

# SOLD AS THE ALPHA KING'S BREEDER

## Chapter 836

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### **Chapter 47: It's Over**

*Eliza*

I knew Jared was behind me. I could feel him closing in on me as I entered his bedroom and walked to the bathroom. My hands were covered in Archer's blood. They shook as I washed them in the sink, crimson streaks swirling down the drain. The doorway creaked with Jared's weight as he leaned against it.

"I knew what I was doing. He'll heal," I said, my voice quivering as I soaped up my hands.

"Why did you tell us you didn't fight in the war in your realm?"

"Because I didn't." A chill ran down my spine as I glanced at him through the mirror then dropped my gaze back to my hands.

"How did you know how to stitch—"

"There weren't enough nurses in Mirage to tend to the wounded who were sent there from Breles. Practically every abled-body person of age was called to fight. I worked as a medic. I learned a few things. Doing the mending here... honed my craft." I dried my hands on a towel and turned to face him. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Jared replied, his tone thick with frustration. "He should have been halfway to the capital right now. I'll find out once he's had some rest."

"Then the village isn't in danger?"

"I have guards posted around the perimeter of the village. Scouts have been sent out after the wolves who left him just outside my territory. I'll know more in the morning, I'm sure."

His words echoed through the room as I absently reached for a hairbrush. A silence settled between us, but I found myself deafened by everything left unsaid.

"I'm sorry that Archer was hurt. I know... I know how much he means to you, and to Brandt."

He said nothing in response, but I could feel his gaze on my neck as I reached up to undo the ribbon holding back my hair. I ran the brush through my curls if only to do something other than sit in suffocating silence with him.

"I let Carmen go, Eliza. She's gone. I overheard what she talked to you about and I need to say—"

"It's fine," I interrupted, though my throat tightened painfully around the words.

"She wasn't totally wrong in anything she said to you, but I need to explain some things."

I looked over at him, a ripple of shock prickling over my skin. He took a step into the bathroom, his eyes focusing on mine with an intensity that made me want to take a step away from him.

"Carmen wasn't my mate, but she wanted to be. Before I came into my powers, that was what I wanted more than anything—to find my mate, have a family... live a life free of Alphas and raise this village up to its full potential. It was never going to be Carmen, and she knew that. But I wasn't what I am now when I was with her. I didn't have the curse hanging over my head. I've changed over the last three years, maybe for the worst."

He sat on the edge of the tub, stretching his legs out in front of him.

"I didn't keep her locked up. She worked in this house. She lived here only because I allowed it, but she was under Miriam's control, not mine. She never shared this room with me. She wasn't allowed in my study because I didn't trust her. She lied to you when she told you she'd had access. That was my only rule for her, and she broke it to steal from me. I felt nothing when she left, and what I felt when I saw her on the platform in Suncrest was fear, and not because she was going to die. It was fear because I knew Aeris was doing this to try to get to you, and I couldn't allow him to win. I made the choice to rise up against my own brother to save my—"

He paused, breathing deeply and closing his eyes for a moment. He shook his head, continuing, "As the years ticked by, I accepted my fate. I found it unlikely I'd ever break the curse and I'd succumb to the full force of my dark powers. I pushed the idea of finding my mate away—"

"The song in the locket," I said softly, cutting him off. "She said you used to play it over and over again after you were given the first piece of the Cryptex. Why?"

"Because I felt the mate bond through it," he said, his eyes focusing on mine once again.

My chest tightened around his answer, my heart beginning to beat rapidly as I slowly set the hairbrush down on the counter.

"The song—"

"Is the same one you played on the piano in Aeris's castle," he confirmed, resting his hands on his knees with a sigh. "The song you said you composed as a child."

"How is that possible?"

He looked up at me through his lashes, his eyes like simmering embers. "I have to take you to the capital. You need to return to your own realm, Eliza."

I inhaled deeply, my entire mind and body physically revolting against the idea of going home.

"Why did I know the song in your mother's locket?" I forcefully repeated.

I knew the answer already. Maybe I'd known for a while but was never willing to admit that it could be the truth.

"I don't know—"

"You do know," I ground out, tears welling in my eyes. "You just won't say it. You're fine playing house with me and taking me to your bed, but you're never honest about what's actually happening. You had nothing to say about Draven coming to me in the Dark Forest... or the witch, or why I felt the powers in the Cryptex when no one else can. What is happening, Jared? Why—"

There was a sharp knock on the door of his bedroom. Jared stood up and left the bathroom in a single long stride. I followed him out, fear prickling over my skin as Miriam's voice cut through the electric tension in the room.

"Archer is lucid. He's refusing to rest until he speaks to you. He's been moved to the old infirmary."

"I'll go to him. Get some rest, please," he told her, his voice softening a bit as Miriam sighed shakily and her footsteps retreated down the hallway.

Jared looked over his shoulder at me. "We'll talk about this later."

"I want to go with you."

"Fine," he said, holding open the door as I stepped past him.

I didn't know where the infirmary was. The maze-like house held rooms I'd never been in before and I'd been living here for weeks. I followed him down

the stairs to the second story, then through an archway and down a winding hallway lined with doors shut tight against the slight chill in the air. He didn't knock as he opened an inconspicuous door that led into a large room with several cots lining one wall. Only one of the cots was occupied.

"I'm glad your mending skills transfer over to flesh," Archer said in a pained, gravelly voice as he grunted and pushed himself into a seated position.

"Lay back down," I urged, walking briskly toward him.

"I'm fine, really," he said, his cheek dimpling with a boyish smile. "I can't wait for the scar this will leave behind."

I gave him a genuine smile, my shoulders losing some of the painful tension they'd been carrying all day.

But then he looked up as Jared walked over and his smile faded in an instant.

"Have you signed the marriage certificate yet?" Archer asked.

"No, we haven't."

"You need to, as soon as possible. Aeris has already started spreading the word about you, how you're going to rise up against the King with your... rightful Luna, a Luna from the Dark Realm. Every village I stopped in was talking about it, and I hadn't even made it halfway to the capital before I found out about the Alpha of Alderwood."

I sat on the edge of the bed, glancing between the two men. Jared shifted his weight, tucking his hands in his pockets as he looked down at Archer expectantly.

"You said the Alpha was dead?"

"He is. I was in the village of Leviss, fifty miles east of here. He was killed by bandits on the road. His body was still in the village, and I was able to confirm his identity. Gage wasn't with him."

"Who's Gage?" I asked them.

Archer's expression darkened, his eyes shifting from Jared's to my own.

"Scarlett's son... the reason I was going to the capital, trying to intercept them. When I found out the Alpha was murdered, I thought the boy had been as well—" he took a shuddering breath, wincing at the pain of his stitches. "He was taken, probably to be held for ransom."

"Who were the bandits?"

"Abel's men," Archer answered without hesitation, his eyes focusing on Jared with an intensity that made me flush with apprehension.

"Who's Abel?"

"Someone we used to know," Jared replied flatly, sitting down on the cot across from Archer's. "You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm going there tomorrow—"

"Not in your condition. Abel won't harm the boy—"

"Where does Abel live?" I asked, but they ignored me.

"Scarlett doesn't know," Archer said, shaking his head. "I need to tell her."

"No," Jared said firmly. "Not until—"

"What do you mean, no?" I snarled, glaring at Jared. "This is her son we're talking about!"

Jared slowly met my gaze, his eyes narrowed as he clenched his jaw.

"Stay out of it, Eliza. Abel is a dangerous—"

"Oh my Goddess! Literally everyone in this realm is dangerous according to you, Jared. Tell her—" I turned to Archer, pointing my finger at him. "You tell her, and then figure out how to get that kid back to his mother."

"This doesn't concern you, Eliza," Jared said through gritted teeth.

I ignored him. We could fight about this later.

"If you don't tell her, I will," I said to Archer.

He nodded, looking slightly relieved.

"I will."

I rose from the cot and gave Jared a dirty look before leaving them to talk amongst themselves. I had it in mind to go all the way to the attic where Scarlett was probably rolling around in bed, wondering what the hell had happened. I was just as curious about how Archer had ended up severely wounded just outside of the village, but that could wait.

I changed into pajamas after arriving back in Jared's bedroom. I knew he would be close behind, especially after seeing the exhaustion and pain etched into Archer's face every time he took a breath.

But I was curled in bed by the time Jared arrived, the room illuminated by a single candle. He closed the door behind him, turning to me as I sat up against the pillows.

"What—"

"Brandt will escort you to the capital in two days' time," he said firmly.

I sat up a little straighter. "No—"

"It's not up for debate. You need to go home now."

"I can't—"

"You will." He was cold as ice as he moved toward the bed. "It's not safe here with Aeris making good on his plans to overthrow the King. I can't involve you in this, Eliza. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" I scoffed, turning to face him. "What the hell does that mean? You're sorry—"

"You're my mate!" The force of his words boomed through the room, cutting through me like a heated blade. It wasn't said with love or longing. It was said with deep regret. "I shouldn't have been able to find you, Eliza. This is a cruel, sick game of the universe—"

"If what you're saying is true," I said, trying in vain to keep my voice from cracking, "then this fate—"

"Fate," he coldly laughed. "Ah, sure. Fate. Is it truly fate that I found you when I only have months to live, when nothing about my life is stable and the country is on the brink of war? Or is fate that I'm losing control of my powers with each passing day, and I could kill you in an instant if I so much as loosen the death grip I have on them? You're in danger just being in a room with me."

"You act as though you've given up on breaking this curse!"

"Because I have!" He curled his fingers around the footboard, leaning forward. "It's over. You need to go home."

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Chapter 48: I'm Not Making Promises

I got out of bed and stalked towards him.

"You're a coward," I spat, mingled hurt and fury blurring my vision as I rounded the corner of the bed to face him. "You say I'm your mate and then push me away. You say you're giving up on breaking the curse right after you tell me we're mates!"

"I am not going to risk your life—"

"You haven't ever asked me what I want!" I could have screamed it. I could have woken every sleeping person in this village with the force of my rage. "You've shared my bed. You've kissed me. You've made me feel like—like this was something \_—"

"Losing you—"



"You knew from the beginning, didn't you? You knew all along." My heart was thundering against my ribs as I took another step toward him, my hands clenched into fists. "You said nothing to me about it but still came to me after the ball—"

"Do you think this has been easy for me? Do you really think all I meant to do was take advantage of you and then send you away?"

"But that's exactly what you're doing! This was never about breaking the curse, was it?"

"When you played that song in Aeris's castle... that was when I knew, at least, I thought that's what it was." He straightened up, exhaling deeply as he turned to face me. "Your scent in my study that night we fought... When I pushed you against my desk? Like rain, like the feeling of stepping out into the night after a storm... I didn't think I'd ever feel the mate bond. I didn't think it was possible with my curse. When I took you to bed for the first time it snapped into place for me and ripped me to shreds, Eliza. It took all of my f\*\*\*\*\* willpower not to mark you right then and there."

"I wish you would have—"

"Don't say that to me," he snarled. A single tear rolled down my cheek as his face contorted into his mask of ice. "Don't say anything about this ever again. It's over, Eliza. I can't protect you from what's coming. I won't parade you around as my Luna just to buy us time and keep others from wanting you. I won't put you in danger chasing a dead man and his artifact to try to break a curse that can't be broken. It's too late. You need to go home, back to your family, to where you're safe—"

"How could you?" I whispered, my heart shattering into pieces. Every feeling and emotion from the last few weeks came rushing to the forefront of my heart, overwhelming me. I'd known. I'd known from the beginning. I'd felt the first inklings of the mate bond, muted and subdued because I hadn't yet come into my wolf, but it was there.

It was there, and it was strong, and it was killing me.

He'd taken me to bed time and time again, running his fingertips over my skin. He whispered my name against my lips.

I closed my eyes.

"This is for your own good."

"Don't," I whispered, taking a step away from him. "Don't say anything else."

Stupid, stupid girl. Stupid, lovesick puppy. Stupid girl on a stupid adventure. I ran my hands over my face, roughly wiping the tears from my eyes.

"All I wanted to do was help you," I whispered, choking on the words.  
"Because I could."

I should have told him what I'd found about his tattoos and the map, that all signs led to the lost city of Myrel. I couldn't find the words. I couldn't find the strength, not now. Not now that it didn't matter what I said, or did, to show him I could do this, that I could handle it, that I loved him.

Loved him. I'd never admitted that before.

"Does it feel like this with everyone?" I'd asked while wrapped in his arms only a day before. He'd whispered the answer against my skin, igniting that tethered thread that should have bound us together for eternity.

No, it doesn't.

I looked up at him through my lashes, my heart cracking at the thought of what I was about to do.

"Reject me, then," I said, trembling over the words. "Reject me."

"There's nothing to reject—")

"I want to hear you say it so I can move on," I cut in, biting the inside of my cheek.

He looked furious. He should be furious, I thought, but only with himself.

"Why not?" I asked, my own rage bubbling over the surface as I noticed the abrupt change in his demeanor. "You wanted me to just wallow away in my grief from losing a mate and never find someone else? This is what you wanted, right? For me to return home? For me to be safe? Well, I want more. I want a mate, children. Love. If you're refusing to accept the bond you say we have then reject me, Jared. For the love of the Goddess, say it!"

"I can't," he said levelly, but his tone sent a shiver through my soul. I could feel his hurt, his regret.

"You can't feel the bond yet, anyway. By the time you can I'll be long gone. Dead, Eliza."

"You don't even know my birthday," I sniffled. "I could be turning twenty-one tomorrow—"

"August 29th," he said, clenching his jaw before continuing, "the same as mine."

A hush fell over the room. A rogue tear slid down my cheek and along my jaw as I blinked, thoroughly confused.

"The day you'd feel the mate bond is the same day the curse takes what's left of my wolf, of me."

"What does this mean? The song, the powers in the Cryptex, now our birthdays?"

"We're inexplicably linked."

"Well, that's f\*\*\*\*\*g obvious!"

Jared narrowed his eyes at me, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "Do you think this is easy for me, knowing that my mate is standing right in front of me and I'm going to lose her to either myself, or another threat? If you aren't taken from me, Eliza, you'll die by my hand, I guarantee it –"

"You have no faith in yourself–"

"I know myself too well to overlook the fact that I'm losing pieces of myself every single f\*\*\*\*\*g day!" he shouted, his cheeks going ruddy with emotion.

"I'd rather give you up than take the risk–"

"And if there's no risk," I choked, swallowing back the desperation in my voice. "If the curse is broken or doesn't come to fruition–"

"I'd find you," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "I'd tear our worlds apart looking for you."

"Promise me–"

"I'm not making promises." He tore his eyes away from mine, his body tense with grief. I choked on a sob as he walked past me toward the door, hesitating as he turned the doorknob. "I sent word of Aeris's plans to overthrow the Alpha King to the capital this morning."

Then he left the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

I felt like a ghost of myself as I crawled back in bed. It was the middle of the night, no moonlight dancing through the windows as raindrops trailed down the glass panes. I laid there with my eyes open until the candle flickered out, warm wax coating my bedside table. I had half a mind to go upstairs and curl up in my old bed, but I knew Jared wasn't coming back tonight. Not to this room, not to me.

I realized he'd been pulling away from this quest to solve the curse ever since the night of the ball. Once he'd known what we were to each other, his focus

had shifted. He wanted me to go home. I wanted to stay. I hadn't understood his insistence that this was suddenly too dangerous.

But I was his mate. He had a Goddess given duty to protect me, something ingrained in his soul that was taking his focus from the curse.

I was in the way, I realized.

I fell asleep to the sound of rain pounding the windows. I woke up to another gray spring day. Jared's side of the bed was cold to the touch, the blankets still made and unruffled. I dressed and walked to the kitchen, finding Miriam kneading dough on the wide work table, dark circles under her eyes.

"Where's Jared?" I asked. Miriam looked up at me, a soft but pained smile touching her lips.

"He left with a crew on a mission, my dear. He's trying to find the wolves that harmed our Archer. He'll be back in a week."

And I was supposed to be leaving with Brandt to the capital in two days.

He hadn't even said goodbye.

I swallowed back the pained sob tightening my throat and nodded, trying to smile. Miriam must have known Jared's plan to send me away. I could see the hurt lingering behind her eyes.

"Scarlett hasn't come down for breakfast yet," she said slowly, her pained expression broken by a brief flash of what I can only describe as mischief.

"Could you tell her she has the day off today, please? Maybe the two of you could talk for a while."

I arched my brow as I nodded, the corner's of Miriam's mouth twitching into a smile as she went back to kneading the dough.

"Oh, and, before I forget. They're a few traveling packs in the storage closet on the second floor. Could you pull them out for me, dear? They need to air out a bit."

"I will," I smiled, nodding at her in farewell. What is she plotting?

I found Scarlett in her bedroom, her eyes focused on the ceiling as I shut the door behind me.

"Miriam says you have the day off. She wants us to go on a walk together."

"A walk? It's raining?"

"I think she's up to something but I did want to talk to you about something." I sat on the edge of her bed, exhaling deeply as I met her eye. "Do you know someone named Abel?"

"Yes, why? He's an enemy of Jared's--"

"Do you know where to find him?"

Scarlett sat up, her hair ruffled and full of static as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"Roughly... His territory is northwest of here."

I fought back a smile, chuckling to myself as I looked down at my hands.

I wasn't going home, not yet.

I had a few things I needed to do first. One of which...

"If you needed to... incapacitate someone," I began with a tilt of my head.

"Just to make them sleepy enough to... not notice you're gone for a while, how would you do it?"

"Wolfsbane and chamomile, why?"

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Chapter 49: Recruiting Scarlett

The storage room on the second floor was not what I was expecting it to be. Scarlett went down the hall to check on Archer while I searched for the traveling packs Miriam was talking about. I pulled on a string hanging from the ceiling and the entire room flooded with light.

I gasped.

It was a long, narrow room lined with shelves, with backpacks and hiking boots, several stacks of clothing, shelf-stable food... and weapons, lots of them.

"Holy s\*\*t," I hissed, clutching the traveling packs, essentially backpacks with metal rods to support the weight during long hikes, to my chest.

Everything I needed was in this room. Miriam must have seen my secret plans written all over my face.

Now I just needed to convince Scarlett to go with me.

I backed out of the room and shut the door behind me, tossing the bags along the wall in the hallway. The house was incredibly quiet today with such a large amount of Jared's men gone.

"He's asleep," Scarlett whispered as she came out of the infirmary. "Ready? Our jackets are downstairs."

I nodded and followed her through the house. Miriam's voice drifted through the lower level where the house was filled with kitchen sounds, as well as Giselle's voice lifted in a frustrated whine.

"Giselle is upset because Jared took Tommy instead of Brandt on this trip," Scarlett said as she shrugged into her coat. She pulled a hat over her head as I held the door open for us to exit the house.

"Yeah... Brandt," I said, not meaning to growl, but that was exactly how it sounded.

Scarlett shot me a look, but I just smiled at her. I was, hopefully, doing a good job of hiding the absolute agony ripping me to shreds after my conversation with Jared last night. I felt like he'd taken a piece of me with him, and now my heart was wrapped in grief. I couldn't believe he'd just left. I'm sure he thought I'd give up and leave without a fight.

He didn't know me very well if he actually believed that.

We reached the sparse trees at the edge of the village where the ground began to slope towards the bluff. Rain pattered against my head, my curls twisting and springing up all over the space in the thick humidity.

"Wanna see something cool?" I asked.

She shrugged one shoulder, swinging the picnic basket Miriam had waiting for us by the front door.

"Have you seen the stone circle yet?"

"Oh, no," she said, her cheeks going pink. "I know it's there, but I've never-"

"Come on. It's pretty cool." I didn't give her the option to protest as I took the picnic basket from her and walked briskly through the trees.

She let out her breath, mumbling to herself as she followed me over the fallen logs and rich green underbrush. Spring was here, and the ground was dusted with fresh spring greens, the new leaves on the trees beginning to unfurl. It smelled wonderful, crisp and clean. I was feeling much better by the time we reached the bluff overlooking the river valley below.

"Down this way," I coaxed, despite Scarlett's hesitation. "I won't let you fall. I promise."

Scarlett made a few noises of protest as we struggled down the trail, which was slick with mud and debris from the storm last night. Finally, we found ourselves on flat ground again, and in the distance, I could see the grove of trees that hid the stone circle from view.

"I was thinking we were going to walk a few loops around the village," Scarlett breathed as we sat beneath a large oak, its thick branches sheltering us from the rain. "But this is actually really nice."

I toyed with the brown paper covering my sandwich. I didn't have even a hint of an appetite. I probably wouldn't for a while.

"Has Archer told you... anything?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, taking a bite of her sandwich and staring at me expectantly.

"About what he found out?"

She shook her head, looking thoroughly confused.

Damnit. I didn't want to be the one to tell her this. I couldn't totally blame Archer for not saying anything yet. He was literally laying in bed with stitches running across his abdomen after being flayed open like a fish.

"The Alpha who got you pregnant is dead," I said, then winced as her sandwich hit the ground. "Your son-"

"Oh," she choked, tears welling in her eyes. "Is he dead?"

"No, no, no. He's not dead. He's with Abel-"

"Oh no!" She held her face in her hands, a sob escaping her lips. "That's worse!"

"What do you mean that's worse? If you know where Abel is-"

"Abel is horrible, Eliza. An absolute monster!"

"How, exactly?"

Scarlett let her hands fall to her sides, her mouth opening, but no words came out.

"I've never met him, but I've heard stories-"

"Would he seriously harm a little boy?"

"I don't-I don't know-"

"Look," I said, scooting closer to her and taking her hands in mine. "I'm leaving tonight. I want you to come with me. I want to go get your son."

"How are we supposed to do that?"

"We walk right in and get him. You're his mother. His father is dead."

She stared at me blankly, her face void of all expression. For a moment, I thought she was having a stroke, but then she swallowed, blinking away tears.

"When Archer is well, he'll go-"

"I don't think we have that kind of time," I said firmly, squeezing her hands.

"They're holding him for ransom. I can make a deal with Abel-I don't care what it is-but you'll return with your son, I promise."

"Why would you do this for me?"

"Because you're my friend and I love you," I said, somewhat shocked. "Archer found out where he is but can't go get him. I'm part of the crew, so now it's my responsibility."

"Brandt won't let us-"

"Let me worry about Brandt," I said, waving my hand in dismissal.

She peered at me, narrowing her eyes. "You asked about incapacitating someone-"

"Exactly," I grinned. "I won't kill him, obviously."

Scarlett looked away from me, her eyes locked on the trees surrounding us. The whole area was filled with the sound of rain pattering against the leaves of the trees, a natural symphony of sound.

She rose to her feet, pacing a bit and digging her booted toes into the ground as she mulled over my offer.

"I will find you an escort back to the village," I said. "You'll be safe the entire time."

"Why an escort? Are you not returning?"

"Not for a while. There's somewhere else I need to go," I said.

My mind filled with the map I'd created based on the ancient map of Egoren and Jared's tattoos. If Scarlett could get me to Abel, I could find a way north to where I believe Myrel used to be. Once there....

I hadn't thought that far, not yet. One quest at a time.



"What about Jared?"

Her question hit me like a freight train, totally derailing my thoughts. That creeping depression locked around my heart, pulling me back to reality.

"What about him?"

"He'll kill us both if we do this."

"He won't. He'll be mad at me, not you. This is my idea and I'll make sure he knows that." I bit back the rest of the words. I wanted to tell her everything that had happened, that Jared told me I was his mate and then effectively ruined my life in the next sentence.

Maybe I was being a little dramatic. He could be wrong. We both could be. I could turn twenty-one and find my mate on a random street corner one day, and all of this would be just a strange, long lost memory, a fever dream.

But this hurt, badly. Everything in my soul was telling me this was real, this was fated. I was meant to be here, on this journey.

It should have been with him.

Scarlett would do just fine as a travel companion, however.

"So, is this a yes?" I asked.

She'd walked away a few paces, running her fingers over a thicket of alders. "He won't recognize me," she said sadly, her voice straining around the words. "He was taken from me before I even had a chance to hold him."

"You're his mother, Scarlett. This shouldn't have happened to either of you."

She stooped, tilting her head as she examined something on the ground.

"We'd have to travel through the Dark Forest, you know. His territory is north of here, then to the west... deep in the west."

"I can handle it. It's not as bad as they make it sound."

She breathed deeply, standing back up and turning to face me.

"I'll go."

I stood up, dropping my uneaten lunch back in the basket. Scarlett gave me a shy smile, but her cheeks colored deeply as she took a deep breath.

"I wonder what he looks like," she whispered, the corners of her mouth twitching as her smile grew.

"We're going to find out. We'll leave once everyone else has gone to bed. Be ready, okay?"

"I'd leave right now if you asked," she breathed, her smile wavering.

She turned from me and continued to explore the area, coming to a stop where the trees rested against the rocky bluff. I packed up our lunch. It was raining in earnest now, and the thick droplets pelted my head as I stepped out from under the shelter of the oak with the basket hanging from the crook of my elbow.

Scarlett reached up, standing on her tiptoes as her fingers grazed the rock. A piece of rock the size of the picnic basket slid free of the bluff, flattening a bush below it. I yelped in surprise, my hand flying over my chest as my heartbeat began to race.

"You could've been crushed!" I cried, hurrying over to her.

"Look," she said, turning to me with something shiny in her hand.

I arched my brows as she unfurled her fingers, the pale gray light reflecting off a smooth, gold surface connected to a chain.

I drew in my breath as I slowly picked up the chain, letting the locket dangle in the air between us.

"Do you know what this is?" I whispered, lowering it into my palm. "It's Jared's locket. It belonged to his mother."

"I thought Carmen stole it?"

"No," I said, opening it with my fingernail. "She threw it away."

Inside was a variety of tiny gears and mechanisms. I turned it over in my hands, trying to figure out how to make it play the song.

My heart was racing. I couldn't figure it out.

But then a single note played, the entire locket trembling with effort to play the next.

"It's been outside for years. It might be broken," Scarlett said as she peered at it with a furrowed brow.

I turned it upright so I could see the gears. It was still trying to move. Opening it up likely activated something inside.

Another strained note rang out, followed by trembling, grinding gears. Then another, then another. Suddenly the area erupted in music, mingling with the rain.

I closed my eyes as the familiar song filled my ears.

Talk about fate, I thought. I knew at that moment that taking Scarlett on a journey to find her son was exactly what I was meant to be doing.

Now to take care of our Brandt and Archer problem.

#### Chapter 839

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 839

Chapter 50: Eliza and Scarlett on the Loose

\*Jared\*

We'd come back to the village three days earlier than expected.

It should have been a happy homecoming. We'd successfully tracked down the three wolves who'd left Archer at the edge of our territory. They hadn't been the ones who attacked him, that was clear. But they'd been nearby and had run into the rogue who jumped Archer before he was able to cross over into our boundary.

I paid them handsomely not only for their information, but also for dragging Archer several miles to our village so that we could save his life.

I'd left some of our men behind to deal with the rogue. I wasn't in shape for it, not now. I'd been on the edge of oblivion the entire journey to track down Archer's saviors. The only thing keeping me upright was the idea that I was going to have an opportunity to rip someone to shreds... to let loose that shadow.

I wanted to just let it consume me, to just put myself out of my own misery. I hesitated at the edge of the village while my men walked forward, all of them excited to be home.

There was nothing I wanted to do less than be back here. Eliza's memory would be forever imprinted on my house, on my bed... in my heart.

She'd called me a coward and she'd been right. I didn't even say goodbye to her. I couldn't because I knew I'd falter. She would have fought me and won.

I hoped that my cowardice had saved her life, at least. She couldn't be here for this. I wasn't going to put her in danger any longer, and I sure as f\*\*k wasn't to let my own mate watch me die.

She'd be in the capital by now, if not very close. Brandt was keeping her safe. I owed Brandt my life for putting up with her.

I crossed over the boundary of our village and crossed into the village proper, my heart shattering with each stop.

This was a good thing, I told myself. She'd be safe with her family. She'd be loved, and find love... even if the thought of anyone else having her made me want to kill someone.

"JARED!"

I froze, my heart rate quickening as I slowly looked up at the owner of the voice.

"What in the f\*\*k," I snarled, stalking forward with my hands clenched into fists, "are you still doing here?"

Brandt started jogging over to me, his face twisted into a scowl. He was red in the face, absolutely furious

He stopped a few feet away from me. I noticed the yellow, slow-healing bruising under his eyes and over his nose, which had recently been broken.

"Where is she?" I said hastily. "What happened? What-"

"Eliza happened," he growled, shaking his head. He ran his finger through his hair and over the back of his head, wincing like he was hurt. "She's gone, her and Scarlett."

"What?" I snapped. "Where?"

"I'm guessing to get Scarlett's son. We sent scouts

I opened my mouth but was at a loss for words. Part of me was furious, especially at Brandt and Archer for being so f\*\*\*\*\*g careless and letting this happen. But the other part of me was... thankful. I felt like I could breathe for the first time in days. She was still here, in this realm. She was just going in the wrong f\*\*\*\*\*g direction.

"They went through the Dark Forest, then?" I said, running my hands over my face. "How did this happen?"

"They drugged Archer, put him into a stupor. I caught them in the act. They got me too. I would have been impressed if I wasn't so furious."

Brandt explained what had happened, how he went to check on Archer after everyone else had gone to bed. He noticed the door to the storage closet where we kept all of our supplies for journeys was open. Then he saw the door to the infirmary was open as well, and he heard voices inside.

He saw the women dressed for the road, sporting leathers and blades along their belts. Their packs were resting against the wall, full to the brim with supplies. Eliza was gently lowering Archer onto his pillow, whispering to him while Scarlett tucked him in.

Brandt had thought he'd snuck on them, but Eliza had been expecting him. She offered him some tea, giving him her best, most manipulative smile. Brandt, sucker that he was, accepted graciously as Scarlett stirred milk and a copious amount of sugar into his tea.

"I took a drink before I even asked why they were dressed for a journey. The last thing I remembered was Eliza kissing me on the forehead and telling me she was sorry. I came to hours later by falling out of bed and hitting my face

against the floorboards. I didn't even catch myself. It took hours for the feeling to come back into my arms and legs."

Brandt had scoured the house and the village once he came to. Scouts were sent out into the forest, but they lost their scent and trail several miles deep.

"We sent out fresh scouts this morning to try to catch up to them, but it's been three full days, Jared. Archer is livid. He ripped his sutures open shifting and had to be tied to the bed-

"f\*\*k," I murmured, resting my hands on my knees as I fought against the urge to either scream, or laugh. I wasn't sure. I felt an unusual sense of pride toward both women, which was totally inappropriate given the circumstances.

"Archer should be back on his feet now, I hope. He can walk, at least. We were planning on going to Abel's ourselves, but now that you're here-

"We'll all go, all three of us. Does Eliza know who Abel is?"

"No, not that I know of. Neither of the women has any idea what they're getting into."

"We can take the southern trail and cut northward when we reach the river, that'll save us two days of travel. They're likely on foot, right?" Scarlett was old enough to shift but had never done it as far as I knew.

"They are; both of them had packs for supplies."

"Good, they'll be moving slowly. We can cut them off before they reach the edge of the forest and walk blindly into Abel's territory." I started walking forward, mulling over the situation in my mind. We needed to move, now.

Abel used to be a friend of ours. We'd lived together, trained together. I'd considered him as close as a brother at one point, but then I became leader of our village and our crew. I'd been chosen over him.

Some of the scars I wore on my body were from the fight we'd had before he left the crew. He'd been terrorizing the packlands with his own crew ever since.

But he kept his distance. He would have no idea the little boy he was holding for ransom belonged to Scarlett. He'd never met her. Archer would rip him to shreds if he had the chance.

This was bold of Eliza. She had no idea what she was starting.

"Jared, there's more."

I stopped, turning around to face him. He tucked his hands into his pockets, his eyes downcast.

"What?"

"She took the Cryptex with her, all of the pieces. She got into your safe; I don't know how. The Cryptex is gone, as well as the map she stole from Aeris's vault. Archer said he heard... he swore he heard the song from the locket when he started to fall asleep after they drugged him."

"She took the Cryptex?"

"Yes," Brandt confirmed, his expression grave.

I arched my brows as I tried to stifle the absolute rage threatening to explode. What the hell was she thinking? "She's in the Dark Forest with the Cryptex?" I said, mostly to myself.

Brandt winced, nodding. "Where was Miriam in all of this?"

"She's rather casual about it," Brandt said, running his tongue along his lower teeth with a shrug. "Had a huge meal waiting for us when we finally came to. She seemed particularly pleased with and uninterested in our suffering."

"So she helped them?"

"She won't admit it, but it's obvious."

"Great," I said through gritted teeth.

I turned and stalked toward the house. I wanted a bath and a hot meal, so I wasn't going to punish Miriam for aiding the two women, not yet.

She took the Cryptex... and the map. Somehow she'd found the locket as well, if Archer's recollection could be believed.

Miriam didn't even look in my direction when

Brandt and I barreled into the house. We went straight to the infirmary, where Archer was waiting for us, fully dressed.

"I saw Tommy come into the village," he said, securing a belt around his waist. "We're going, now."

"Archer," I began, but he raised his hand, shaking his head.

"This is my mate, Jared. I'm going, I don't give a f\*\*k what you say or think about it."

"You're injured-"

"And Scarlett and Eliza could be out there getting chased by witches, Jared. You literally just told me Hestia is after her-"

"I don't know if that's actually the case," I said briskly, holding my hands out in surrender. "Hestia hasn't been seen in years and is dead, for all I know. She wouldn't have been in the Dark Forest, either. Carmen was bluffing. I wholeheartedly believe the women are fine. Our scouts would have found them by now if not."

"I can shift. I can feel it. Miriam took the sutures out this morning," he said, ignoring me. "This is my mate-"

"I know, and Eliza is mine." I bit down the words



the second they left my mouth.

Archer raised his brows, glancing at Brandt with a smug smile.

"So you finally admit it," he practically purred, resting his hands on his hips.

"You'll never hear me say it again," I breathed, rolling my eyes at the look Archer was giving Brandt.

"We're happy for you, man. I thought we were going to have an intervention between you two." "You know nothing good will come from this. Brandt was supposed to be in the capital with her right now, sending her home to her family."

"Maybe it's a good thing she bested him and stole off with my mate, then?" Archer chuckled. The tension in the room lifted as Archer cuffed his sleeves. "What are we waiting for?"

"Miriam's making roast beef," Brandt shrugged. "We should eat something before we go."

"We'll have her pack something for the road," I said, shaking my head. "I need to pack."

"How many men are we taking with us?" Archer asked.

"None. It'll be just the three of us. Abel won't take kindly to us striding onto his property twenty-men strong."

Brandt nodded, glancing at Archer before both men turned their attention to me again.

"We find them, and then get Scarlett's son. That's it."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 840

Chapter 51: Lost and Found

\*Eliza\*

Everything was terrible.

Scarlett and I huddled together, shoulder to shoulder, trying to keep warm. It was dumping rain like I'd never seen. We were soaked to the bones, and had nowhere to hide from the downpour that had started over a full day ago and hadn't let up at all since then.

The first two days of our journey had been stupidly easy. The forest was in full bloom, the first signs of summer evident as we walked along the trail for miles and miles and miles. Flowers dappled the rich, emerald-colored moss. The trees were heavy with green buds and freshly unfurled leaves. It smelled like heaven, rich and crisp and green.

Scarlett's quiet disposition had been a blessing in disguise, her silent stealth proving useful when it came to catching rabbits to roast over our nightly fire. We ate like kings, slept on beds of moss that felt like clouds, and whistled to the birds chirping overhead as we traveled deeper into the forest. Jared and his men had been so fearful of.

But we'd made a miscalculation somewhere and ended up off the trail.

It was as if the forest had snapped its theoretical fingers and unleashed hell on Scarlett and me just for enjoying ourselves.

The relentless rain made the forest live up to its name. Even in the daytime, it had felt as though we were walking through a moonless night. I'd successfully kept the witch from my mind during the first two days of our trek... but in the darkness?

All I could hear was the way her fork had scraped across her plate, the way her long fingernails rapped against the wood of that table loaded with food. All I could smell was that illusion of decadence that hid the gore beneath the spell she'd cast on me like a fishing net.

But as much I gave into the fear as the darkness and rain consumed us, I didn't taste the metallic coating of magic on my tongue. I didn't feel like I was being watched. We were alone-utterly, wholly alone.

And maybe that made it worse.

"What're we going to do?" Scarlett said through chattering teeth. "I don't even know what time it is anymore. It's been dark since-since we crossed that creek-"

"That was at least twenty miles ago," I replied, tucking my trembling hands between my thighs. I'd stuffed the map to Myrel down my shirt, nestling it against my bare skin to try to keep it dry. But all of the layers I was wearing were wet now. Our backpacks were full of water. I couldn't risk taking out the map of Egoren we'd found in the storage closet to try to figure out where we were, not until we found shelter.

Scarlett turned to look behind the tree we were resting against. I knew she couldn't see anything, not with the sheets of nearly obsidian rain rushing into us with every breath that we took.

"I thought I saw some rocks ahead... like, a rock face. I think we're near the mountains you found on your map. We've covered enough ground to be nearby."

"Let's go, then. We'll be warmer if we keep moving."

We helped each other up, clinging to the tree as we shook the water from our coats. We trudged through ankle-deep mud, neither of us speaking Our oil

lanterns had been swamped with water yesterday, rendered absolutely f\*\*\*\*\*g useless.

I would have forced her to turn around... I was still thinking about it. But in reality, this journey was for Scarlett. We were going to get her son. We'd make it to Abel's territory or die trying.

Then I would... Go. Go north... follow my stupid map based on Jared's stupid tattoos into the unknown... alone.

"I think it might be morning," Scarlett said after an hour of walking.

"Who knows?" I shivered. I wasn't even sure if she could hear me over the rain. "But we need to get warm and dry soon. This is getting dangerous."

"We should have reached Abel's territory by now," she replied, shielding her eyes from the rain. She stumbled, and I reached out to steady her. "The map I took from the storage room had his territory marked-"

"We're lost," I admitted, the words burning my tongue. "We have been for a while."

I hated myself for thinking I was strong enough to guide Scarlett through the Dark Forest. Of all places to be lost, this was the worst one I could think of by far. Maybe the rain was a blessing and the only thing keeping the demons and ghouls who crept through the darkness at bay.

We walked on and fell into silence for a long while. My mind began to wonder, my body going numb to the chill and rain and falling into rabid hunger.

All I could think about was the chocolate cake Miriam had made a few days ago. It had chunks of candied ginger in it, and coffee frosting. Tears welled in my eyes as I thought of the cake. I was really losing it now, for sure.

"Look!" Scarlett cried, rushing forward.

I blinked into the downpour and adjusted the weight of my backpack. Scarlett was there one minute, and gone the next.

"Scarlett? Scarlett!"

I saw a glint of red in the shadows before me and Scarlett's face came into view, a delirious smile stretching from cheek to cheek.

I wiped my eyes, trying to clear the water from my vision.

"It's a cave! And there's wood in here. Someone made a fire a long time ago!"

I rushed forward, shrugging off my backpack and letting it fall with a splash in the entrance of the cave. It was wide and tall enough for us both to stand.

"Get out of your jacket and boots. We'll make a fire and get dry," I said quickly, coming back to my senses. I roamed around the cave in the dark, gathering dry kindling. Oh, thank the Goddess. Someone up there was watching out for us.

I heard Scarlett moving around behind me and suddenly the cave erupted in a spray of amber light as she struck a match.

I could have fallen to my knees and wept. I was sure all of our matches were soaked, worthless.

It didn't take long to build a fire. The cave was shallow enough that the whole area heated and dried quickly. Scarlett and I laid out our wet clothes, socks, and shoes. I took everything out of our packs to dry while Scarlett laid out jerky, what was left of our bread, and boiled a small pot of rainwater to drink.

"This is all the food we have left. The rest is soaked."

"I know," I replied, shivering as I shook out my pants and laid them out on the ground near the fire. "This rain has got to let up soon."

I felt a rush of apprehension as the rain pounded outside the cave. The trees trembled in the storm, moving and swaying like dancers bathed in blue shadows. A fire would draw attention to anything that was lurking nearby. I grabbed my belt off the ground and unsheathed Jared's dagger, running my thumb over the engravings on the hilt. I knew I'd rather go down swinging than die of exposure.

I walked over to Scarlett, who was sitting next to the fire in nothing but the tight-fitting thermal leggings and matching shirt we'd found in the storage room. I was wearing the same, thankful the material was quick to dry.

I'd already laid out the map to what I hoped was Myrel to dry near the fire. Scarlett had unrolled the more modern, technical map of the area and had it drying next to her, flattened by several rocks.

"I have no idea where we are now," she whispered, looking down at the map.

"It's okay. We can figure that out when the rain stops. We'll rest here for a few days if need be."

She looked up at me, a shadow of a smile touching her lips.

"The men are probably on our trail," she said softly. "Do you think they'll find us?"

"Not anymore," I said with sudden regret. "It would be impossible to pick up our scent after all of this rain."

I found it likely Jared would raise hell whenever he got home from hunting the people who hurt Archer and had found out what we'd done. He'd be coming after us, even if Brandt and Archer were already on our trail.

I felt a pang of guilt at the thought of Archer and Brandt. We'd dosed them appropriately, so I was sure we hadn't accidentally killed them... but still. I considered them my friends and....

I hugged my knees to my chest, wiggling my bare toes near the fire. Scarlett handed me a piece of bread, which was damp on one end and toasted to a crisp on the other side. I gave her a soft smile in thanks and gingerly bit into my bread.

We didn't speak for a long time. Scarlett eventually curled up in the fetal position with her half-dried coat covering her like a blanket.

My body was exhausted but my mind was moving at a hundred miles per hour as I rested my back against the side of the cave, looking out into the downpour.

Maybe I had fallen asleep. I wasn't totally sure if I was dreaming or not, because at some point during the day or night-whatever time it was-I saw a night-dark shadow move through the rain.

I reflexively gripped the blade I had resting along my thigh. Whatever it was, it was coming closer, stalking toward the cave through the dark and the rain like a ghost.

But then it lifted its head, blood-red eyes searing me to my soul. I screamed.

I leaped to my feet just in time for a rogue wolf to slam me back into the ground, the dagger clattering against the dirt and stone feet from where I now lay. Scarlett screamed, woken violently by the commotion.

"RUN!" I cried, then screamed in agony as the wolf clamped its jaws around my shoulder and shook me.

I felt for the dagger, my fingertips grazing the blade. The rogue was trying to rip my arm off, its teeth breaking through my skin and a large, mud-covered paw pressing down on my neck. My vision dappled with black spots as I fought for breath and my hold on the knife.

Help me. Help me! Someone-

I felt a pop in my shoulder and pain radiated through my body. I saw nothing but black for a moment, then felt... wet... something wet and warm seeping into my thermals and pooling against my skin. Scarlett's voice, shrill and terrified, filled my ears as I blinked, my vision blurred by tears.

"Oh no, oh-oh no, no- Eliza? Oh, please-"

I couldn't breathe. Was I bleeding out? Had that popping feeling been the wolf ripping my arm clean off?

Scarlett screamed with effort and something warm and heavy slumped to the ground beside me. I saw a glint of metal and peered over at it, seeing the flames from the fire reflecting in Jared's dagger, which was stuck in the throat of a large, black wolf.

I choked on a laugh or a sob, I didn't know. Scarlett was hovering over me in an instant, her hands on either side of my face.

"How many arms do I have?" I croaked, tears streaming down my temples and into my hair.

"T-two," she sobbed, shaking her head. "You killed it."

"Oh," I said casually. I felt like I was on edge of slipping back into whatever dream I'd been having.

My toes felt cold. I craned my neck, seeing that my legs below the knee were exposed to the elements outside of the cave.

But my eyes moved upward to the two tawny colored wolves standing a few yards away from the cave's entrance. One of them sat back on its haunches. The other stepped forward, eyeing us with interest.

Scarlett grabbed me by the armpits and pulled me deeper into the cave, panting and straining against my weight.



A darkened figure ran up behind the wolves,  
cloaked from the rain. He froze, a large bow in one hand.

"You killed that rogue?" an unfamiliar man said, his voice lifted with mingled concern and confusion.

"Sorry," I murmured, then closed my eyes, letting myself spiral into oblivion.

Chapter 841

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 841

Chapter 52: Are You Abel?

We were trapped. We had nowhere to run. The cloaked man stepped forward, one hand outstretched in a show of surrender, of mercy.

Scarlett had slapped me on the cheeks until I woke up, the pain in my shoulder threatening to take me under with each breath I took. She was shaking uncontrollably as the man approached us, casting a cold shadow over where Scarlett rested on her knees beside me, with the dead wolf on my other side.

I was covered in its blood. I could feel it starting to dry against my skin. I wanted to vomit-I needed to, especially as the man stepped into the cave and grabbed me roughly, forcing me into a seated position with one hand forcing my elbow into my side. I gritted my teeth against the pain, looking up into his startling pale green eyes. He had a long, jagged scar that ran from his left temple down across his nose and along his right cheek.

He maintained intense eye contact with me while he gripped my elbow.

"Do it," I whispered, tears welling in my eyes.

He said nothing as he slowly turned my wrist into position and then snapped my arm back into my shoulder joint.

Scarlett was holding me steady as I cried out, but no noise echoed through the cave. It had been a silent scream, my whole body rippling with agony before a calm numbness settled over my body. My arm didn't hurt any longer.

The man looked me over, his gaze settled on my opposite arm, where my thermal undershirt was shredded and my skin was oozing blood from where the rogue's claws had pierced my skin.

He glanced at the dead wolf, then reached over and pulled the blade from its ribs.

"This belongs to you," he said, holding the blade and placing the hilt in my hand.

"Uh, thanks-"

"Gather your belongings," he said, his voice naturally raspy as he rose to his feet, towering over me and Scarlett. "We need to move."

"Actually," I said quickly, clearing my throat. "We have somewhere we need to be."

The man just looked down at me, expressionless. Nothing flashed behind his eyes.

"I see," he said, glancing around the camp where our clothes were still laying out to dry. He settled his gaze at Scarlett, his eyes narrowing. "Are you by chance looking for your son?"

Both of us paled, I gaped up at the man, then turned to Scarlett, whose face was nearly gray with shock.

"I'll take that as a yes. Five minutes, then we go. I'll wait."

Scarlett made a shallow noise in her throat as she helped me onto my knees. I waved her away, adrenaline still tearing through my veins and dulling the pain I felt in both arms.

I told myself I was fine, that the pain could wait. I got to my feet and looked down at the wolf for the first time, my stomach clenching at the puddle of blood soaking in the entrance of the cave.

I glanced up at the cloaked man, finding him staring right at me.

"Are you Abel?" I asked, a tremor licking down my spine. He was... terrifying.

"No, I am not. But I'll take you to him.

\*\*\*

The wall was made of wood and stone, solidified with concrete. It wasn't pretty, not by any means, and it was tall enough to tower over us and hide any of the buildings beyond as we approached. Rain pelted the tops of our heads, but the storm had passed, now nothing but a thick, black shadow over the incredible, snow-capped mountains in the distance.

I wondered how much ground Scarlett and I had covered over the course of what must have been four days, maybe five.

The cloaked man hadn't told us his name, but his two wolf companions had shifted back to their human forms when we reached their camp, which hadn't been far from ours. One of them was named Ches, and the other was Peter. Neither of them spoke much, but had given Scarlett and me food and water, as well as tended to my wounds and set me up with a sling for my arm.

The cloaked man had watched us with a careful eye... me, especially.

There was a small wooden door along the wall that looked tiny compared to the behemoth that was the wall itself. Compared to the wall around Aeris's kingdom with its grand golden gates and ivory facade, this looked... violent, like whatever was inside was something that should stay there and never be released upon the land.

The door swung open and a few men stepped out, calling out to us. Their voices carried then hushed as they saw Scarlett and me looking more than worse for wear.

"Someone get Abel," the cloaked man said, coming to a stop.

Ches and Peter kept walking, however, pushing us forward toward the door. I looked at Scarlett, seeing the fear behind her eyes.

"It's okay," I whispered, praying I was right.

They hadn't taken our things. They hadn't gone through our bags or taken my dagger. That was good news, right?

Right?

We crossed the threshold of the wall and I glanced over my shoulder. The cloaked man was gone, like he'd disappeared into thin air.

Scarlett gasped, her brow knitted in confusion. I turned to follow her gaze, my own body relaxing. Beyond the wall was a very neat and tidy village, rows of buildings and cottages made of stone leading up to a wide, square fortress. It was quiet, with no one milling about what looked like market stalls in the center of a wide road leading through the center of the village. Candlelight flickered in the windows, however, with shadows moving behind curtains as people peered out to look at the guests, or captives, or their leader.

"Well, well, well," came a booming, honeyed male voice in the distance, followed by an even louder laugh.

I blinked into the gray drizzle, seeing an ashen blond man dressed in fine, blue velvet walking toward us, flanked by men dressed in leathers and homespun similar to what Jared wore daily. "I wasn't expecting visitors. What a treat."

Abel stopped short of us, peering at us with a careful, curious eye. His eyes were just as blue as the well-fitting suit he wore, his hair brushed away from his devastatingly handsome face. He met my eye, arching his perfect brows.

He was the most handsome man I'd ever seen in my entire life. I could readily admit that. But he gave off an air of self-righteousness that immediately put me on alert. His cheeks dimpled as he smiled, looking me up and down and chuckling to himself.

"Well, you've seen better days I reckon, sweetheart."

I pursed my lips, willing myself to keep a leash on my smart-ass mouth.

He walked a circle around me, closing the distance between us. Something caught his eye and he paused, glancing down at my belt where Jared's dagger was sheathed. He looked into my eyes as he took a step closer, grazing his fingertips over the hilt.

"Friend, or foe?" he whispered into my ear.

I straightened my back. "That depends," I said firmly, holding my ground. I wouldn't let this man dominate me. "We're here to collect the boy."

"Oh?" he chuckled, tapping the hilt of the blade. "On whose orders?"

"On my orders," I hissed, turning my head to look up into his eyes. "That child belongs to my friend. She is his mother and we are claiming him."

Abel turned to look at Scarlett more closely, narrowing his eyes as he inspected her face.

"Well I'll be damned," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "You must be his mother—"

"I'm serious, she is his mother. She was a breeder to the Alpha—"

"He's a spitting image of her," Abel said sharply, turning to me. "It's eerie, really. No wonder Lock brought you here."

"Lock?" I asked, furrowing my brow at him.

"The scary-looking man with the scar," he said, waving his hand over his face. "Scares me to death just to look at him. Anyway, you're just in time for dinner, come—"

"The boy," I interrupted, tilting my chin toward the sky. "We'd like to see him."

"That will be arranged once I know the ransom will be paid—"

"It will be paid," I cut in.

He flexed his jaw, obviously tiring of my constant interruption.

"My mate will be sending you the ransom once the child is in our possession."

Abel looked at me, his eyes searching mine. His gaze drifted down my body to the knife.

"And who," he said, taking a step toward me again, "is your mate?"

I knew Scarlett was looking at me. I could sense her confusion and shock. I held Abel's gaze, however, flexing my jaw in a show of strength, maybe even defiance.

"Jared Crimson."

Abel gave me an odd look, his teeth bared and tightly clamped shut.

"I was hoping that the bastard was dead, and that's why you had his blade. Well, this should be interesting. Come, dinner is being served." He spun on his heel and walked away, his hands tucked behind his back.

I glanced at Scarlett, letting out my breath. "What the hell is going on?" I whispered, but she shook her head, just as shocked as I was.

We took a few gingerly steps forward, shoulder to shoulder.

"How is Jared supposed to pay the ransom? Gage is an Alpha's son!" Scarlett whimpered, tears welling in her eyes.

"I don't care!" I hissed. "I'll do what I have to do—"

"Eliza—"

I turned to face her, my cheeks going ruddy with emotion. I was trying to be angry with her to deflect from the crippling fear and pain threatening to take me under. I was in way over my head. I'd just killed a rogue. We'd spent days in the Dark Forest, barely surviving the storm. Now I was in Abel's territory, and nothing about him was what I was expecting.

His being handsome and friendly was more off-putting than if he'd been scared and terrifying like whoever the hell that Lock character was.

Something was up, and I didn't like it, not one bit.

"I didn't know that Jared was your mate," she said softly, her eyes glimmering with tears. "Congratulations—"

"We're not—he sent me away, Scarlett."

I turned away from her and continued to follow the road toward Abel's fortress, where he was waiting at the front door, occasionally looking down to check his watch.

"They're going to come after us," she continued, catching up to me. "You have to know that."

"I know. I'll deal with that when they get here," I said, my voice catching as we reached the fortress.

"Welcome to my home," he said, a charming smile on his face. "I'm looking forward to... getting to know my dear friend's mate."

Something in his voice made me look up at him, seeing the sly smile spread across his mouth.

I glared as he ushered us inside.

Chapter 842

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 842

Chapter 53: A Deal With the Devil

The inside of Abel's fortress didn't match the plain gray stone and basic shape of the exterior. I was hit by the scent of vanilla and spring roses as we entered the main foyer, the entire area bright, clean, and painted in muted purples and violets.

A large stone staircase forked to two separate wings of the house, and art in thick, intricate gold frames lined almost all of the wall space spanning two sweeping stories. I stifled a gasp as Abel shut the door behind us, rocking on his heels with a boyish grin on his face.

Two pretty maids rushed over to us, bobbing their heads in greeting.

"Have their things brought upstairs," Abel began, stepping between me and Scarlett with a casual air as he addressed the maids. "Run a bath for- well, I don't know either of your names." He blinked at us expectantly.

I cleared my throat. "Eliza," I said, then motioned to Scarlett. "And Scarlett."

"Nice to meet you both," he said, the corner of his mouth lifting into a smile as he tucked his hands into his pockets. His gaze was still on me, though, his brilliant blue eyes searching mine for something-something buried deep, I realized.

"Anyway, run Scarlett a bath and find them both some fresh clothes. Scarlett-" he extended his hand to her, but she remained frozen by my side. He curled



his hand into a fist, pursing his lips before continuing, "Scarlett is the little prince's mother. How lucky are we that she's here?"

The maid's mouth dropped open, her cheeks turning a rosy pink. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

Scarlett looked thoroughly confused, her body rigid with shock. This was not what we'd been expecting.

"We'll get you a bath and new clothes right away, ma'am."

"Some food, as well. I'll be dining with Eliza tonight, alone. Scarlett can reunite with her son in the morning once... business has been attended to." Abel was still staring right at me.

I could feel his gaze on the side of my face as I kept my eyes locked on Scarlett. Unease ripple through me as I reached out with my good hand and squeezed her arm.

"It's fine, we're fine," I whispered, although it was obvious everyone could hear us. I desperately wished I could mindlink with her; it would make all of this so much easier. Scarlett gave me a weak smile, but her eyes gave away her true feelings.

Something felt off about this situation-this kindness... this hospitality. We'd both thought Abel was some monster, an enemy of Jared.

But looking at him, at the soft, ashen blond hair and handsome, boyish face... his house, immaculate and tasteful... his maids, well kept, well fed, and dressed in finer clothing than I was accustomed to in my own realm.

The only scary, threatening thing about him had been Lock, or whatever his name was. And even he had helped us, fed us, and escorted us right where we needed to go.

One of the maids stepped forward and gently coaxed Scarlett to follow her. Scarlett looked over her shoulder at me, fear in her eyes. I just nodded, praying to whoever was listening that she'd be alright, that we'd both be alright.

"I have a healer on staff who can take a look at those wounds," Abel said casually as he waved his hand toward me, grimacing.

The rain had washed away most of the blood-my blood and the rogue's-but my white shirt was now stained maroon, and my tattered sleeve was hanging off my shirt on one side, while a soiled shirt I'd had packed in one of our bags had been torn and tied around my other arm as a sling. I was a mess.

"I'd like a bath, too," I began, turning to face him fully. "And I don't want anyone touching our things, period." I said this loud enough that the maid retreating up the staircase with Scarlett could hear my demands.

"I wouldn't think of it," he said curtly, and he sounded somewhat offended. "New clothes too, perhaps? I have a feeling you prefer... pants?"

"Yes," I replied, narrowing my eyes at him. "Thanks."

"Well, Kristina here will show you to the infirmary. I'll see you for dinner shortly." He bobbed his head, holding his gaze for a moment longer before chuckling under his breath and turning on his heel. His footsteps echoed down a long, tight corridor to the right.

I watched him until he turned and opened a door, disappearing from view.

"Right this way, ma'am," Kristina said prettily, her voice as sweet as honey.

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"Call me Abe," he said, cutting into a piece of prime rib. "My father's name was Abel. It makes me feel... old."

I sipped my wine, nodding at him as he held my gaze for a moment. He turned back to his food and I took the opportunity to continue examining the dining room, which was snug and cozy, warmed by a roaring fire in a marble fireplace. There was a single window in the entire room, and just like in the foyer, the walls were covered in paintings. He had taste, that was for sure.

I'd spent the better part of an hour getting fixed up by the healer, who was a strange but kind older gentleman who knew his stuff. He'd bandaged the lacerations on my left shoulder and fashioned a new sling for my right arm, giving me a clean bill of health. Before I'd seen the healer, I'd been allowed to take a quick but scalding bath, a maid helping me scrub my journey from my skin and hair.

I glanced down at the pale gray sweater made of what felt like cashmere, a matching pair of pants completing the divinely comfortable outfit. I had something just like this at home in Winter Forest. It made me feel odd to be dressed so... modern.

"You have a very unique eye color," he said, breaking me from my musings. "Is it exclusive to your family?"

I blinked up at him, furrowing my brow. He was being entirely too nice.

"It's exclusive to me," I said, helping myself to another piece of fish and steamed vegetables." It's practically a combination of my parents' eye colors."

I could have bit down on my tongue. I had no ideal

why I'd so openly mentioned my parents to this perfect stranger, this enemy.

He didn't seem like an enemy. He was relaxed and casual as he ate, occasionally asking me questions about how we fared during our journey, even going as far as to compliment me on my tenacity to risk a trip on foot through the Dark Forest. He hadn't mentioned Scarlett and her son, or the rogue I'd killed, or Jared, at all.

"So, both of your parents are alive?"

"Yes," I said, grabbing my wine and leaning back in my chair, pleasantly full.

"Are yours?"

"I hope not," he grinned, his blue eyes shining in the light of a half dozen candles illuminating the table. My lips twitched into a smile, but I stifled it.

"Where're you from? I don't remember you from the village."

"The Realm of Light," I said, and for whatever reason, it felt good to tell the truth. "And if you think for a second that you can try anything with me-"

"How very forward of you," he grinned wryly, rolling his eyes.

I pursed my lips, narrowing my eyes at him.

"I meant in terms of taking me hostage and selling me to the highest bidder-"

"Too much work," he said, lazily waving a hand in dismissal. "I have a feeling you could slit my throat right now if you wanted to. I've given you ample opportunity. If you really feel threatened, just say so. Leave, if you must. You're my guest, not a prisoner."

"I'm the mate of your enemy," I said, setting my wine back on the table.

"Has he marked you?"

"No, but-"

"I can't sense a wolf on you yet," he said, pausing to sip his wine. "So, you're not of age to even know your mate for sure, so Jared is irrelevant. We'll talk about him later if we must."

If we must... I saw the twinkle in his eyes as he said it, his words laced with silent challenge.

"So, the Realm of Light," he drawled, pouring us both another glass of wine.

"Did you fight in the war?"

I glanced at him, trying to keep the color from rising in my cheeks.

"No," I replied as he sipped his wine, his eyes fixed on my own. "I was a... triage nurse at the tail end of the war-"

"A few of my men are from the Realm of Light."

"What?" Unease settled in the pit of my stomach. "Why?"

"Maybe for the same reason you're here.

Adventure, sights unseen, a wild, untouched world."

I inhaled deeply, pondering my next move. He was staring at me, a contemplative look on his face.

He leaned back with his wine glass, looking entirely at ease.

"I fought in the war for the same reasons."

"In Breles-"

"In Crimson Creek," he interrupted, his eyes darkening slightly as he blew out his breath. "Then the, uh, the Night Realm."

I damn near dropped my wine glass. "What?"

The battle in the Night Realm had effectively ended the war. I'd heard faint whisperings of what had happened, mostly from my cousin Oliver.

"I just happened to be standing there when our Luna tore through Crimson Creek with that cousin of hers, Prince Oliver. She was looking for our Alpha King, and she chose a legion of warriors to go into the Night Realm with her to find him and end the war. I was just standing there, so... well, I went. Why the hell not, right? I was grossly unprepared for what I saw and had to do. Those who fought in the Night Realm were paid... handsomely, for their services." He waved his hand in a wide circle around the room before running his fingers

through his hair. "I didn't have a crew yet, or my own village. But the money was a start, and now here I am."

I was at a loss for words as I slowly sipped my wine.

"I'd like to go back one day and really see your realm for what it is, you know? Jared and I used to talk about it, dream about it... that was before his curse. I'm assuming you know-"

"I know," I said, the words coming out with more emotion than I'd intended.

hadn't known that Jared wanted to see the Realm of Light, however.

Something about Abel's-Abe's- words sliced through my heart. He caught it, his brow furrowing for a fraction of a second before he shrugged, flexing his ringed fingers.

"Why didn't he come with you?"

"I thought we were only talking about Jared if we had to," I said flatly, setting my wine on the table.

"What did he tell you about me?"

"Nothing of substance, nothing that could have prepared me for... all of this." I waved my hand in a dramatic circle, mimicking his mannerisms.

He gave me a sly smile, chuckling to himself.

A trio of male servants came in to clear the table, Abel nodding his thanks as he tossed his napkin on the table and rose. "This conversation calls for something a little stronger than wine, I'm afraid. Come," he motioned for me to take his hand.

I hesitated. "Come where, exactly?"

"My bedroom, of course." He winked at me just as his fingers closed around mine.

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I knew I'd underestimated Abel the second he locked the bedroom door behind us. I whirled around, expecting him to launch himself on me, but he walked right past me toward a bar cart. He poured brandy into two crystal glasses, turning to me with a look that made an anxious shiver run down my spine.

"Jared and I were best friends once," he began, taking a drink.

I sipped from my own glass, not enjoying the taste. Maybe it was the acrid taste in mouth from just being locked in his bedroom that made my stomach clench and my throat tighten with unease instead of the brandy.

"I couldn't accept being second."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He was voted into the position of leader over me," he said flatly, but I could tell it stung. "I made a big show of it, beat the ever living s\*\*t out of him and took off, promising I'd rip him to shreds if I ever saw him again. Funny how his mate somehow ends up in my home."

I took another drink of the brandy, trying to wet the sudden dryness in my mouth.

"Is he on his way?" Able asked.

"I don't know."

"Surely he'd come after his mate-"

"He was trying to send me home, back to my own realm. He'd gone... he left, so I decided to leave, too."

"Ah, I see-"

"I'm just here to reunite Scarlett with her son-"

"Jared won't pay the ransom," he said, staring out one of the windows on the far wall. He turned to me, his mouth curving into a smile. "But maybe you and I could make a deal."