

Kings Breeder 843

[Chapter 843](#)

Jared

Archer nudged the black mass of the dead wolf with the toe of his boot, his face twisted in a grimace.

I could scent both women in this cave. The fire they'd started was cool to the touch, but the charcoal was still oily from whatever they'd used to start it. I rubbed the ash between my fingers as I crouched, looking around.

"How'd they get so far off course?" Brandt said from the entrance of the cave as he slid his favorite dagger back into his belt.

"Lock was here too," Archer said quietly, his boots leaving bloody footprints as he walked out of the cave and looked around. "And two scouts, I think."

"I know," I breathed, rising from my position and running my fingers through my hair. I didn't mention that I could smell blood other than the wolves. They knew it too, but none of us were willing to admit what that meant.

"All of their things are gone," Brandt said absently as he turned to glare into the setting sun. We'd been running for days through a colossal storm. Picking up their scent again had felt like a miracle, but now....

"f*****g Lock," I said through gritted teeth, glancing around as I scanned the area around the cave. We weren't far from the edge of Abel's territory. We'd make it there by morning if we traveled through the night.

If we didn't run into Lock, first.

"I haven't seen that prick in years. Not since the war," Archer bit out, dragging the wolf out of the cave by its tail. I watched him as he bent to examine it, pulling back its fur to show the deep gash on its neck. "Think he did this?"

"Eliza did it," I breathed, closing my eyes for a moment.

I let myself be momentarily racked by guilt at the thought of Eliza having to defend herself from this rogue. It was a true rogue, too, the soulless kind who had no master but itself, driven by primal urges like hunger and the need to chase and hunt.

"Eliza?" Brandt said, his brow furrowed.

I lifted one of its paws, her blood dried against its talons. Archer let out his breath as he rose to his full height, the three of us looking at each other for a moment.

"The other camp we passed had their scent, so they're likely still alive," Archer said coldly, his fingers grazing his knife belt.

"Abel wouldn't kill them. He has no reason to," Brandt added.

Silence fell again, the space between us filled with the sounds of the forest. The women had made it through the Dark Forest alone, and alive.

“We’ll shift and keep moving,” I said, undoing the buttons on my shirt.

We didn’t have a concrete plan when it came to when we’d eventually reach Abel’s territory. He had some of the fiercest scouts in the lands, and I knew that to be true because Abel and I had trained together for years before he left our village. We were a physical match for each other, but he had something I didn’t.

“Lock will be expecting us. I’m sure he knows we’re here now,” I warned, keeping my eyes on the forest as I undressed.

Archer tossed his clothes into his bag before shifting and shaking out his coat. Brandt gave me a careful eye, then undressed, his eyes downcast as he tucked his knife belt in his bag.

I didn’t know how to explain Lock. He was a shadow, damn near silent as he crept through the woods. He was too striking to be a spy, not with his scar, deep-set silver eyes, and raven black hair that fell down his back, nearly touching his waist. But he was the best f*****g warrior I’d ever witnessed, and he’d chosen to follow Abel instead of me.

I couldn’t say I was upset about it. Lock was terrifying and for the most part, uncontrollable. He was only half wolf, the other half a mystery. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

I shifted, picking up my backpack between my teeth.

‘Let’s go,’ I said down the mindlink, tilting my head to motion for them to fall in line in front of me.

I prayed to whoever was listening that Eliza was on her toes, using that big head of hers to think rationally. Abel was sharp as a tack, and his specialty was manipulation.

I’d nearly fallen for it once.

There were six of them standing in a row, their wolf forms distorted by the field of tall, yellow grasses swaying in a humid breeze. The wall around Abel’s village shone in the midday sun, casting a long shadow across the field as the sun crept closer to dusk with each passing minute.

We’d been followed by Abel’s scouts since morning, waking up to them creeping through the trees as we roused ourselves from shallow sleep. They made no moves on us and kept their distance. We were unwelcome guests in their territory. They’d been waiting for us, just like I thought.

They followed us through the remainder of the forest until we reached the sweeping plains at the base of the Northern Mountains, then they fanned out around us, forming a barrier between us and the wall to the fortress where my mate was being held.

‘Are we doing this with fists or teeth?’ Archer asked through the mindlink.

As if on cue, the scouts backed up, disappearing into the grass. I saw figures moving along the top of the wall, faint voices carrying in the wind as they alerted each other of our location.

I shifted back, dropping my backpack and hastily changing into my clothes. Brandt was dressed by the time I'd secured my knife belt over my waist, but Archer stayed in his wolf form, his snout lifted to the breeze.

"We're doing this like civilized men, Archer. Shift, now," I said, flexing my jaw as I started forward. I kept my eyes on the men now running along the top of the wall, some of them pausing to look down at us as we approached.

I planned to knock on the front door like the old friend that I was.

"Don't come any closer!" said a young man of no more than eighteen as he hurried through the grass. He was a kid, really, tall and gangly, having not yet filled out his new-found height. I paused midstep, tilting my head at him as I loosened my shoulders and flexed my hands in front of me before curling them into fists.

"I don't fight babes. Move aside. I have business with your leader."

"Y-you're not welcome!"

"I wasn't asking," I said sharply, fixing him with a dark look.

He visibly swallowed, turning his gaze slowly back toward the wall, where several of the men were now shouting at him to do something, anything.

"You're being tested," I said as the boy turned back to face us.

Archer crossed his arms over his chest beside me, shirtless, his muscled physique gleaming in the sun. Brandt came up on my other side, calm and collected like usual.

"Which one of us do you want to fight?"

"N-none—"

"Choose wisely, kid. Those men up there—" Archer pointed to the wall, wiggling his fingers in hello as the men jeered and shouted at us. "We were all one in the same, okay? Trained by the same masters and hardened by the same Dark Forest that separates our villages. Choose me, and I'll rough you up with only my fists. Choose this guy—" Archer jabbed his thumb at Brandt, "Well, he likes to fight with knives."

"What about him?" the boy said, his face draining of color as he met my eyes.

I fought against the shadow curling into knots inside of me, begging to be released.

"I wouldn't choose him," Archer said flatly, then chuckled as the inconspicuous wooden door leading inside the wall opened and several men came out. "We're trying to help you out, kid. You think we haven't been in the same position as you, led out to fight some enemy under the careful gaze of our elders? They're placing bets on you, how many hits you can land. How long it takes before you go—"

The boy stepped forward and swung on Archer. I stepped out of the way, crossing my arms and glancing at the dozen or so men now walking in our direction, shaking out their muscles as they prepared for a fight.

Archer let the boy hit him cleanly in the jaw. The boy looked absolutely shocked as he staggered backward, his cheeks flushing with pride.

“Rule one,” Archer said, rubbing his jaw for a moment. “Never back down after the first hit—” He reached out, grabbing the boy by the shoulder, then picked him up and threw him a great distance into the grass.

Muffled shouts of mingled laughter and surprise rang out along the wall, but I was focusing on the men approaching us.

“You really sent a kid out to greet us?” I ground out as a few familiar faces came into view. Abel’s departure after I’d been voted the leader had split our village and crew into pieces. Some of these men I’d trained with, some of them were new.

But all of them knew who I was.

“He’s in training,” came a voice I recognized as Doug, a man not much older than myself. He nodded at me in greeting but kept a careful eye on Archer and Brandt. “Couldn’t let the opportunity pass us by.”

“Well,” I said, looking from man to man. “We’re here to see Abel. He has something that’s mine.”

“We can’t just let you walk up to the door—”

“Why not?” I cut in, giving him a fierce look.

He took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest.

Archer cracked his knuckles, c*****g his brow at a rather burly young man standing next to Doug.

“You can come inside if you can get through the door,” Doug continued, eyeing my knife belt.

I reached down and unfastened it, letting it fall to the ground.

“Better?” I said sarcastically.

Brandt pursed his lips, looking somewhat disappointed as he released his belt as well.

A tense hush fell over the area, no sound but the whisper of the breeze drifting between us as we faced off with Abel’s men.

I took a slow step forward, arching my brow at Doug.

All hell broke loose.

I slammed my body into Doug, hurling him up and over my shoulder as I darted for the door. I could hear Archer smashing into our opponents, his voice raised in a laugh as hit after hit sounded out behind me. Someone’s arm came around my neck, pulling me backward. I pitched forward and they flew head over heels onto the ground in front of me. I stepped on them as I continued forward.

More men funneled out of the door, shouting at each other as they ran toward me. My knuckles split against someone’s jaw, my fingers curling as I swung wildly, taking out two men at once.

It was three men against over a dozen... three men walking right into Abel’s village.

How embarrassing for him.

Brandt came up behind me, grabbing my shoulder. He pointed along the wall where Lock was standing, his face shadowed by his cloak.

“Still a creep,” Archer said through a mouthful of blood, spitting into the grass. “It’s been a long time, Lock. You look... just as awful as the last time I saw you!”

Lock’s face wasn’t visible, but his cloak billowed in the wind as if in answer. I flexed my jaw, giving him a brief nod in greeting. He turned and walked away, silent as a ghost.

Another man started through the door then skidded to a stop a few feet from me, his eyes going wide as he looked past me to the men now rolling and groaning in the grass behind us. He started to back away but I grabbed him, pulling him toward me and headbutting him soundly. He slumped to the ground in front of us, swaying on his knees for a moment before falling onto his side.

I saw her then, those sea-glass eyes open wide and her mouth slightly ajar. I arched my brows at her in challenge as I stepped through the door.

“Do you want to explain what the f**k you’re doing here?” I asked, keeping my eyes on hers despite the men gathering around us as Brandt and Archer breached the wall.

[Chapter 844](#)

Eliza

I’d simply unlocked Abel’s door and walked away, not bothering to shut it behind me. I was not making any more deals or bargains with the men in this realm, not anymore... never again.

My footsteps echoed through the house as I climbed the grand stone staircase to the second story. I passed a maid who was bustling by, a basket of laundry clutched to her chest. She gave me a kind smile and a bob of her head as she passed, tilting her head down the hallway from which she’d come to where a door was slightly ajar, light spilling into the darkness.

I glanced back at the staircase, half expecting Abel to be hot on my heels, but he wasn’t.

I walked into our room, finding Scarlett sitting up in the bed, her knees tucked into her chest. The hair around her face was damp, and her brow was gleaming with sweat. Her cheeks burned a deep crimson as she slowly looked up at me, shivering.

“What happened?” I said with force, slamming the door and locking it behind me before hurrying over to her.

She pulled her legs into her chest until she was as small as possible, her eyes welling with tears. I could feel... heat coming off of her, like she was burning with a fever.

“The man with the scar... he came in and asked me a bunch of questions. I couldn’t stop–stop talking. I answered everything he asked. I don’t know why, but I just couldn’t lie to him or refuse to answer. His eyes were just... I couldn’t look away from him even if I tried.”

I narrowed my eyes as I scanned her for injuries, my own cheeks flaming with sudden fury. Of course... this made sense. Abel separated us on purpose. I should have seen something like this coming, but I'd been a fly in his web of lies and manipulation.

"Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head, clutching her legs.

"He said I can see my son tomorrow. He said he believed me. He believed when I told him about the Alpha who bought me... I told him everything, Eliza, every detail. I couldn't stop. I asked him to let—to let me stop talking—"

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me, her eyes blurred by tears.

"He had some power over me. It... it felt like magic. I could taste it."

I could almost taste the magic she was talking about. The memory of that metallic tang coating my mouth was forever etched into my mind after my experience with the witch. I stared at her for a moment, then gently rested my hand on her shoulder. She leaned into me, whimpering.

"I've never talked about it to anyone before," she whispered against my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, meaning every word. I closed my eyes and held her until her whimpering quieted and she slowly laid down, her tears staining her pillow.

"I get to see him tomorrow," she whispered. "They're going to let me see him."

"They're going to let us take him home tomorrow," I breathed, pulling the covers over her.

She was still blazing hot, which worried me. I wasn't sure what Lock was, but if he had powers like this... powers that could make people tell him things they hadn't wanted to share....

I ground my teeth as I laid the back of my fingers over her temple.

I'd say something to Abel about this tomorrow, among other things. And I wasn't going to be nice about it, not at all.

Sometime later I curled into bed beside her, the room cast in blue-hued shadows as a full moon illuminated the room. I found myself on edge as the hours ticked by, unable to sleep. I was sure someone would come into the room, whether it be Abel or Lock or someone else, I didn't know....

I closed my eyes just as the sky began to turn a rich violet.

I refused to come down for breakfast. Scarlett stayed behind as well, pacing in front of the windows as we waited, and waited, and waited for someone to come and fetch us.

A breakfast tray appeared in the late morning with a note from Abel himself.

"Please?" it said, with a sad face and a broken heart scribbled next to the word.

“Who the f**k does this guy think he is?” I muttered, crumpling up the note and throwing it into the fireplace.

“What?” Scarlett asked, wringing her hands together. “What do you mean?”

“He took me to his bedroom last night after dinner—”

“What?” she hissed.

I gave her a look, rolling my eyes as I slumped into an armchair.

“Nothing happened, of course. He wants me to help him convince Jared to ally with him against Aeris in lieu of the ransom.”

That’s exactly what he’d asked of me after he said something could be “arranged.” I’d expected him to ask me to sleep with him, and found the actual deal more shocking than the latter.

“I thought Jared and Abel were enemies?”

“So did I, but something is... off.” I tapped my fingers against my knees. I sighed, sinking a little lower into the armchair. “I kind of feel like Abel might... miss Jared.”

“Miss him?”

“Yeah, actually. He had this look in his eyes when he talked about him, I can’t really explain it. Abel’s actually really nice. I like him. I guess he beat up Jared and left the village—”

“They were both being considered as the leader of the crew after Rhett died,” Scarlett said slowly, turning to look out the window again.

I’d heard of Rhett. There was a portrait of him in the library at Jared’s house. He’d been a handsome middle-aged man when the portrait was painted, with dark hair and blue eyes.

“Rhett said it would be between the two of them on his dying breath, apparently. It was several years before I came to the village, actually. Half of the crew wanted Jared, and the other half wanted Abel. It took years to decide it for sure and, well... that’s all I know.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad—”

There was a sharp knock on the door. We turned to face the door just as it opened. I sat bolt upright, gripping the armrests as Lock stepped into the room.

I’d never seen him without the hood of his cloak shielding his face. I could see that he was once a handsome man, but not anymore, not with that scar that ran from temple to opposite cheek blurring the sharp planes of his face.

“You’re to meet Abel outside in an hour, and he will take you to your son,” he said directly to Scarlett, who was frighteningly pale as she held his gaze.

I leaned forward in my chair, looking him up and down. His eyes shifted to mine, narrowing on me. I glared right back, holding his gaze until he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“An hour,” Scarlett whispered, turning back to the window. “That feels like a lifetime and... too soon, all at the same time.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” I asked, knowing it was a risk.

She looked down at her feet, sighing audibly. “I haven’t. They took him away right after he was born. I didn’t even get to hold him.”

My heart shattered around her words.

“He won’t remember me,” she whispered. “There’s no way he could possibly remember who I am to him.”

“My great aunt was a breeder,” I said softly, meeting her eyes as she turned around. “Do you want to hear the story while we wait?”

It was a bright, sunny day when we stepped out of Abel’s house and walked into the village center. Abel was walking a few paces in front of us, occasionally looking over his shoulder at me as we followed him into the village.

“Did you get my note?” he said softly, glancing from me to Scarlett, who was lost in her thoughts with her eyes downcast on her shoes.

“Yes, and my answer is no. Whatever this is, it’s between you and Jared.”

Abel frowned, turning away from me as we approached a wide, wooden building on the other side of the square.

He’d just opened the door to usher us inside when a warrior ran up to him, whispering frantically in his ear. Abel’s brows shot up, then he relaxed, shutting the door firmly before motioning for us to go back up to the house.

“What—” I began, but then noticed the men running toward the wall.

I followed their movements, glancing up at the top of the wall where warriors were stalking back and forth, shouting at whatever was happening in the fields that lay beyond the village.

“What’s happening?” Scarlett said quickly, grabbing my arm.

“Sounds like we have more guests.” Abel tucked his hands behind his back and nodded at the men that ran by, some of them now funneling through the door leading outside of the wall. “What a treat.”

“Who?” I barked, but Abel started walking away, toward the wall. I followed. “Hey!”

Through the open door, I could see a battle taking place in the distance, the fray distorted by the swaying golden grass.

But then Jared was just beyond the door, taking a man by the shoulders and headbutting the man so hard he slumped to the ground.

Jared stepped through the threshold, panting, his eyes wide and full of violence.

“Do you want to explain what the f**k you’re doing here?” he snarled, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

I blinked at him, then let the hurt I’d been hiding for days shine clear on my face.

Several days in the Dark Forest had dulled the pain of his rejection and abandonment, sure. I had to be the protector instead of the one needing protection for once, and I’d let it wholly consume me until it was all I could think about. I had to keep Scarlett safe. I had to reunite her with her son. I had to kill that rogue. I had to be tough.

I had to be tough. I had to be. I had to—

“f**k you, Jared,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion as I turned away from him and walked over to Scarlett, who was standing, shellshocked, her eyes focused on the four men now staring after us... after me.

I glanced over my shoulder at Archer, Brandt, and Abel, who were all staring at me in shock. Abel looked especially confused, looking between me and Jared with his brow c****d and hands tucked casually in his pockets.

“Mates, huh?” Abel said to Jared, chuckling lightly. Jared exhaled deeply, eyes darkening on Abel and then on me. “I wouldn’t have taken her to my room last night had I known—”

I closed my eyes to the sound of violence coming from the group... a group of old friends, from what I’d heard.

I didn’t know what kind of game Abel was playing, but what he was doing was causing a distraction, that was obvious.

“Will you come with me?” Scarlett asked in the smallest voice I’d ever heard.

I nodded, knitting my hand in hers as we turned toward the stone building behind us and walked through the door.

Jared and I would talk later, we had to.

There was so much left unsaid.

[Chapter 845](#)

Eliza

The building must have been used as some kind of common space for the people of Abe’s village. It was a wide, open space with several long tables able to seat dozens of people as well as bookshelves lining the walls. There was a single hallway leading away from the common area, and one of the doors was ajar. Light spilled into the darkened hallway as I held Scarlett’s hand and led her forward.

I could feel her hesitation. The air around us was thick and electric. One glance at her face and I knew she was likely going to faint when we reached the room, especially now that childlike laughter was filling the air around us.

The voices of women cut through the chatter as we approached the door. Scarlett paused, digging in her heels.

“I can’t,” she squeaked, looking up at me with wide eyes and a flushed face. “I can’t!”

“Why? He’s your son—”

“He has no idea who I am. He wouldn’t have been told anything about me, Liza. I was never considered his mother. I was just a vessel—”

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “Stop it, Scarlett. Look at me! Look at me right now.”

She sheepishly held my gaze, tears welling in her eyes.

“He’s probably terrified. His father was just killed, and he was taken by strangers to this place. Now I’m here to take him. I’m just another stranger taking him to another strange place—”

“You’re taking your son home, Scarlett,” I said with force, wiping a tear from her cheek. “He needs you. He’s always needed you. He should have never been taken from you to begin with. I don’t care if that’s how things are done here,” I ground out, tears welling in my own eyes as she began to crumble in my arms. “It shouldn’t have happened. It shouldn’t have happened to you and I am sorry. I am so sorry—”

“Are you here to see the boy?” came a light, feminine voice down the hallway.

We both turned our heads at the same time, finding a woman standing a few yards away from us. She gave us both a sympathetic smile, her eyes creasing as she beckoned us over.

“Abel said you looked just like the boy. Look at you,” she took Scarlett’s trembling hand as she came within reaching distance, her fingers closing around Scarlett’s. “Oh, my dear. There is no doubt this child is yours.”

The woman must have sensed the emotional turmoil Scarlett was experiencing. I reluctantly let go of Scarlett, watching as they turned into the mysterious room. The sound of laughter rang through the air, followed by the clanging of toys and little footsteps darting around. There was more than one child in the room... there had to be.

And I was right, I realized, as I crossed the threshold of the doorway and stepped into the light of a large room decorated with all of the colors of the rainbow. At least a dozen children, most under the age of five, zigzagged around the room in a chaotic fashion while four women tended to them.

Scarlett was standing in the center of the room with the kind woman’s hand pressed lightly against her lower back. The woman was speaking softly to Scarlett, her eyes fixed on Scarlett’s face.

But Scarlett was rigid as a statue, her back to me, her eyes focused on a small boy with a gleaming mop of cherry red hair who was playing with blocks in the corner of the room.

My heart was in my throat.

He really did look exactly like her.

I choked back a sob as I ran my hands over my face, wiping away the tears. Someone touched my elbow and I turned around, finding Abe standing beside me, dabbing at a split lip. One of his eyes was red, the skin around it puffy and turning a hellish crimson.

"I think Jared and I are going to be friends again," he said sarcastically, meeting my eyes. Then he threw his head back in a chuckle, wincing a bit as he tucked his bloodied handkerchief in his jacket pocket.

"Did he do that to your face?" I asked, my voice slightly wobbly from emotion. I was still reeling from Scarlett's reunion with her son and had momentarily forgotten that Jared and his besties were outside and had beat the s**t out of half of Abe's warriors.

"The rest of my body is worse," he grimaced, shrugging painfully. "I deserved it for saying I took you to bed. I don't know why I said it. I just couldn't resist."

"You're a menace, aren't you? You just wanted to get a rise out of him."

"Of course I did," he said, rocking on his heels. A little girl ran up to him with a jar full of marbles. He c***d a brow at her, popping the jar open and handing it back. She scurried off, giggling. "I can't tell you why because I honestly don't know. There's just something about Jared that makes me want to push every button he has until he pops."

"It's the shadow," I replied, knowing exactly what he was talking about. "That unearthly... fury."

"That power," he corrected, but he nodded his head nonetheless. "He had it before he turned twenty-one, you know. It was never a secret that he was a Dark King, or Lord, whatever they call it now. I was always fascinated by it but he never unleashed it, no matter how badly I pestered him."

He paused as the sound of marbles pinging off the shallow carpet echoed through the room.

"Well, I'll be in trouble for this," he breathed, giving one of the women a boyish smile in apology as she scowled in our direction. "Walk with me?"

I glanced at Scarlett, who was now kneeling beside her son, her shaking hands helping him build a tower. Her face was pale, her mouth stretched in a thin line. But her eyes were wide and dry, focused on the boy with every ounce of her being.

I let out my breath and nodded at Abe, who offered me his hand. I glared at him.

"Still warming up to me. I get it."

"Who are you, exactly?" I asked as we left the room.

"I like to think of myself as an Alpha to these people," he began as we slowly made our way down the hallway. "But I'm just another mercenary, another bandit... maybe even a rogue, but not the soulless kind, mind you." He wagged a finger at me and then motioned for me to sit across from him at one of the long tables in the common room.

"Why does Jared hate you so much? I don't believe for a second it's because you beat him up."

“Well, that was obviously a lie,” he snorted, leaning back and crossing his legs. He waved a hand over his face, highlighting his injuries. “I mean, look at me. Jared could kill me with just his ice-cold glare of death if he really wanted to.”

I couldn't help but smile, nodding in understanding. Then I bit back that smile and narrowed my eyes on him again.

Was I really starting to... like Jared's arch nemesis? Maybe I was... not going to lie.

“To answer your question,” he sighed, flexing his hands over his knees, “it's because I am charming and devilishly handsome, and he just couldn't stand it.”

I tilted my head to the side, narrowing my eyes into slits.

“I am manipulative and a well-trained spy, darling. Jared conquers with his fists and whereas I just use my smile to make even the most daring Alphas bend to my will. Had I been in Suncrest with you instead of Jared, I would have had Aeris eating out of my f*****g hands within an hour just by charming him with my words. Jared likes the chase, the hunt, the violent end. He didn't used to be like that, though. I didn't like the idea of Jared becoming the leader of our village because I thought it would be bad for him personally, not because I was jealous he was chosen over me, or because I didn't think he'd do a fine job. I know he has and will continue to do so... for the next four months, at least.”

A stunning realization prickled through my body as Abe continued, his eyes downcast on the table.

“I was worried about him and what he'd become. He was so... focused on ignoring the curse and carrying on like nothing was going to happen. I knew being our leader meant he'd stop looking for a solution for his own problem. I realized I'd lost him, and I left because I couldn't bear to see him suffer a fate worse than death. I felt responsible in a way... I tried to talk some sense into him but—”

“It's like arguing with a brick wall?”

He flicked his eyes to mine, smiling.

“I thought maybe I could take the title of leader away from him by force. He nearly killed me. I licked my wounds and went to war a few months later.”

I believed him... every word.

“But now you're in the picture,” he said, clicking his tongue. “Interesting indeed. Now what are you going to do?”

“I'm going to break the curse,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“I believe you.”

I swallowed back the feeling blossoming in my chest. Abe had said those words and meant it, I could see it. I could feel it.

I wish I could convince Jared of it, too.

“Those children in that room,” Abe said, his tone dropping an octave as he changed the subject. “That’s my real work, Eliza. All of them are the sons and daughters of breeders. I find them and try to reunite them with their mothers.”

“Really?”

He nodded, sighing deeply. His typically upbeat and boyish mask shifted into one of dismay and maybe even violence as he met my eyes once more.

“I have spies in every territory, every pack, and every village. I would have found Scarlett eventually and reunited her with her son. It was never about a ransom. The packs never pay the ransoms, anyway. A lost child is just that, lost. The Alphas just find another breeder and the wheel continues to spin.”

“That’s... awful.”

“It is. My mother was a breeder, my father an Alpha. She escaped shortly before I was born. She never recovered from it. I made it my mission to stop the practice. Alpha King Alexander is finally making progress, at least in the east.”

“So, you’ll let Scarlett take him home?”

“Unless they want to remain here, yes. Several women who I’ve reunited with their children stay here. They are given homes and jobs and the children receive schooling.” He leaned over the table, taking my hand in his before I could react. “What I am saying to you is that I am not a monster.”

“I know,” I admitted.

He squeezed my hand, and I squeezed it back. “So, we’re friends now.”

“Fine,” I breathed. “We are friends.”

He clapped his hands together, exceedingly pleased.

“Great, now that that’s settled, let’s patch things up with your mate, shall we?”

“Wait—”

Abe was already striding toward the door leading out into the village. I flexed my jaw, shaking my head as a chill ran up my spine.

I was still so hurt... just devastated by what had happened between me and Jared. I didn’t have anything to say to him, not at all.

“He has to believe I want you,” Abe said from the threshold of the common room.

I looked up from the table.

“He has to believe I want you for this to work. You also need to be... more docile than you’d normally be.”

“What are you talking about—”

He stalked back over to me, extending his hand as if to help me out of the seat I was currently glued to.

“I know Jared, okay? That man and I were like brothers at one point. The way he looked at you—” he gritted his teeth, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen him look at anything like that before. He wants to have nothing to lose. The longer he thinks that’s true, the less time he has to break this curse. Someone else will take over as the leader of his village. Someone else will see to the safety of his people when he’s gone. The world won’t stop moving just because he’s dead—” He squeezed my hand, a pleading look flashing behind his eyes. “But your world will, won’t it?”

I found it hard to breathe. I couldn’t hide the emotion clouding my vision as I nodded reluctantly.

“And you’d do anything to save his life?”

“I would,” I said, a little breathless.

“I will help you break this curse. You have my word and my word is good, I promise you... but now we play the game.”

“I’m familiar with games,” I replied, but my stomach was in knots. “But I don’t want to fool Jared.”

“You won’t have to,” he said, a wicked grin replacing his charming smile. “Leave that to me.”

[Chapter 846](#)

Eliza

I wasn’t exactly sure what Abe was plotting. I was just along for the ride it seemed, especially when I got back to the room I shared with Scarlett and found a glittery fuchsia-colored dress laid out on my bed. It had cutouts along the waist and an extremely low back... very low.

There was a note that was obviously from Abe with nothing but a smiley face scribbled on the paper. I arched my brow, shaking my head as I held up the scrap of fabric and looked it over with a critical eye.

“Why?” I whispered, laying the dress back down and fumbling with the buttons on my shirt.

Abe had mentioned in passing that I dressed like a teenage boy, a gleam of disapproval in his eyes. Jared seemed to like me for who I was regardless of my pants and men’s shirts... but he had broken things off and tried to send me home to my parents.

Maybe Abe was onto something.

I sighed heavily and dressed, which took a lot longer than I anticipated. Abe had mentioned all of us would be dining together tonight, that some kind of truce had been made when Scarlett and I had left to meet her son.

But the tension in the air was thick, even in the privacy of my room.

Did Jared even want to talk to me? He looked more angry that I’d drugged his friends and stolen into the night than happy to see me alive and well.

I glanced at myself in the mirror and fluffed my hair, separating my curls with my fingers. I looked... really good. I couldn’t deny it. I’d have to ask Abe where he was even getting these clothes.

I swallowed back my anxiety and worked my face into a steely gaze. My eyes flamed a deep green against the pink of my dress. My curls were extra unruly, and my face was flushed with subdued emotion.

There was a knock on the door. I was expecting Scarlett, but a maid stepped inside instead. She gave me a huge smile as she looked me up and down.

“Can I escort you to the dining room?” she smiled.

I nodded, taking an aching huge breath.

“He has warriors dappled through the western coast,” Abe said, swirling his glass of wine. “Why? I don’t know. But the information I’ve been fed has alluded to a possible conflict between Suncrest and Starfall Coast.”

I had no idea where Starfall Coast was, or whether or not it was a pack name or the name of a territory, but the look on Jared’s face across the table told me this was not good news.

“He’s making moves then,” Jared said, almost to himself.

Abe nodded, shrugging one shoulder. “He’s trying to get on Alpha King Alexander’s radar. That’s all I know. Aeris won’t make a move until the King does. He wants the King to be the aggressor.”

Jared flexed his jaw as he contemplated what Abe was saying. I’d been sitting here for twenty minutes listening to the two men speak in monotone voices about business; what the Alphas of the surrounding territories were up to, who was fighting with who, who was encroaching on the “neutral” territories led by rogues like Jared and Abe.

It was kind of a trip watching the two of them converse—Jared, all ice and shadow and Abel, nothing but charm and sunshine... two morally gray men on opposite sides of the spectrum, each of them tethered to a moral compass that didn’t know up from down.

Jared barely looked in my direction, and if he did, his gaze was firmly fixed on my dress with a look of marked disapproval, especially as his gaze slid down to the cutouts that had the curve of my hips on full display.

I ignored him, and the boring conversation, and focused on my food.

Brandt was sitting beside Jared, his eyes downcast on his plate. Archer and Scarlett weren’t in attendance. I didn’t expect Scarlett to be here, not after being introduced to her son. But Archer’s absence was notable, especially since this was technically a dinner meeting with someone they believed to be an enemy. I looked around the room, half expecting Archer to be lingering in the shadows somewhere, waiting for his opportunity to lunge at Abe and snap his neck.

“What’s next for you, Eliza?” Abe asked.

I nearly dropped my fork, having missed the last ten minutes or so of conversation as I pushed a roasted carrot around on my plate. My chest was tight and my heart was heavy sitting this close to Jared. That last time we'd spoken he'd just... left, meaning for us to never see each other again.

Now I was here, right in front of him, and his gaze was like ice as I met his eyes instead of turning my attention to Abe.

"I'm going north," I said, not daring to blink, "to investigate the ruins of the city of Myrel."

"Myrel? From the legends? I didn't realize it was found—"

"It wasn't," I breathed, giving Abe a look before turning back to Jared. "But it will be soon."

"Fascinating," Abe purred, his mouth curving into a smile as he looked between me and Jared.

Jared was glaring at me so intensely it sent a shiver of ice down my spine, but I dug in my heels and refused to look away from him.

"How do you know where it is?" asked Abe.

"Jared's tattoos," I said plainly, shrugging one shoulder and reaching for my glass of wine. "It's a map, and it matches the map I stole from Aeris."

I felt Jared's foot brush against mine in warning.

"I believe the key to breaking Jared's curse is in the city of Myrel," I continued, kicking him firmly in the shin.

He didn't so much as flinch.

"I'm hoping to find the forge where the Cryptex was made."

"Why?" Abe inquired with enthusiasm as Jared opened his mouth to say something, but nothing more than a growl came out.

"Because a piece of it is broken and needs to be mended. Once that's done, I plan on going to the witches for help."

"No—" Jared cut in.

"Yes," I spat, narrowing my eyes at him.

Abe c****d a brow, chuckling under his breath as I leaned back in my seat with my arms crossed over my chest.

"How far away is Myrel?" Abe asked, ignoring the shadow now creeping over the table.

I swallowed back the prickling apprehension rolling over my skin as I held Jared's gaze. "My estimation is forty miles north of here—"

"In the mountains, then?"

"Yes."

“And you plan to go... alone?” Abe’s voice wavered his words, his eyes shifting from me to Jared.

“Yes,” I said with finality.

Jared’s nostrils flared, but he said nothing. His shadow began to retreat, coiling like a snake across the table. I ran my tongue along the inside of my lip before I drained my wine.

I could barely breathe with the weight of the words unsaid between us settling on my shoulders with a pressure that had my back buckling under the strain. I didn’t think I’d ever been truly scared of Jared... but now?

There was nothing but what looked like mingled hatred and fury behind his dark eyes.

And they were firmly settled on me.

“I believe the Alpha King might send... help, with this quest, if that’s something you’re interested in.”

I blinked, meeting Abe’s eyes.

“No, I can’t involve him.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Alpha King is married to my cousin, and I’m not involving my family in this.”

“That’s enough—” Jared growled.

Abe’s jaw dropped open, his eyes shining as my revelation echoed through the room. “You’re related to the Queen?”

“She’s my cousin. Our grandparents are siblings—”

“Then you’re not a White Queen—”

“No, I’m not part of that line. My parents—”

Jared rose from the table so swiftly I barely processed the movement until he was leaning over it, his hands flat on either side of my plate.

“I said,” he raged, “that was enough.”

I moved away from him, my chair hitting the ground in my haste to get up. Abe sipped his wine, glancing between us with an interested expression.

“What the f**k were you thinking?” Jared seethed, his hands curling into fists. “You could have died, or worse—”

“But I didn’t. I’m here now, unscathed—”

“And sharing your secrets with him,” Jared said through gritted teeth.

I reached down and righted my chair, taking a seat. My chair scraped across the tile, the sound echoing through the room. I didn’t look him in the eyes as I laid my napkin back down in my lap.

“Eliza,” Jared warned, the wooden table cracking beneath the pressure of his hands.

“Leave me alone. Abe hasn’t been anything but nice to us and now you’re here, ruining it. You made it clear that we couldn’t be together, so why do you care what I do?” My eyes settled on him again, silently challenging him to argue the point.

Jared ran his tongue along his lower lip, his eyes narrowing into cat-like slits. Abe, on the other hand, was eating up every second of this very public argument.

I held my gaze on Jared as Brandt shifted uncomfortably in his seat, reaching for his wine.

“You’re coming back to the village with me,” Jared ground out, “and then you’re going home.”

“No,” I said calmly, breaking from his gaze and picking up my fork as if the man wasn’t trying to dominate me still by leaning over the table. I forked the carrot into my mouth, turning my gaze to Abe and giving him a smile. “Dinner was divine.”

Abe nodded once, but then quickly looked back at Jared. Something snapped deep within Jared, something I could almost feel in my own heart—rage, jealousy...maybe even regret.

He rose to his full height, his gaze searing the side of my face as I poured myself another glass of wine.

Then he turned on his heel and left.

“Well done,” Abe whispered, rising and throwing his napkin on the table.

“I still don’t understand the rules of the game you’re playing,” I whispered, more to myself than to him.

Abe was gone in a flash, chasing after Jared.

A hush fell over the room, then Brandt cleared his throat. I flicked my gaze to him, noticing he was looking right at me.

“I’m sorry—”

“He regrets what he did,” Brandt said, his blue eyes piercing my own. “I just want you to know that.”

“It sure seems like it,” I sniffled, wiping my nose as the emotions I’d been burying started to claw to the surface. “He hates me.”

“He loves you.” Brandt’s voice was steady but strained as I looked up at him through tears. “I’m sorry, Eliza.”

He didn’t love me. He wanted to control me, to dominate me, to ensure every move I made was monitored.

Right?

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” I whispered, wiping my eyes. “And just so you know, there’s nothing going on between me and Abel. He—”

“I know,” Brandt said with a soft smile. “Trust me.”

I furrowed my brow, noticing the slightly pinkening of Brandt’s cheeks.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve known Abe for a long time,” Brandt whispered, bringing his wine to his lips. “He’s not like that.”

The way he said it was odd, as was the somewhat forlorn expression on his face as he tilted his wine glass back and drained it.

“You... were clever, back at the village—drugging us, I mean.”

“I’m sorry, I had to—”

“You’ll face worse out there than us, Eliza. I need you to know that and remember it.”

“I understand—”

Brandt rose from the table and walked around it, squeezing my shoulder before he left the room.

Then, I was alone.

[Chapter 847](#)

Jared

I knew Abel was following me. I’d seen through his little ruse from the very beginning. It had been confirmed the second Eliza walked into the dining room with nothing but that shred of fabric clinging to her body, her face twisted in a fierce and confident glare.

Abel had always been a master of manipulation.

I hadn’t expected him to break Eliza, especially after only a matter of days. She didn’t even realize she was eating out of his hands like a wounded bird.

“Drop the act,” I said with forced calm as I poured myself a drink, draining it in seconds.

The door to the library closed behind him as Abel entered the room, his heavy footsteps coming to a halt.

“I know what you did to her.” I didn’t say I was impressed, even though I was. I poured myself a second drink, a stiff one, and downed it like it was water from a freshwater spring.

“She’s safe here,” Abel said, the bravado in his voice cracking as he removed that metaphorical mask of eternal sunshine. “You have to know who’s after her.”

“I didn’t know until recently,” I breathed, closing my eyes as the fine whiskey burned down my throat and numbed the furious roiling in my chest where my power was pleading to be let loose. “How did you find out?”

“Did you allow her to send mail to the capital? Or is she really as cunning as everyone is saying?”

I turned around to face him, noticing the great distance between us. His face was starting to bruise from where I’d swung at him earlier in the day.

“You tell me,” I said through gritted teeth before lifting my drink to my lips.

He pursed his lips, shrugging uncomfortably in his fine clothing. He’d really pulled out all the stops for this. I couldn’t help but wonder why.

“First of all,” he began, taking a cautious step toward me with his intention of taking a seat in a high-backed armchair near the hearth clear, “I did what I had to do to keep my village safe.”

“From two women?”

“From a woman who walked into my village smelling like you,” he said coldly, wrinkling his nose. “Reeking of you, Jared.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say—”

“I treated them both as guests, made sure they were cared for and comfortable. Eliza suffered a few injuries during her journey here and they were mended. I didn’t... start the game until I realized she brought your artifacts here. I did what I had to do.”

“By manipulating her into trusting you—”

“It’s not manipulation if it’s the truth,” he cut in, fire blazing behind his cobalt eyes. “I never took her to my bed. My bedroom, yes, but only to keep her separated from Scarlett long enough to allow Lock to work his... magic.”

I could have crushed the crystal glass I was holding in my fist.

“You have some nerve—”

“I have the mark of a Dark Witch seeking refuge in my village, Jared. Tell me, what would you have done? Let me guess—” he slumped into the armchair, crossing his legs. “If she hadn’t been your mate, you would have left her for dead long ago, right?”

“You know that isn’t true.”

“Then you’ve changed.”

“My village is full of women I’ve rescued—”

“So that the village carries on into the next generation in your absence, just like you planned. So that mates are united, so that children are born, so that those children grow into warriors so they can protect and be protected when you let the curse consume you, I know.”

I shook my head, running my tongue along my lip as I stalked toward him. I halted my progress as he sighed, examining his nails.

“Always the hero, aren’t you Jar? Never the lover. I would have paid a pretty penny to have witnessed you barreling through a boarded-up window at a f*****g breeder auction and finding your mate curled up against the wall, of all places. How did that feel?”

“I’m not talking about Eliza with you—”

“I saw right through her, you know. She came in here with the confidence of a man who’d seen some s**t and survived out of pure spite. I had her wrapped around my finger in a single day. Do you know why?”

Abel was a spider, and I’d inadvertently walked right into his web.

“Because her love for you is her greatest weakness. I used that against her, making her bargain with me without realizing it. I gained her trust. I sent her that dress to wear to dinner because I knew she’d wear it with little prodding to do so, and you’d see what I’d been able to do with only the truth and a shred of kindness I don’t think she’s seen since she was torn from the trading vessel.”

Of course, he knew how she’d ended up here. He knew everything. He always had.

That wasn’t the surprising part, not at all. Abel had spies throughout the realm and elsewhere constantly feeding him information. He would have known her name, her address back in her own realm, her parents’ names, and what kind of pets she had growing up as a child.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

“My men intercepted the letters she tried to send. One was addressed to her parents, Gemma and Ernest. One was addressed to Lena.” He drew out the nickname of the Luna Queen that only her close family would know, his eyes narrowed into slits. “A massive oversight, my friend. You should be on your knees thanking me for intercepting them before they fell into the wrong hands.”

“What does Hestia want with her?”

“You,” Abel said before I’d even finished speaking.

I looked down at the remaining amber liquid in my glass, clenching my jaw. “And where is our favorite witch right now?”

Abel gave me a sly smile, his eyes twinkling as he uncrossed his legs.

“Off her trail, thanks to Lock.”

“How did you do it?”

“He has your mother’s locket. You’ll get it back eventually, I promise. But for now, it’s in Lock’s possession and somewhere far, far west of here. Hestia will assume Eliza made it to the witches and her luck has run out. I bought you time to—”

“To take her home.” My words were ripe with finality, but Abel shook his head.

“To break the curse. She’s in this now.”

“That’s not your decision to make.”

“It’s not yours either, is it? In reality, she doesn’t have a choice, and you’ve known that from the beginning, haven’t you?”

f**k, I really hated this guy sometimes.

“You need her to break the curse. She feels it, doesn’t she—that power within the artifacts... the Cryptex, or whatever she calls it.”

“If she stays, she could die by my own hands if I lose control—”

“So don’t lose control—”

“You’ve met her,” I said, my voice dropping an octave as I took three long strides toward him and sat in the chair opposite him.

He shifted his weight, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile as I trapped myself further in his web.

“She is drawing that power out of me, toying with it and enjoying it—”

“How incredibly inconvenient for you,” he pouted sarcastically, forcing his mouth into an animated frown. “Your poor shadow wants to play and you’re denying it—”

“It wants to kill her, Abel.”

He pursed his lips, considering.

“Have you considered whether she’s cursed as well?”

A hush fell over the room, broken only by the crackling of the birch logs in the fireplace.

“She’s not.”

“If you’re truly her mate, then she is cursed. Think about it—” he leaned forward, his palms flexed in surrender. “She ends up here, in our realm, and suddenly every evil, unearthly being in our realm is after her before you even find her, Jared.”

“You’re telling me things I already know.”

“I’m telling you what you won’t accept, and that’s the truth. You’re closer than you’ve ever been to finding a way to break the curse. Your f*****g mate is leading the charge, dangers be damned. She’s not going to stop. I don’t think my games could persuade her from doing so, even if I... pulled out all the stops.”

I glared at him, sending that shadow of power lurching forward in warning.

He rolled his eyes. “Your shadow and I are old friends. I doubt it’s forgotten.”

“Why toy with Eliza and not just deal with me?”

“Because Eliza got here first, and it’s been so long since I’ve had anything to play with.”

“And what exactly did your little games win you this time?”

Abel met my eyes, a smile touching his lips.

There were names for this man around the realm... the Spy Master, the Ghost Courtesan. My favorite was simply “Sleeper,” which was probably the most well known within Egoren.

By the time the packs he infiltrated were aware that something was amiss, he and his spies were already gone, stealing away into the night while the wealthy and privileged were safe in their beds.

But Abel’s days of charming his way into the beds of both Alphas and Lunas alike were over, at least from what I’d heard.

Lock was his ears and eyes while Abel played Alpha in his fortress of a village.

“You’re here, aren’t you? You’re here, so I finally have the opportunity to talk some sense into you before you let yourself die.”

“You manipulated my mate for days just to get a rise out of me so you could get me alone,” I corrected, noticing the ruddy gleam to his cheeks as he smiled and nodded.

“You wouldn’t have spoken to me otherwise, and you certainly wouldn’t have agreed to listen to what I’m going to say next.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything—”

“You haven’t legally wed Eliza. I know that much is true. When I found out about what had happened in Suncrest I knew... I understood why that was something that needed to be done to secure her immediate safety. War is on the horizon. The King can’t keep Aeris under his thumb, and Aeris’s influence is still too large to ignore, even with my spies out in the field intercepting his calls to action against the King. Aeris will come to you, and so will the other prominent Alphas of the west, and if anyone has doubts—”

“We will sign the marriage contract.”

“You will mark her with your name, a ring, and your teeth.”

I sucked in my upper lip, shaking my head. “No.”

“Her being taken back as Aeris’s breeder is the least of your problems. She doesn’t have her wolf yet, Jared. You’ll leave her defenseless—”

“Yes,” I breathed, meeting his eyes. “I’d rather take that risk than put her through the pain of losing a mate to death, Abel.”

His eyes darkened for a moment, his expression shifting to one of sudden grief. He composed himself in a flash, leaving me hardly any time to regret my words.

“How long has it been now?” I said, my voice edged with regret.

Abel didn’t meet my eye. He looked into the fire, the flames reflecting in his eyes.

“Two years.”

“I heard what happened,” I said as gently as possible. Abel swallowed, his throat bobbing as though he was choking back the sob that was always lingering there, always threatening to burst forth. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

He said nothing for several long, silent moments.

“Sometimes I envy you for knowing you’re on borrowed time,” he said, his gaze still focused on the flames. “The thought of knowing just how long you have with your mate before you lose them is... somehow a blessing.” He turned his gaze back to me, his face cast in shadow. “How I would have lived those last months with Sam knowing he’d be gone... that I’d lose him, just like that.” He snapped his fingers, the sound echoing around the room.

My own throat tightened around the pain in his voice. I blinked a few times, my eyes settling on the door leading out into the castle.

Hurting Eliza like I had was inexcusable, despite what I believed to be very valid reasons.

I drained the rest of the whiskey in my glass, rising to my feet.

"I want you to ally with me against the Alphas of the west when the time comes," he breathed, still not meeting my eyes. "You owe me. This is what my game was about. You'll live to do it, you'll break the curse—"

"I know," I replied. That was as much of an answer as I could give.

I set the empty glass down on the coffee table and left the library, closing the door behind me.

I felt her presence before I saw her. I turned my head just as Eliza came to a stop, now dressed in a pair of simple pajamas, her bare feet soundless on the tile. She froze, her eyes widening for a split second.

She was fidgeting her hands, picking at her nails.

"I have some things I need to say to you," I said, turning to face her fully. "Please."

[Chapter 848](#)

Jared

Archer nudged the black mass of the dead wolf with the toe of his boot, his face twisted in a grimace.

I could scent both women in this cave. The fire they'd started was cool to the touch, but the charcoal was still oily from whatever they'd used to start it. I rubbed the ash between my fingers as I crouched, looking around.

"How'd they get so far off course?" Brandt said from the entrance of the cave as he slid his favorite dagger back into his belt.

"Lock was here too," Archer said quietly, his boots leaving bloody footprints as he walked out of the cave and looked around. "And two scouts, I think."

"I know," I breathed, rising from my position and running my fingers through my hair. I didn't mention that I could smell blood other than the wolves. They knew it too, but none of us were willing to admit what that meant.

"All of their things are gone," Brandt said absently as he turned to glare into the setting sun. We'd been running for days through a colossal storm. Picking up their scent again had felt like a miracle, but now....

"f*****g Lock," I said through gritted teeth, glancing around as I scanned the area around the cave. We weren't far from the edge of Abel's territory. We'd make it there by morning if we traveled through the night.

If we didn't run into Lock, first.

"I haven't seen that prick in years. Not since the war," Archer bit out, dragging the wolf out of the cave by its tail. I watched him as he bent to examine it, pulling back its fur to show the deep gash on its neck. "Think he did this?"

"Eliza did it," I breathed, closing my eyes for a moment.

I let myself be momentarily racked by guilt at the thought of Eliza having to defend herself from this rogue. It was a true rogue, too, the soulless kind who had no master but itself, driven by primal urges like hunger and the need to chase and hunt.

"Eliza?" Brandt said, his brow furrowed.

I lifted one of its paws, her blood dried against its talons. Archer let out his breath as he rose to his full height, the three of us looking at each other for a moment.

"The other camp we passed had their scent, so they're likely still alive," Archer said coldly, his fingers grazing his knife belt.

"Abel wouldn't kill them. He has no reason to," Brandt added.

Silence fell again, the space between us filled with the sounds of the forest. The women had made it through the Dark Forest alone, and alive.

"We'll shift and keep moving," I said, undoing the buttons on my shirt.

We didn't have a concrete plan when it came to when we'd eventually reach Abel's territory. He had some of the fiercest scouts in the lands, and I knew that to be true because Abel and I had trained together for years before he left our village. We were a physical match for each other, but he had something I didn't.

"Lock will be expecting us. I'm sure he knows we're here now," I warned, keeping my eyes on the forest as I undressed.

Archer tossed his clothes into his bag before shifting and shaking out his coat. Brandt gave me a careful eye, then undressed, his eyes downcast as he tucked his knife belt in his bag.

I didn't know how to explain Lock. He was a shadow, damn near silent as he crept through the woods. He was too striking to be a spy, not with his scar, deep-set silver eyes, and raven black hair that fell down his back, nearly touching his waist. But he was the best f*****g warrior I'd ever witnessed, and he'd chosen to follow Abel instead of me.

I couldn't say I was upset about it. Lock was terrifying and for the most part, uncontrollable. He was only half wolf, the other half a mystery. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

I shifted, picking up my backpack between my teeth.

'Let's go,' I said down the mindlink, tilting my head to motion for them to fall in line in front of me.

I prayed to whoever was listening that Eliza was on her toes, using that big head of hers to think rationally. Abel was sharp as a tack, and his specialty was manipulation.

I'd nearly fallen for it once.

There were six of them standing in a row, their wolf forms distorted by the field of tall, yellow grasses swaying in a humid breeze. The wall around Abel's village shone in the midday sun, casting a long shadow across the field as the sun crept closer to dusk with each passing minute.

We'd been followed by Abel's scouts since morning, waking up to them creeping through the trees as we roused ourselves from shallow sleep. They made no moves on us and kept their distance. We were unwelcome guests in their territory. They'd been waiting for us, just like I thought.

They followed us through the remainder of the forest until we reached the sweeping plains at the base of the Northern Mountains, then they fanned out around us, forming a barrier between us and the wall to the fortress where my mate was being held.

'Are we doing this with fists or teeth?' Archer asked through the mindlink.

As if on cue, the scouts backed up, disappearing into the grass. I saw figures moving along the top of the wall, faint voices carrying in the wind as they alerted each other of our location.

I shifted back, dropping my backpack and hastily changing into my clothes. Brandt was dressed by the time I'd secured my knife belt over my waist, but Archer stayed in his wolf form, his snout lifted to the breeze.

"We're doing this like civilized men, Archer. Shift, now," I said, flexing my jaw as I started forward. I kept my eyes on the men now running along the top of the wall, some of them pausing to look down at us as we approached.

I planned to knock on the front door like the old friend that I was.

"Don't come any closer!" said a young man of no more than eighteen as he hurried through the grass. He was a kid, really, tall and gangly, having not yet filled out his new-found height. I paused midstep, tilting my head at him as I loosened my shoulders and flexed my hands in front of me before curling them into fists.

"I don't fight babes. Move aside. I have business with your leader."

"Y-you're not welcome!"

"I wasn't asking," I said sharply, fixing him with a dark look.

He visibly swallowed, turning his gaze slowly back toward the wall, where several of the men were now shouting at him to do something, anything.

"You're being tested," I said as the boy turned back to face us.

Archer crossed his arms over his chest beside me, shirtless, his muscled physique gleaming in the sun. Brandt came up on my other side, calm and collected like usual.

"Which one of us do you want to fight?"

"N-none—"

“Choose wisely, kid. Those men up there—” Archer pointed to the wall, wiggling his fingers in hello as the men jeered and shouted at us. “We were all one in the same, okay? Trained by the same masters and hardened by the same Dark Forest that separates our villages. Choose me, and I’ll rough you up with only my fists. Choose this guy—” Archer jabbed his thumb at Brandt, “Well, he likes to fight with knives.”

“What about him?” the boy said, his face draining of color as he met my eyes.

I fought against the shadow curling into knots inside of me, begging to be released.

“I wouldn’t choose him,” Archer said flatly, then chuckled as the inconspicuous wooden door leading inside the wall opened and several men came out. “We’re trying to help you out, kid. You think we haven’t been in the same position as you, led out to fight some enemy under the careful gaze of our elders? They’re placing bets on you, how many hits you can land. How long it takes before you go—”

The boy stepped forward and swung on Archer. I stepped out of the way, crossing my arms and glancing at the dozen or so men now walking in our direction, shaking out their muscles as they prepared for a fight.

Archer let the boy hit him cleanly in the jaw. The boy looked absolutely shocked as he staggered backward, his cheeks flushing with pride.

“Rule one,” Archer said, rubbing his jaw for a moment. “Never back down after the first hit—” He reached out, grabbing the boy by the shoulder, then picked him up and threw him a great distance into the grass.

Muffled shouts of mingled laughter and surprise rang out along the wall, but I was focusing on the men approaching us.

“You really sent a kid out to greet us?” I ground out as a few familiar faces came into view. Abel’s departure after I’d been voted the leader had split our village and crew into pieces. Some of these men I’d trained with, some of them were new.

But all of them knew who I was.

“He’s in training,” came a voice I recognized as Doug, a man not much older than myself. He nodded at me in greeting but kept a careful eye on Archer and Brandt. “Couldn’t let the opportunity pass us by.”

“Well,” I said, looking from man to man. “We’re here to see Abel. He has something that’s mine.”

“We can’t just let you walk up to the door—”

“Why not?” I cut in, giving him a fierce look.

He took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest.

Archer cracked his knuckles, c*****g his brow at a rather burly young man standing next to Doug.

“You can come inside if you can get through the door,” Doug continued, eyeing my knife belt.

I reached down and unfastened it, letting it fall to the ground.

“Better?” I said sarcastically.

Brandt pursed his lips, looking somewhat disappointed as he released his belt as well.

A tense hush fell over the area, no sound but the whisper of the breeze drifting between us as we faced off with Abel's men.

I took a slow step forward, arching my brow at Doug.

All hell broke loose.

I slammed my body into Doug, hurling him up and over my shoulder as I darted for the door. I could hear Archer smashing into our opponents, his voice raised in a laugh as hit after hit sounded out behind me. Someone's arm came around my neck, pulling me backward. I pitched forward and they flew head over heels onto the ground in front of me. I stepped on them as I continued forward.

More men funneled out of the door, shouting at each other as they ran toward me. My knuckles split against someone's jaw, my fingers curling as I swung wildly, taking out two men at once.

It was three men against over a dozen... three men walking right into Abel's village.

How embarrassing for him.

Brandt came up behind me, grabbing my shoulder. He pointed along the wall where Lock was standing, his face shadowed by his cloak.

"Still a creep," Archer said through a mouthful of blood, spitting into the grass. "It's been a long time, Lock. You look... just as awful as the last time I saw you!"

Lock's face wasn't visible, but his cloak billowed in the wind as if in answer. I flexed my jaw, giving him a brief nod in greeting. He turned and walked away, silent as a ghost.

Another man started through the door then skidded to a stop a few feet from me, his eyes going wide as he looked past me to the men now rolling and groaning in the grass behind us. He started to back away but I grabbed him, pulling him toward me and headbutting him soundly. He slumped to the ground in front of us, swaying on his knees for a moment before falling onto his side.

I saw her then, those sea-glass eyes open wide and her mouth slightly ajar. I arched my brows at her in challenge as I stepped through the door.

"Do you want to explain what the f**k you're doing here?" I asked, keeping my eyes on hers despite the men gathering around us as Brandt and Archer breached the wall.

[Chapter 849](#)

Eliza

I'd simply unlocked Abel's door and walked away, not bothering to shut it behind me. I was not making any more deals or bargains with the men in this realm, not anymore... never again.

My footsteps echoed through the house as I climbed the grand stone staircase to the second story. I passed a maid who was bustling by, a basket of laundry clutched to her chest. She gave me a kind smile and a bob of her head as she passed, tilting her head down the hallway from which she'd come to where a door was slightly ajar, light spilling into the darkness.

I glanced back at the staircase, half expecting Abel to be hot on my heels, but he wasn't.

I walked into our room, finding Scarlett sitting up in the bed, her knees tucked into her chest. The hair around her face was damp, and her brow was gleaming with sweat. Her cheeks burned a deep crimson as she slowly looked up at me, shivering.

"What happened?" I said with force, slamming the door and locking it behind me before hurrying over to her.

She pulled her legs into her chest until she was as small as possible, her eyes welling with tears. I could feel... heat coming off of her, like she was burning with a fever.

"The man with the scar... he came in and asked me a bunch of questions. I couldn't stop-stop talking. I answered everything he asked. I don't know why, but I just couldn't lie to him or refuse to answer. His eyes were just... I couldn't look away from him even if I tried."

I narrowed my eyes as I scanned her for injuries, my own cheeks flaming with sudden fury. Of course... this made sense. Abel separated us on purpose. I should have seen something like this coming, but I'd been a fly in his web of lies and manipulation.

"Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head, clutching her legs.

"He said I can see my son tomorrow. He said he believed me. He believed when I told him about the Alpha who bought me... I told him everything, Eliza, every detail. I couldn't stop. I asked him to let-to let me stop talking--"

"What do you mean?"

She looked at me, her eyes blurred by tears.

"He had some power over me. It... it felt like magic. I could taste it."

I could almost taste the magic she was talking about. The memory of that metallic tang coating my mouth was forever etched into my mind after my experience with the witch. I stared at her for a moment, then gently rested my hand on her shoulder. She leaned into me, whimpering.

"I've never talked about it to anyone before," she whispered against my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, meaning every word. I closed my eyes and held her until her whimpering quieted and she slowly laid down, her tears staining her pillow.

"I get to see him tomorrow," she whispered. "They're going to let me see him."

"They're going to let us take him home tomorrow," I breathed, pulling the covers over her.

She was still blazing hot, which worried me. I wasn't sure what Lock was, but if he had powers like this... powers that could make people tell him things they hadn't wanted to share....

I ground my teeth as I laid the back of my fingers over her temple.

I'd say something to Abel about this tomorrow, among other things. And I wasn't going to be nice about it, not at all.

Sometime later I curled into bed beside her, the room cast in blue-hued shadows as a full moon illuminated the room. I found myself on edge as the hours ticked by, unable to sleep. I was sure someone would come into the room, whether it be Abel or Lock or someone else, I didn't know....

I closed my eyes just as the sky began to turn a rich violet.

I refused to come down for breakfast. Scarlett stayed behind as well, pacing in front of the windows as we waited, and waited, and waited for someone to come and fetch us.

A breakfast tray appeared in the late morning with a note from Abel himself.

"Please?" it said, with a sad face and a broken heart scribbled next to the word.

"Who the f**k does this guy think he is?" I muttered, crumpling up the note and throwing it into the fireplace.

"What?" Scarlett asked, wringing her hands together. "What do you mean?"

"He took me to his bedroom last night after dinner—"

"What?" she hissed.

I gave her a look, rolling my eyes as I slumped into an armchair.

"Nothing happened, of course. He wants me to help him convince Jared to ally with him against Aeris in lieu of the ransom."

That's exactly what he'd asked of me after he said something could be "arranged." I'd expected him to ask me to sleep with him, and found the actual deal more shocking than the latter.

"I thought Jared and Abel were enemies?"

"So did I, but something is... off." I tapped my fingers against my knees. I sighed, sinking a little lower into the armchair. "I kind of feel like Abel might... miss Jared."

"Miss him?"

"Yeah, actually. He had this look in his eyes when he talked about him, I can't really explain it. Abel's actually really nice. I like him. I guess he beat up Jared and left the village—"

"They were both being considered as the leader of the crew after Rhett died," Scarlett said slowly, turning to look out the window again.

I'd heard of Rhett. There was a portrait of him in the library at Jared's house. He'd been a handsome middle-aged man when the portrait was painted, with dark hair and blue eyes.

“Rhett said it would be between the two of them on his dying breath, apparently. It was several years before I came to the village, actually. Half of the crew wanted Jared, and the other half wanted Abel. It took years to decide it for sure and, well... that’s all I know.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad—”

There was a sharp knock on the door. We turned to face the door just as it opened. I sat bolt upright, gripping the armrests as Lock stepped into the room.

I’d never seen him without the hood of his cloak shielding his face. I could see that he was once a handsome man, but not anymore, not with that scar that ran from temple to opposite cheek blurring the sharp planes of his face.

“You’re to meet Abel outside in an hour, and he will take you to your son,” he said directly to Scarlett, who was frighteningly pale as she held his gaze.

I leaned forward in my chair, looking him up and down. His eyes shifted to mine, narrowing on me. I glared right back, holding his gaze until he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“An hour,” Scarlett whispered, turning back to the window. “That feels like a lifetime and... too soon, all at the same time.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” I asked, knowing it was a risk.

She looked down at her feet, sighing audibly. “I haven’t. They took him away right after he was born. I didn’t even get to hold him.”

My heart shattered around her words.

“He won’t remember me,” she whispered. “There’s no way he could possibly remember who I am to him.”

“My great aunt was a breeder,” I said softly, meeting her eyes as she turned around. “Do you want to hear the story while we wait?”

It was a bright, sunny day when we stepped out of Abel’s house and walked into the village center. Abel was walking a few paces in front of us, occasionally looking over his shoulder at me as we followed him into the village.

“Did you get my note?” he said softly, glancing from me to Scarlett, who was lost in her thoughts with her eyes downcast on her shoes.

“Yes, and my answer is no. Whatever this is, it’s between you and Jared.”

Abel frowned, turning away from me as we approached a wide, wooden building on the other side of the square.

He’d just opened the door to usher us inside when a warrior ran up to him, whispering frantically in his ear. Abel’s brows shot up, then he relaxed, shutting the door firmly before motioning for us to go back up to the house.

“What—” I began, but then noticed the men running toward the wall.

I followed their movements, glancing up at the top of the wall where warriors were stalking back and forth, shouting at whatever was happening in the fields that lay beyond the village.

“What’s happening?” Scarlett said quickly, grabbing my arm.

“Sounds like we have more guests.” Abel tucked his hands behind his back and nodded at the men that ran by, some of them now funneling through the door leading outside of the wall. “What a treat.”

“Who?” I barked, but Abel started walking away, toward the wall. I followed. “Hey!”

Through the open door, I could see a battle taking place in the distance, the fray distorted by the swaying golden grass.

But then Jared was just beyond the door, taking a man by the shoulders and headbutting the man so hard he slumped to the ground.

Jared stepped through the threshold, panting, his eyes wide and full of violence.

“Do you want to explain what the f**k you’re doing here?” he snarled, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

I blinked at him, then let the hurt I’d been hiding for days shine clear on my face.

Several days in the Dark Forest had dulled the pain of his rejection and abandonment, sure. I had to be the protector instead of the one needing protection for once, and I’d let it wholly consume me until it was all I could think about. I had to keep Scarlett safe. I had to reunite her with her son. I had to kill that rogue. I had to be tough.

I had to be tough. I had to be. I had to—

“f**k you, Jared,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion as I turned away from him and walked over to Scarlett, who was standing, shellshocked, her eyes focused on the four men now staring after us... after me.

I glanced over my shoulder at Archer, Brandt, and Abel, who were all staring at me in shock. Abel looked especially confused, looking between me and Jared with his brow c****d and hands tucked casually in his pockets.

“Mates, huh?” Abel said to Jared, chuckling lightly. Jared exhaled deeply, eyes darkening on Abel and then on me. “I wouldn’t have taken her to my room last night had I known—”

I closed my eyes to the sound of violence coming from the group... a group of old friends, from what I’d heard.

I didn’t know what kind of game Abel was playing, but what he was doing was causing a distraction, that was obvious.

“Will you come with me?” Scarlett asked in the smallest voice I’d ever heard.

I nodded, knitting my hand in hers as we turned toward the stone building behind us and walked through the door.

Jared and I would talk later, we had to.

There was so much left unsaid.

[Chapter 850](#)

Eliza

The building must have been used as some kind of common space for the people of Abe's village. It was a wide, open space with several long tables able to seat dozens of people as well as bookshelves lining the walls. There was a single hallway leading away from the common area, and one of the doors was ajar. Light spilled into the darkened hallway as I held Scarlett's hand and led her forward.

I could feel her hesitation. The air around us was thick and electric. One glance at her face and I knew she was likely going to faint when we reached the room, especially now that childlike laughter was filling the air around us.

The voices of women cut through the chatter as we approached the door. Scarlett paused, digging in her heels.