“I took her to Suncrest shortly after I turned twenty-one and had a few months under my belt when it came to running the village. I knew Aeris from my childhood and thought we could form a professional alliance. He was more interested in using me to overthrow my brother. I refused, of course, but when Carmen found out who I really was she just... couldn’t let it go. That whole trip she was begging me, going as far as to try to manipulate me into accepting Aeris’s offer to help put me on the throne. I came home and she broke into my study one night. I caught her doing it. I forced her out of the village the next day and haven’t seen her since.”

He looked down at me, a brief smile touching his lips.

“As the daughter of an Alpha, even a late one... she had a chip on her shoulder. She used that to for own gain to access the courts of nearby territories. She’s been married twice, from what I’ve heard. She’s secured herself quite a fortune. How she ended up a prisoner of Aeris... I need to find that out, which is why I gave her freedom to roam around today. I had people watching her, of course. I needed to find out what she was up to, what she was planning.”

“And now?”

“Now... she’s being kept in one of the cottages, locked in and guarded. She won’t be able to get out until I’m ready to talk to her. My guess is she’s working for Aeris in some capacity.”

“She’s not going to talk,” I said firmly. I’d seen the look in her eyes before I swung on her. She was solid, unbreakable. Maybe in a way, I was the most jealous of that.

“She will,” he said with conviction, giving me a careful look before taking the soapy rag from my hands. “I’m not the same man I was three years ago. She hasn’t seen the full extent of my dark powers, not since I’ve been losing my wolf for a few years now.” He ran the rag over my arm, then down my back. I softened against his touch, closing my eyes for a moment.

“No one gets to touch you like that,” he said, his voice edged with silent, stifled fury.

“I think I handled it okay,” I replied, giving him a weak smile.

“I think you should go to the sparring ring tomorrow,” he said, dipping the rag back in the water. “You’re tough. You took a fist to the nose and got right back up.”

I tilted my head to allow him access to my neck. The water was perfect, and smelled richly of pine and sandalwood soap. Miriam had dumped a bag of what looked like salt into the bath, which stung my split knuckles a bit.

His fingertips brushed over my skin, lingering on the back of my neck for a moment before he rose from the stool and began taking off his clothes.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, pressing my knees against my chest.

He practically jumped into the bathtub, water splashing over the sides as he sunk into the water. He seemed pleased with himself, a boyish smile touching one side of his mouth.

“You’re filthy, and you’re cleaning all of that water up when you—”

I yelped in surprise as he pulled me into his chest, turning me around so my back was flush against him. He held me there for a moment, the water roiling like an incoming tide.

“This bathtub isn’t big enough for two,” he said, resting his arms on the sides.

“Yet there’s two people in it,” I replied curtly, toying with the rag.

“I told Miriam I was going to take care of you tonight,” he said softly, a hint of... regret, in his voice.

I turned to look up at him, noticing the gleam in his eyes. “Miriam’s pretty mad at you—”

“She told me if this curse doesn’t kill me, she will.”

I snorted with mirth, turning back around and allowing myself to melt against him. Jared ran hot when that shadow wasn’t tormenting him, and I could have sworn his fevered body heated the tub a few degrees. Steam danced above the water’s surface, fogging up the mirror on the far wall.

I leaned my cheek against his arm and took a risk.

“I’ve never looked at them this closely,” I whispered, trailing my fingers over the intricate tattoos that ran up the length of his arms. They swirled and wove themselves in a startling pattern. I could see... mountains, I believed, tucked between two veins of pure black ink. Stars flaked his skin, a waxing crescent moon... I turned to the other arm, curiosity bubbling through me as I adjusted my position on his lap.

He grunted, blowing out his breath as my ass and thighs brushed against his skin. He reached under the water, resting his hands on the curve of my hips as I traced the lines on his other arm, totally oblivious to the intimacy of the moment. Scars broke through the tattoos on the left side of his body. He likely shielded himself with this arm while wielding a sword or dagger with the other.

I adjusted my position again, following the tattoos up to his shoulder, where they began to stretch across his chest.

He let out his breath again, gripping my hips.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he breathed.

I could feel his need against my skin, rigid and wanting.

“Sorry,” I grinned. “You just said this tub isn’t big enough for two.”

We were so close now, my face only inches from his. I reached up to brush back one of the dark curls touching his brow, my fingertips lingering on the sharp planes of his face.

I kissed him, slow and deep, and every feeling of fear and longing rushed to the forefront of my mind. His hands moved from the underside of my knees all the way up to my hips.

“Come to bed with me,” he whispered against my lips.

[Chapter 832](#)

We didn’t make it to his bed, not for a long time.

We were flooding whoever’s room was directly beneath us by the time he picked me up and carried me out of the bathtub, my legs wrapped around his waist. He set me down on the counter, sliding inside of me without preamble as I arched my back and dug my nails into his shoulders. He was bracing himself with one hand on the fogged-up mirror, his other hand holding me in place by my hip.

He was moving achingly slow, each thrust meant to tease and draw out a pleading moan from my lips as I tangled my fingers in his hair.

I wanted more—much more. I wanted him to take me like he had the night after the ball. I wanted him to claim me.

“Please,” I whimpered, trembling as he nuzzled my neck, his teeth grazing over my skin. I locked my legs around his waist before he could pull out again, holding him in place.

I was playing with fire... well, with the shadow that he was doing everything to keep contained.

But that was exactly what I wanted. I wanted him to unleash himself, to take what he wanted from me. He ran his free hand up my back and tangled his hand in my hair, pulling me down so I was forced to look up into his face.

“Don’t play games with it, Eliza,” he rasped as I ground my hips against him, slow and teasing like he’d been thrusting into me. “Fuck—” he gritted his teeth, releasing his hold on my hair and pressing his forehead against mine. His eyes darkened as he pulled slightly away. I could feel that power coursing through him, begging for control.

“I want to,” I whispered, brushing my lips against his. “Please—”

He gathered me roughly against his chest and damn near kicked open the bathroom door as he carried me into his bedroom and dropped me on the bed. He grabbed my legs and pulled me toward him. He was on me in an instant, kissing me so deeply I found it hard to catch my breath.

He forced my legs open, entering me with the roughness I’d been begging for, and had me teetering on the edge of pure ecstasy within seconds.

He held himself up with one hand while the other cupped my breast, his thumb circling over my n****s. I arched my back, tears of pleasure welling in my eyes as I moaned his name.

"I'm so close," I whimpered, my vision blurred as I looked up at him.

He let out his breath, sweat dappled across his brow as he pulled me closer, grinding his hips against mine.

"Eliza," he rasped against my lips. "Come for me."

He thrust into me, hard, and my whole body shattered into a mind-numbing orgasm that had me seeing stars. His breath quickened, his hands gripping the sheets on either side of my body as my muscles contracted around his length. I was shaking, holding on to him for dear life.

I felt a chill settle over us as he rose onto his knees and took me by the waist, pulling me onto him with enough force to shake the bed. I looked up at him, my arms spread wide. That shadow was... everywhere. I could feel it with every stroke, in every touch.

So much power.

That animalistic look in his eyes as he gazed down at me, vulnerable and open for him, was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

He made me come again, and again until he was satisfied enough to let himself fall into pieces beside me, holding me against his trembling chest. The bedsheets were shredded and we were shimmering with sweat, our bodies illuminated by the light of the moon drifting through the windows.

He kissed the ridge of my shoulder, his teeth grazing my skin. I closed my eyes, imagining him biting down, leaving his mark on me.

But he didn't. I didn't expect him to, no matter how badly I realized I wanted it.

"You're asking for trouble," he whispered into my hair. He pulled what was left of the bedcovers over us. "I barely had control over it."

I rolled over to face him, taking his face in my hands.

Whatever I was going to say was silenced by the look in his eyes. It broke me.

"I think this is a little more than... playing pretend," I whispered.

"I know," he replied, brushing a kiss over my temple.

"Does it feel like this with everyone?"

"No," he breathed. "It doesn't."

Jared pushed his way into his study, kicking the door closed with his foot as he balanced a breakfast tray loaded with food and a pot of coffee. He cursed under his breath as he stumbled over a stack of books, glowering at me as he steadied the tray and gingerly walked toward the desk.

I was sitting on the floor surrounded by books and scratch paper, totally oblivious to his presence.

“You need to eat something,” he commanded over the sound of coffee being poured.

I shook my head, too totally engrossed in my research to pay him any mind, but after a moment he was towering over me with a plate of food. He bent down and snatched the pen out of my hand and set the food in front of me. “Eat, please.”

I gave him a somewhat annoyed smile as I balanced the plate of eggs, bacon, sausage, and potatoes in my lap. He turned to fix himself a plate, sipping his coffee as he looked over everything I’d laid out over the desk.

I’d woken before the sun with a sense of urgency and had been sitting in here ever since.

Jared had no idea it was because the thought of losing him to this curse had kept me up all night.

“I found a few mentions of Draven in your religious texts, but not many. Brandt mentioned the city of Myrel, but I haven’t been able to find anything about it.”

“Draven was the villain in the early lore of this realm; that’s why. You’re not likely to find things written about him because the focus is on Lycaon and his heroes, then the Dark Kings.” Jared turned to face me, biting into a piece of bacon. He shrugged, carefully stepping over the scratch papers and books scattered across the floor.

“What I don’t understand,” I said, waving my hands over the mess in front of me, “is why something like the Cryptex isn’t mentioned at all. Those pieces are solid gold and powerful. It obviously comes from a time when there was still magic like that just moving through the world... people who could forge such an item. I would assume something like this would have been sought after by the Church, the same way the Church of the Moon Goddess hoards the artifacts pertaining to this era. Draven said it was his, and he seemed upset that I had it. Why did he make it in the first place?”

Jared looked contemplative as he leaned against the desk and ate his breakfast. He shrugged.

“Brandt mentioned the witches—”

“No,” Jared said, shaking his head. “Absolutely not.”

“But if they could help us—”

“It’s out of the question.”

“Why?”

He motioned to the plate of food I was ignoring and I forked an angry bite into my mouth.

“The journey to their territory is treacherous, and I’m not going—”

“To risk me like that? Have I not proven I can handle this? I haven’t been able to find anything useful in your collection so far. We’re at a dead end!”

He sipped his coffee, his eyes locked on mine.

“I’ll go without you if you don’t agree,” I concluded.

One of his dark brows shot up. "Well it's a good thing you're training with the crew today."

"What?"

"Finishing eating," he said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. "We have somewhere we need to be."

Tommy clenched his fists, boxing the air between us and shifting from foot to foot. "Show me what ya' got, missy," he said with a boyish grin.

We were standing in the center of the sparring ring, ankle deep in mud and surrounded by Jared's crew as they leaned against the railing to watch.

"Get him in the jaw for me, Liz," someone said behind me, followed by grunts and chuckles of approval.

My cheeks flamed as I turned a careful eye on Brandt, who was inside the ring with us but standing out of the way with his arms crossed over his chest.

"How is this training?" I scowled.

"Just hit me," Tommy urged, a gleam in his eyes. "Come on, it'll be fun."

I swatted at him but he caught my wrist, shaking his head.

"Curl your hands into fists, Eliza," Brandt said firmly. I blew out my breath and swung at Tommy, hitting him squarely in the sternum. I stifled a shocked yelp as I held my fist against my chest, pain radiating through my bones. My skin was still sore, split, and bruised from punching Carmen last night.

Tommy grabbed me by the arms and turned me around, crushing my back against his chest. His hand hovered over my neck like he was holding a blade.

"Again," Brandt said as Tommy released me.

"Brandt, I don't know what I'm doing!"

"Think on your feet, Eliza. If Tommy really meant to hurt you, he would. Don't let that happen."

Tommy had a smug grin on his face as he shook out his shoulders and got into position again.

I swung at him, missing him entirely as he dodged my blow. He launched forward, grabbing me by the shoulders.

My body acted before my mind had a chance to catch up. I raised my hands and slammed them into the curve of his elbows, which caught him off guard and made him take a step toward me. I grunted with effort as I drove my knee into his groin, and then had to dig my heels into the ground to steady us both as Tommy pitched forward, his face draining of all color.

Raucous shouts of praise erupted from the railing. Tommy stumbled forward, his hands resting on his knees.

"Well, that's one way to do it," Brandt said under his breath as Tommy hobbled to the railing and threw up.

“Aye, Tommy, you deserved that!”

“She’s got some power to ‘er, this one. Say, Liz? When do you turn twenty-one?”

I wasn’t sure who had asked because all of the men seemed to be talking at once, all of them chiding and brutally making fun of Tommy as he slumped against the railing.

“August 29th,” I said to no one in particular, flexing my injured hand.

It was safe to say that Tommy was done sparring with me for the day. Brandt took his spot, and the men who had been watching me make a fool of myself decided they had better things to do than watch Brandt lead me through a variety of hand-to-hand combat exercises.

Brandt moved with the practiced skill of a dancer, every motion of his body calculated and sure. He and Jared had that in common. I was thankful it was Brandt training me and not someone like Archer, whose fighting style could be compared to that of a battering ram.

Brandt spent most of the time teaching me how to block, how to be on the defensive.

I was panting and flushed from exertion by the end of the session. The sun was setting over the village when Brandt finally told me we were done. I would be sporting new bruises tomorrow, I was sure. But the physical exercise had felt good, and had helped me unwind some of the tangled threads in my mind. I’d zoned out after a while, my thoughts flipping through the internal catalog of information I’d gathered from my morning spent in the study.

“Is your birthday really August 29th?” Brandt asked as he handed me a cup of water.

I drank deeply, nodding as I wiped my mouth. “Yeah, why?”

“Nothing, it’s just odd—”

“How’d it go?” Jared said as he approached the ring.

I turned to face him, fighting the smile threatening to spread across my face.

“She needs some work,” Brandt said flatly. “But Tommy won’t be giving Giselle pups anytime soon.”

Jared’s brows shot up as he glanced between us.

“Is dinner ready?” I asked as Jared helped me up and over the railing.

His hands brushed against my hips for the space of a breath before he turned to Brandt, who was watching us with a smug look on his face.

“I’m sure,” Jared said, but he didn’t turn to the house. He was obviously having a conversation with Brandt over the mindlink.

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

Both men turned their gazes to me, then back to each other.

“Seriously, what?”

“There’s something we have to do first,” Jared replied as Brandt leaped over the railing. “Carmen wants to talk to you, alone.”

[Chapter 833](#)

I had no desire to talk to Carmen, but it didn’t seem like I had much of a choice as I followed Brandt and Jared through the village.

“I thought she was supposed to be gone by now?” I asked, the words sharpened to an edge.

“She was refusing to leave until she talked to you first,” Jared replied.

I still didn’t understand his thought process when it came to Carmen. He was very nonchalant about it, especially since he had his suspicions about Carmen possibly being a spy for Aeris, or at least working for him in some capacity.

We left the village proper and began walking into the sparse woods that surrounded the village, walking along the same trail we’d taken during my arrival in the village weeks ago now. Several cottages dotted the area, their windows casting the forest floor in muted amber light as we trudged through mud and fog.

Three men were sitting on a porch, basking in lantern light, while a fourth roamed nearby in his wolf form.

Jared led me up onto the porch, pausing to allow one of the guards to unlock the door. I hesitated before stepping through the threshold.

She was sitting on a couch with her bare feet propped up on a pillow, her eyes flicking up to meet us as I followed behind Jared. She rolled her eyes back to whatever book she was reading.

“I’m not saying anything if you’re here, Jared. I already told you that.”

“I’m not playing your games tonight, Carmen,” Jared replied as Brandt stepped inside the cottage and closed the door behind him.

Carmen looked up at him, tilting her head as she scanned his face.

“Then leave, so I can talk to your wife alone,” she said curtly, chuckling to herself as she set her book down and rose from the couch. She was filthy, her long golden hair caked with dirt and in a long, messy braid that fell down her back. Black and purple bruises lined her eyes, and her nose was red and swollen from what had to have been a break.

I’d seen myself in the mirror this morning. I had similar bruising but not nearly as bad. I hated that I flushed with pride at the fact that I’d hurt her more than she’d hurt me.

Jared hesitated, glancing at Brandt, then at me. I gave him a nod, doing my best to curve my mouth into a convincing smile that said, ‘I’m fine. There’s nothing I’d rather be doing right now than sitting in a room with your bat-shit crazy ex-girlfriend.’

I failed, of course.

Jared took a heavy step forward, his eyes narrowed on Carmen. Her stone-cold facade faltered as he ran his fingertips over the hilts of the blades he always wore along his thigh.

Nothing was said between them, but whatever was lingering behind his eyes was enough to knock her down a few pegs.

Her eyes were downcast as Jared turned back around and motioned for Brandt to leave. He touched me lightly on the arm before stepping out of the cottage without saying a single word.

But I could feel his power in the room. It was a suffocating presence. I was sure that power was what he'd just shown Carmen.

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat as I scanned the room. It was sparsely furnished, nothing but a couch and dining table in the corner. A tea kettle was hanging from a hook over the hearth, its lid open and wafting steam.

"You wanted to speak to me," I said, squaring my shoulders.

Her lips twitched into a soft smile as she continued to keep her gaze on the floorboards.

"I'm surprised he let you," she replied, looking up at me. Her hair had fallen loose from her braid and fell over her face as she spoke. "I'm sure he's worried I'll infect your mind."

"Nothing you say to me will make me think any differently about him—"

"I wouldn't be so sure," she breathed, tilting her head as she looked me over. "I didn't believe it when I first heard about you. Everyone in Aeris's court was talking about the curly-haired girl Jared had brought with him. I assumed you were just some w***e meant for his enjoyment." She chuckled to herself, flopping back down on the couch. "Is it true you were sold to Aeris's brother as a breeder?"

I said nothing.

"Hmm... I guess it doesn't matter now, since you're married."

"Why are you working for Aeris?"

"I'm not," she said, exhaling deeply. "Is that what Jared told you?"

"That's what I assume—"

"I work for many people, some of whom are at odds with each other. No man is my master, Eliza."

Her voice rang out like a death knoll through the cottage, sending a shiver up my spine. She was looking directly into my eyes as she said it.

"Women like us... educated, forceful... we're rare. Do you understand that?"

"I'm not here to talk about character qualities with you—"

"Then why did you agree to talk to me? Was it simply curiosity?"

"You," I said, taking a step toward her, "wanted to see me."

"I did, that's true, but only to warn you about what's to come, what rumors are flying—"

"I already know that Jared is the brother of King Alexander. I know that he agreed to overthrow him if Aeris released you. Was that part of your plan with Aeris?"

"I had no plan with Aeris," she yawned. "I was just in the wrong place at the right time, you could say."

"I'm not playing games with you," Jared had said to her only minutes ago.

I wasn't, either. I looked her up and down, then turned on my heel and walked toward the door.

"I did steal his mother's locket," she said lightly.

I turned around to look over my shoulder at her. She was twirling a lock of her hair around her finger, looking contemplative.

"Do you want to know why?"

I didn't answer.

"I wanted him to overthrow his brother as well." She sighed, her eyes flicking up to mine. "I tried to understand why he wouldn't, but my mind is just... well, Jared and I have always had different priorities. I saw Jared rise up the ranks and take over this village. He's a born leader. But then he... turned twenty-one. He wasn't as easy to manipulate after that."

I chewed my lower lip to prevent myself from saying anything.

"That's what you're here for, isn't it, to help him break his curse? I heard rumors about your skill set when I was a prisoner in Aeris's castle."

"I don't believe you were a prisoner—"

"Oh, I was," she said with a little laugh, knitting her fingers over her stomach. "Suncrest is a fantastic place to sell jewels and artifacts. That whole city has incredible wealth. How was I supposed to know that a necklace I'd stolen from an Alpha's drunken daughter in a neighboring pack was a family heirloom dating back to Lycaon's time? Word of the missing necklace reached Suncrest before I did. They were looking for it, and they found it with me. But Aeris recognized me from when I traveled there with Jared years ago. He made me a deal—"

"So you are a spy," I said, taking a step toward the door.

She rolled her eyes.

"No, I work for someone else, someone with more power and much more to offer than Aeris. I made that clear, but Aeris is a cunning man. He read Jared for the fool that he is. Jared would have never accepted Aeris's terms unless he had something Jared wanted. That thing was me, apparently."

I fought against the fury heating my skin, steeling my expression.

"And now I'm here," she breathed. "And will likely be stuck here for a while—"

"You're supposed to be gone already—"

"Jared made the call to keep me locked up," she said slyly, her eyes glimmering with mischief. "I had... quite the day with him today. Much cozier than being in the sparring ring. It was like old times—"

I turned from her and closed in on the door, my body nearly trembling with rage.

“Where is his mother’s locket?” I asked, closing my eyes with my hands wrapped around the doorknob.

“That stupid f*****g locket,” she laughed. “I tossed it over the bluff on the other side of the village.”

“What? Why?”

“Because after he turned twenty-one and got that busted piece of gold as a gift, he wouldn’t stop opening that locket and listening to the song it played. It drove me insane.” She hummed the tune, rolling her eyes as I slowly looked over at her, my blood thundering through my veins. “It was driving him crazy, so I took it and threw it away. He kicked me out of the village after that. That’s when I saw the full force of his dark powers for the first time. Sure, I’d seen glimpses, especially in bed but... never like that.”

I was having a hard time focusing on her words. My mind filled with the song she’d hummed, its chords refusing to ease their grip.

“Does he let you into his study?” she asked as I turned the knob. When I didn’t answer, she said, “I haven’t been there in years. I was the only person allowed when—”

“Why did you want to talk to me?” I snarled, the words trembling as they left my lips.

“To warn you,” she said casually, adjusting her position on the couch.

“Of what?”

“Of falling in with men like Jared because you have nowhere else to go.”

I stole a glance at her, noticing the smile spreading across her face.

“I take it you’re from the capital, and likely came out west on your own for a little adventure? That’s how you ended up at a breeder auction, totally in over your head. Jared saved you like he saved all the others and you’re warm and cozy in his bed, right?”

I gritted my teeth as she continued.

“He wanted to lock me away, you know, keep me in that house and have his pups and worship the ground he walked on. For a time I thought that was what I wanted, too. He was powerful, wealthy... rough when I wanted him to be. But I wanted more, and when I made that clear, he made it even clearer that wasn’t going to happen—”

“I don’t believe a word you say—”

“Then believe this, Eliza,” she said as she sat up, her hair falling over her back. “Listen to me when I say I can show you places you’ve never even dreamt of. The two of us, with our skills... ha, think of what we could accomplish, who we would be—”

“You made him bring me here because you want us to work together?”

“Isn’t there something you want?” she replied. “Something you’re looking for? Some prize that would make your unorthodox education worth it? Or are you fine warming a Dark Lord’s bed until he gets tired of you and moves on to the next sad, submissive female he finds?”

I opened the door and stepped outside. Jared and Brandt were leaning on the railing of the porch, their arms crossed over their chests. One of the guards walked past me and closed the door, locking it as I met Jared’s gaze.

I was sure he’d heard everything she said.

“We need to talk,” I said sharply, then walked briskly down the stairs and out into the night.

And as I put distance between me and Carmen, my mind curled around the tune she’d sung.

The same song I’d composed as a child.

[Chapter 834](#)

Jared didn’t follow me into the house straight away. I was okay with it. I needed a minute to just sit in the feelings I was experiencing and take a moment to mull them over.

Dinner was being served in the dining room like usual, and the house was blanketed in lively chatter over the sounds of silverware clanging against porcelain plates. I sat down, fixing myself a plate as I scanned the table.

“Where’s Scarlett?” I asked Giselle, who was sitting across from me with a glass of wine in her hand.

“I haven’t seen her since this morning,” she replied, taking a sip of wine as she looked over my bruised face. “I think she was a little shaken about what I heard happened last night.”

“You missed quite a show,” I breathed, rising from my seat and grabbing an empty plate from the center of the table. I fixed Scarlett a plate of food and picked up my own, balancing them on my hands. “I’ll talk to you about it later. I’m going to try to find her and make sure she’s okay.”

Giselle gave me a grateful nod in farewell as I walked out of the dining room, careful not to make eye contact with Miriam. I could feel her gaze on my back as I awkwardly pushed my way through the door leading out of the dining room and into the narrow hallway leading toward the stairwell to the upper levels. I poked my head into the laundry room, but didn’t see Scarlett.

My arms were aching by the time I made it to the attic. Scarlett was curled up in her bed, and for a moment I thought she might have been asleep, but she opened one eye and peered at me as I set her plate down on the table between our beds.

I sat down on my old bed facing her, setting my plate in my lap.

I took a deep breath as she sat up.

“I just had a conversation with Carmen,” I said slowly, blinking as if trying to wash the memory of the confrontation from my mind. “She told me some things about Jared that have me... questioning...” I tapered off, unsure of how to word what I was feeling and thinking.

“Don’t believe a single word she says,” Scarlett practically growled as she swung her legs out of bed, her bare feet grazing the floor as she took the plate from the table. “This is a game to her. It always has been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Men,” she said firmly, then exhaled, toying with her food with her fork. “I’d only been here for a few weeks by the time Jared banished her from the village.”

I knew Scarlett had only been living in the village for a few years, and before that she’d been raised in the same orphanage as Archer, and then became an Alpha’s breeder. What had happened when she first arrived at the village was still a mystery to me.

“I was... not well when I first came here,” she began, struggling to swallow. “Archer was very... gentle with me, defensive of me. Carmen was staying in the attic at the time, a kitchen maid. She saw my weakness and Archer’s possessiveness as a threat, I think. I’ve never asked Archer about his history with her. I’m not sure I want to know, but she immediately began to try to put herself between Archer and me. At first, I thought she was being protective of me, you know? But then I... some of the things she said to me about Archer just didn’t align with who I knew him to be.”

I exhaled heavily, understanding that sentiment completely.

“Carmen ruled the house. She didn’t listen to Miriam and spent most of her time causing trouble. She was in the habit of calling Jared her mate, and I remember several instances where he publicly reprimanded her for doing so. She’d tell all of us women he was hers, and fought with several of the women we worked with because Jared smiled at them, or talked to them. She got worse and worse during those last few weeks she lived here.”

She took a deep breath, shaking her head.

“I was in the laundry room one evening when Archer came inside to talk to me. We were both... broken. I’d felt the mate bond with him the second I saw him again after I was brought here, but I wasn’t in a place to even express it. He knew, of course, but didn’t push me. He’s never pushed me. He was more concerned about me than claiming me but... we were talking, I don’t even remember what about, and Carmen came into the laundry room and found us. She told Archer she needed to talk to him, and made it sound like it was an emergency. Archer didn’t seem comfortable going with her—” She swallowed, blinking several times to clear the tears from her eyes.

“The look she gave me over her shoulder still haunts me, Eliza. Like... like she knew she was about to hurt me, to hurt a pair of mates and she wanted me to know, like she was staking a claim to him she wasn’t entitled to. That night I just... hurt, physically, like my soul was being ripped from my body. I knew then that she’d taken him to... to bed—”

“Oh, Scarlett,” I said, setting my plate down so I didn’t break it in half with the intensity of my grip. “Archer would never have done that to you. You know that!”

“I know,” she said, swallowing back a sob. “I know he wouldn’t have. But Carmen was trying to hurt me, Eliza, because she thought the attention I was getting was a threat to her for whatever reason. It was

common knowledge that she went after the highest-ranking men in Jared's circle. She'd been doing it since before he took over the village."

"They both made it sound like they were exclusive—"

"Maybe Jared was," she cut in, then shook her head. "Carmen wasn't. I know that much. I can promise you that much."

A silence settled between us, and it was obvious neither of us had an appetite.

"She said some things to me that made me wonder if... well, she asked if I was comfortable spending my life warming someone's bed. She asked if Jared was keeping me locked up, essentially controlling me—"

"She's threatened by you—"

"She offered to take me with her, to work as partners." I sucked in my breath as I ran my palms over my pants. "She asked if I was looking for something, if I wanted more out of life than I'd get here."

"Do you?"

I looked up at her, her green eyes shone like gems in the soft light of a lantern illuminating the room, her mouth slightly ajar as she waited for me to answer.

"I thought I did," I whispered, knitting my hands together over my lap. "I do, I just... Jared is... not what I expected him to be when I first met him. I've never allowed myself to feel like this for anyone, I guess. It was never on my mind but now it's the only thing on my mind."

"You love him?"

I looked up at her through my lashes, the truth of the matter settling against my chest.

"I do."

But everything Carmen had said to me was clawing at that notion. Jared was commanding, forceful, and strong-willed. So was I. If he hadn't been carrying this curse on his shoulders, what kind of man

would he be? What kind of expectations would he hold me to?

Was I really just a pretty thing to come home to? If we broke this curse, would he expect me to just stay home, to have his pups, to raise his children and run his house?

"He's not what she says he is," Scarlett said with force, reading every emotion fluttering over my face. "I promise you."

"I feel like I barely know him," I said, resigned as I ran my hands over my face. I was exhausted. My body felt like it would fall into pieces if I stood up too fast. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and hide beneath the covers until the sun was high in the sky tomorrow.

"And you're not like Carmen," Scarlett concluded. "Not a bit. You never will be."

I looked up at her, wanting to believe her. I really did. But I'd seen my reflection in Carmen's dark brown eyes. I'd had the same fire, the same stubbornness and drive in her gaze.

I hated that I was actually thinking about Carmen's offer.

"Do you know anything about Jared's locket?" I asked, but Scarlett shook her head.

"I've never seen it, but I remember hearing that Jared was a mess after it went missing. Carmen took it, from what I was told. She was here one day and gone the next."

I nodded. I was unable to process that piece of the puzzle yet. Every time I thought about the locket, I pictured Jared's face that first day at Aeris's castle when he'd caught me playing the piano. I'd played the same song Carmen had hummed. Jared had said... when I told him I composed it, he'd told me I hadn't, and he'd looked... shocked.

Scarlett rose from the bed and moved to the armoire, grasping the dark for something out of my line of sight.

"I should have asked you first," she murmured, turning around with the map I'd stolen from Aeris's vault. "But it was very wet, and I was worried about the fabric disintegrating. It looked important."

"You mended it," I gasped as she placed it in my arms.

"I sewed some paneling on the back so the original fabric wasn't having to support itself any longer. I was gentle, I promise." She pointed to the symbols and the map itself, her fingers brushing over the raised lines of colorful thread she'd sewn over the paint. "I was very careful."

She'd embroidered over the original map, bringing it to life. I looked up at her, shocked beyond belief.

"Thank you," I said, meaning every word. "I can't tell you how much this means to me."

She shrugged, looking pleased. "What is it, exactly? I know it's a map of Egoren, but it was obviously made centuries ago."

"You're right," I replied, looking down at it. I traced the symbols she'd stitched to perfection. My fingertips brushed over the northern tip of the map, where mountains stretched across the coast. Above it, she'd stitched the faded stars, the moon, the forked river that stretched—

Wait a minute.

I looked at her, my heart pounding against my ribs.

Holy s**t. Holy—

I sprung from the bed, nearly knocking over the plate of untouched food sitting next to me.

"What's the matter?" Scarlett yelled, her eyes wide as I looked down at the map again, scanning the northern hemisphere and letting it weave itself like a thread through my mind.

"His tattoos," I rasped. "Oh, my Goddess!"

I ran from the room, Scarlett hollering after me, but I didn't stop. I didn't stop running until I reached his study. I leaped over the piles of books and papers still scattered on the floor. I swept my arm over his desk and sent everything on top of it clattering to the ground.

And then I drew, and I drew, until the desk was full of sketches of his tattoos, the memory of them forever etched into my mind.

I backed away from the desk, pushing the chair out of the way so roughly it fell to the ground, the sound echoing through the room.

Silence fell, the room so still I could hear my own heart beating.

I looked down at the map that would take us to Myrel, the birthplace of the Cryptex... the home of Draven and what I prayed was the key to breaking the curse.

Jared had been carrying around the answers on his skin since the day he turned twenty-one.

There was a commotion outside the window, the sounds of shouts breaking me from my shock. I ran to the window, throwing open the shutters to find Jared's crew rushing toward the house.

A burst of noise rattled the house, followed by a male roar loud enough to cause the glass panes in the window to tremble.

I whirled toward the door, my heart stopping mid-beat.

[Chapter 835](#)

Jared

Eliza didn't look back over her shoulder as she walked out into the night. I hadn't expected her to, not after the conversation I'd overheard from my position on the porch.

I flexed my jaw as I leaned on the railing and watched her walk away, debating whether or not to follow.

That would really depend if I was going to kill Carmen now, or save that for later.

"What're you going to do?" Brandt asked in a low whisper as the crewmen I'd posted to guard the cottage changed their positions behind us.

"Nothing Carmen said was inherently wrong," I replied. The words left an acrid taste in my mouth as I glanced at Brandt, shaking my head. "Though I need to find out who she's working for if it's not Aeri."

"But, Eliza—"

"I'll deal with Eliza," I said sharply, not meaning the words to be so harsh. In truth, my blood was boiling and I was two seconds away from dragging Carmen into the Dark Forest by her hair and doing what I should have done years ago.

The shadow of power within me was roiling as I walked down the steps shoulder to shoulder with Brandt. It was full dark now, the sky nothing but deep black as we walked through the outskirts of the village. It would rain again tonight. I could feel the electricity in the air as we turned onto the trail leading to the house. I wasn't looking forward to the conversation I'd have to have with Eliza tonight.

I had no plans to defend myself or my history with Carmen, I'd already said everything that needed to be said.

It was Carmen's offer to Eliza that needed to be discussed, and immediately. Eliza still saw Egoren through a faded lens, seeing only what she wanted to see. Carmen had enticed her. I knew that for a fact.

"Do you know the schedule for the trade ships that travel between the realms?" I asked as we broke from the trees.

"The last time I was in the Capital, there was a trade ship at the port of Egoren, the first in many months."

"s**t," I breathed, shaking my head.

"I don't think Eliza is dumb enough to take anything Carmen says as the truth," Brandt cut in, coming to a stop. "She wouldn't go off with Carmen—"

"She will if she believes Carmen can help her break my curse."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"I don't know anymore," I said, meaning it.

The idea of putting Eliza at risk was an immense weight on my shoulders, and I was finding it harder and harder to focus. She was in harm's way just by being with me, and the only thing I could do to protect her was to just... be here, be with her, and pretend to be her husband if the wrong people came calling.

A shrill howl sounded somewhere to the east, followed by howls of recognition as Brandt and I turned to the sound.

"The scouts—" Brandt said, his voice catching in his throat as he furrowed his brow.

Another howl pierced the air as a rush of adrenaline prickled over my skin. They were sounding an alarm.

People living in the scattered cottages in the woods came out onto their porches, some of them holding onto young children who were rubbing sleep from their eyes. Brandt began to take off his leathers but I put my hand on his chest, my eyes still fixated on the darkness beyond.

Another howl sounded, this one much closer, followed by six or seven howls much more faint, but closing in on us.

'All men outside. Form a perimeter around the village,' I commanded through the mindlink. Within seconds, the sounds of shouts echoed through the village as my pack, young and old, sprung into action.

Brandt slipped into the darkness, silent as a ghost.

Men ran past me, some of them on foot and some in their wolf forms as I stalked into the woods. I unsheathed a blade, testing the sharpened edge against my fingertips.

A chorus of howling echoed through the woods as the village quieted behind me, everyone who hadn't been called to guard the village tucked safely within their houses.

I fought back the thought of Eliza, knowing damn well she'd be putting up a fight against Miriam, who would be rounding up the women for a headcount at this very minute.

I found myself in front of the cottage where Carmen was being kept, the porch now unguarded. I gripped the hilt of my blade and walked up the steps.

She was laying on the couch looking bored, which I expected. I didn't close the door behind me as I stepped over the threshold, pushing some of my power forward into the room to show her I wasn't here to argue.

"Up," I commanded, my voice dripping with hatred. "I want you out of here and on your way, now."

"Aren't you even remotely curious—"

"I heard everything you said to Eliza, and there is nothing more you could possibly have to say," I snarled, teeth bared. My blade glimmered in the light of the hearth, a crimson reflection making the blade look like it had when it'd been pulled from the forge. "Go, and if I ever see you again, Carmen, I won't hesitate to kill you."

"She's your mate, isn't she?" Carmen made no moves to rise from the couch. She raked her fingers through her hair, her dark eyes fixed on mine. "I can sense it, you know. You carry her scent. She carries yours."

"I said get out—"

"You've been looking for her your entire life. I wish I could be happy for you, Jared, but you found her a little too late, didn't you?"

"I'm not speaking about Eliza with you."

"Fate, isn't it? Funny how these things go—"

I crossed the room and grabbed her by the elbow, dragging her out of the cottage and tossing her roughly on the porch. "I said go—"

"There are others looking for the artifact," she hissed, her eyes narrowing. "Consider that information a parting gift."

"Your employer?" I asked, running my fingertip over my blade again.

"She has no desire for it, no. But she'd be useful to Eliza if your mate survives this place, survives you. You'll take her down with you, Jared."

"Leave this village," I spat.

"Tell Eliza that Hestia is waiting for her," Carmen grinned, her eyes narrowed into slits.

Hestia? Hestia as in... the witch?

"Wait—"

Carmen was gone in a flash, her clothes tearing away as her golden wolf form sprinted into the pitch black.

“f**k,” I growled, adjusting my grip on my blade as I ran off the porch and into the night. It was quiet, much too quiet as I closed the distance between me and the perimeter of men guarding the village. I could barely see them moving through the darkness, but they were there.

My mind was elsewhere at the moment. The howling in the distance faded as I raked my mind for everything I knew about the Dark Witch.

Hestia the Dark, the Witch of Shadows—she’d had a bounty on her head since before I was born.

Carmen was bluffing. Hestia hadn’t been seen in decades. And even so, what would she possibly want with Eliza?

Muffled shouting erupted in the distance, breaking me from my thoughts. I took off in a sprint, several of my crewmen running with me as we broke through the heavy underbrush.

“Stop!” Brandt screamed, his voice edged with desperation.

I sent the command down the mindlink and the men and wolves flanking me skidded to a halt while I continued forward.

A trio of wolves I didn’t recognize stood in a row in the distance, guarding something.

I put my hand on Brandt’s shoulder then stepped past him, keeping a good distance between me and the wolves.

“Who are you? This is my territory.”

One of the wolves took a cautious step forward, his nose lifted to pick up my scent. He pawed the ground, growling low in his throat. His companions whined and huffed in response to whatever conversation was taking place over mindlink between them, a connection I wasn’t privy to outside of my crew.

Their leader turned, his tail swishing as his companions fell in line ahead of him. I couldn’t see their coloring in the dark. I had no idea where they had come from, or why. They were gone as quickly as they’d come.

But then I saw Archer laying flat on his back, his chest heaving with effort.

“Lantern!” Brandt bellowed, his voice holding strong despite the quiver of panic I caught in his tone.

I didn’t wait for him. I ran to Archer, falling to my knees and taking his face between my hands.

“Can you hear me, man?”

“Scarlett’s boy—” he sucked in a rattling breath.

I smacked him lightly on his cheeks as I felt his body give in to whatever injury he was suffering from. Yellow light flared behind me as Brandt arrived with a lantern, casting Archer and me in a golden glow.

“f**k me,” I ground out, tearing my eyes away from the horrific gash that ran from Archers hip to his ribs, his shirt shredded and soaked in blood. “f**k, Archer. Stay awake—Look at me—”

“The Alpha—is dead. Dead. Scarlett’s boy is—I don’t—” Archer choked on the blood pooling in his mouth.

“Get him back to the house, now!” I shouted.

Men were already springing into action around me. I took off my shirt and pressed it into his stomach, holding it there as he was lifted off the ground and carried back to the village.

“Who the f**k did this to him?” I snarled at Brandt, who was pale and wide-eyed.

Brandt met my eye, shaking his head.

“I need boiled water, alcohol, anything will do—” Miriam said in a trembling voice as she bent over Archer, who was laid out on the dining room table.

I was snapping commands at everyone nearby, but inside I was reeling, my heart threatening to jump out of my chest.

“Scarlett!” Archer cried, over and over. He was using the last of his strength to attempt to fight off anyone who came near, and it took six of my strongest men to keep him from rolling off the table.

“It’s not that bad, honey,” Miriam said with tears rolling down her cheeks as she bent to whisper in Archer’s. “You’ll be fine.”

But one look at Archer’s wound told me he would not be fine. Everything was coated in blood—the table, the floor....

Scarlett appeared at his side, wrapping an arm protectively around him as she bent to lean her cheek against his forehead. I couldn’t see her face. I wasn’t sure I wanted to. But seeing her holding Archer shattered something inside of me.

“I need a very large needle and the thickest thread you have.” Eliza’s voice filled the room. She was standing on the other side of the table from me as she tied her hair back with a ribbon, her eyes roving over Archer’s stomach. “Goddess, this is bad.”

She disappeared again, panicked activity taking her place as maids brought in pots of boiling water and bottles of what I was sure was moonshine.

“Hold these for me,” Eliza said somewhere in the crowd, then sidestepped into view, her arms bent at the elbows as she held her hands up, trying not to touch anyone. The smell of alcohol cut through her usual scent as her upper thighs brushed against the table.

Miriam was already cleaning his wounds and he bucked violently as she splashed alcohol over his gash. He screamed, and Scarlet tightened her grip, wrapping herself defensively around his shoulders.

Eliza didn’t look at anything, or anyone, as she took the needle and thread in her hands. I watched her sew my friend back together again with a practiced grace that left me dumbfounded.

Archer passed out at some point, and many of the onlookers left the room. Eliza stepped back, pale in the face as Miriam and two kitchen maids came forward with tinctures and bandages.

Eliza looked like she was struggling to catch her breath. It took everything in me to stay where I was and not go to her side.

She looked up at me through her lashes, her mouth slightly ajar as she took a shuddering breath.

Then she turned on her heel and left the room.

I squeezed Scarlett's shoulder before taking off after her.