

Kings Breeder 851

[Chapter 851](#)

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 achingly 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 seering 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 852](#)

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 853](#)

Jared

Draven's Cryptex, the Sphere of Dreams, the Diadem of Nyx—three of the most coveted artifacts in the realm, all of them shrouded in mystery and lore. No one knew if the Sphere of Dreams or the Diadem of Nyx were real, the only mention of them coming from vague tales from the creation of our homeland.

But Draven's Cryptex was real, very real. And Hestia, the Dark Witch, wanted nothing more than to prevent me from putting those given powers back into it somehow.

If we prevailed... I was throwing the f*****g thing in the ocean. I'd travel to the Realm of Light with the woman I meant to make my wife and have her White Queen aunt toss it in the deepest trenches of the Northern seas.

[Chapter 854](#)

Eliza

I barely had time to get a hold of myself before Jared was rolling through the camp with the two rogues, their wolf bodies nothing but a mass of black as they barreled through the fire, sending a spray of embers throughout the camp.

Run. Run. He'd told me to run!

I grabbed my pack, the one carrying the Cryptex, locket, and maps, and sprinted in whatever direction my feet would carry me.

[Chapter 855](#)

I pulled my clothes back on, not even bothering to clean the blood off my body. It wasn't my own. It belonged to the three wolves now scattered in pieces near the center of the camp. I huffed a breath, adrenaline coursing through my body as I looked at the wolves. I'd practically skinned them alive, then sent that shadow after what remained.

Abe was staring at me from across their remains, his eyes darkened as he pulled his knife belt through his belt loops.

"ELIZA!"

I shouted, baring my teeth. Nothing.

Only the wind carried any noise toward us, and it was the sound of the river roaring nearby.

The silver wolf at my feet twitched as it succumbed to a painful death.

Good.

This one I'd taken my particular time with.

It had barreled into our camp reeking of Eliza, of her fear, but not of her blood.

She'd gotten away somehow.

"Gather what you can.

We need to go,"

I barked, glancing at Abe before gathering up my supplies and our bedrolls.

Eliza's boots and socks had been dragged in several different directions.

Her knife belt and vest were still there as well.

She was out there barefoot with no way to protect herself.

"I'll have her scent,"

Abe stated, shrugging on his backpack.

"What do you want to do with them?"

He waved his hand over the pile of dead wolves. I shook my head.

"I don't care, leave them. Let them be an example to whoever is dumb enough to try to track us."

The silver wolf was obviously in control of the rogues; that was a bad sign. It meant whoever this wolf had been before I ripped it apart with my bare hands had been a witch of some kind.

Only Dark Witches ran with the rogues. But this witch wasn't Hestia, that was clear enough.

Hestia would have killed Abe and Eliza without so much as looking at them, and she didn't need soulless rogues to do her dirty work.

We left the camp and followed Eliza's scent roughly a mile toward the mountains where her scent abruptly ended, right at the river's edge.

"S**t," I breathed, looking up and down the river bank.

"Can she swim?" Abe said flatly, crossing his hands over his chest.

I was more worried about her freezing to death somewhere downstream.

"Yes, she can swim-"

A blood-curdling scream was carried on the wind, followed by Eliza's voice gasping and crying out for help. I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the river and threw my body into action, letting it carry me to the other side. I heard Abe's splash over the rapid as he followed suit.

All of our supplies would be soaked—all of our food and clothing. I didn't care. Her screams were like a flame to my blood.

"Hold on for me" I thought.

'I'm coming. I'm coming. Her frantic screams cut through the air as I pulled myself out of the river and broke into a wet sprint in the direction of her voice. She was far, I knew that much. Her cries for help and agonizing screams were being carried on the wind like the air around us was sending us a message.

"I'm going to shift!" I yelled back to Abe, who was panting a few paces behind me.

Again I ripped through my clothes, my body groaning with fatigue as I sprinted forward, my paws thundering across the rocky forest floor. I didn't turn back to see whether or not Abe had stopped to pick up my things. I had to get to her, especially now that the forest went silent, the wind coming to an eerie stop. I found her in a clearing several miles away.

How she'd gotten there on foot in less than an hour, I didn't know. I didn't have a chance to give it much thought. I skidded to a stop, panting and staring wide-eyed at a circle of stones not unlike the one near my village.

The clouds parted, showering the clearing in the center in pale silver light. It smelled overwhelmingly of blood.

The air was thick and metallic.

Eliza was sitting down, her legs crossed and her hands resting palms up on her knees. Her left hand and arm were soaked with blood.

The Cryptex was in her bloodied hand, whirling, small pieces of blood-covered gold popping open and shut.

Her eyes were open, blinking slowly like she was awake.

I howled, alerting Abe of my whereabouts.

Her backpack was laying on the ground a few feet from the circle.

She'd been carrying some of my clothes inside of it, and I grabbed the first thing I found as I shifted back to my usual form, pulling on a soaking wet shirt and pair of pants as I hurried over to her, rocks slicing into my bare feet.

"Eliza!"

I cried hoarsely, the extent of her injuries now clear as day.

Her hand was torn apart, the sharp inner pieces of the Cryptex penetrating her skin. Her mouth was slightly ajar as she stared forward through the circle and into the sparse birch forest. I knelt in front of her, inspecting her hand.

I tried to pry the Cryptex from her hand, but it was fixed in place like it was a part of her. She sucked in her breath, a shuddering moan escaping her lips.

A tear fell down her cheek as I took her face between my hands.

"Eliza," I begged, wiping her tears away from her cheeks with my thumbs.

"I'm right here-" But then I felt it, that...shadow.

And it wasn't my own.

I reared back from her, landing on my ass as I looked down at her blood-covered forearm.

Dainty, roping lines of black ink snaked up her wrist and arm, intertwined with ink the color of raw emeralds. I screamed her name, crawling back over to her and doing everything in my power to tear the Cryptex from her flesh. She didn't flinch. She didn't even move as I yanked on it, cursing Lycaon audibly as I did so.

But then the Cryptex stopped whirling and the inner pieces slid free of her, clicking back into place.

It fell to the ground, dirt now coating its bloodied surface. I ripped apart my shirt, using it to staunch the bleeding.

She was crying, her breath coming in gasps.

"Eliza, look at me," I said sternly, tying the fabric in place over her palm. I shook her by the shoulders and her eyes rolled back in her head.

"What the f**k is happening?"

Abe shouted behind us, skidding to a stop and dropping our supplies.

I gave him a desperate look over my shoulder as I gathered her to my chest.

His eyes went wide as he saw the blood.

"That's too much blood, Jared-"

"I f*****g know, okay? We need a fire, now-"

"Everything is wet!"

Abe cried, bending to dig through one of the backpacks. He pulled a leather pouch from his bag and whispered a thankful prayer and he opened it and found the contents still dry-sterile bandages, ointment, needles and thread.

The thought of sewing her hand back together sent a rush of rage through me. How did this happen? Who was responsible?

"DRAVEN!"

I screamed, seeing red.

"You f*****g bastard. Where are you? What did you do to her?"

The air around us whispered in answer, a burst of cold wind sending dry sticks and debris showering over us.

"We need to get out of here, now,"

Abe hissed, kicking my backpack and belt toward me.

"There's a cave system nearby. I saw it when I was trying to find you. We can camp there and figure things out."

I picked Eliza up, cradling her in my arms like an infant.

She was freezing, cold to the touch.

Her lips were tinged blue, and it took everything in my power not to scream and unleash my dark powers out of pure fury.

Abe knelt, wrapping the Cryptex in a wet shirt before he took the lead.

Within minutes were standing before a darkened fissure at the base of the mountains.

Abe heaved a nervous breath, glancing at me with a look that told me he'd rather be home and warm in his bed than finding out whether or not this cave had other unearthly occupants.

I gripped Eliza to my bare chest, praying she could feel the fevered heat coming off my body.

It was all I could do for her at the moment until we got a fire going and one of us could go out to hunt.

Abe entered the cave, and a few moments later he reemerged, beckoning me to follow.

I leaned against the rock wall of the cave, closing my eyes to the light of the fire as Abe skinned rabbits on the other side of it.

Eliza was asleep against my chest, her breathing rhythmic and slow, her coloring returning back to normal.

We'd cleaned her wounds and stitched them closed, an act that had me biting down on my lip so hard I drew blood.

She couldn't feel it since she was out cold, but hurting her, knowing I was causing her future pain, cut me to my core.

Abe and I said nothing about the tattoos, but the truth of the matter hung wet and heavy in the air as we dressed her wounds in clean bandages.

All of our supplies were laid out to dry.

I wasn't sure how long we'd have to stay here.

"We're turning back, right?"

Abe asked as he laid one of the rabbits on a piece of smooth, flat shale to roast above the embers.

"Yes," I said hoarsely.

I felt like an i***t.

We'd been attacked on our first day on our journey, and Eliza had somehow unlocked the secrets of the Cryptex.

It left its mark on her, tattoos snaking up her arm like they did mine.

"Her tattoos," Abe breathed, catching my gaze.

"Jared, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I admitted, the words making my mouth go dry.

The thought of her being cursed like I was...

I couldn't even think of it, not now, not while she was wasting away in my arms.

Abe cut up the rest of the rabbits and dumped the pieces in a pot he'd brought with him.

He grabbed a pack of dried vegetables and spices that was laying next to him, breaking it open with his teeth and dumping it into the pot.

We'd boiled water to drink and to cook with.

I took a breath, trying to be thankful for his foresight.

Eliza needed to eat something, even if it was just a thin broth.

"We can go to the witches-"

Abe began, but then Eliza squirmed in my arms, letting out a pitiful whimper of pain.

"Liza, hey-"

I reached down and ran my knuckles over her jaw as her eyelashes fluttered open. She blinked into shadows dancing on the walls above our heads.

"Jared," she breathed, then she choked on a cough, her entire body trembling.

I gave Abe a quick, meaningful look and he rose to his knees, feeling around for anything dry and warm to lay over her shoulders.

"What happened?" I demanded, but my voice was soft.

She closed her eyes again, her face twisted into a look of pain as her injured hand twitched.

"We were always in this together, from the beginning," she whispered, looking up at me through tears.

"I know that now. I need to...to tell you what I saw."

[Chapter 856](#)

Eliza

Aman, wild and crazy, frantically waved the Cryptex around.

His eyes were bloodshot.

His lips moved so fast that they were a blur, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

My heart hammered in my chest as I watched him freak out. I'd never seen that man before, but there was something about him that was familiar.

His hair...his eyes...the curve of his face....It reminded me of someone...someone....

"Eliza?"

Jared's voice rang in my head like a gong going off inside my skull.

Then it fell silent again and I was staring at the wild man with the Cryptex.

He threw it on the ground, spittle flying from his mouth in fury.

Raging, he dug through the drawers in the desk behind him.

He pulled out a hammer with a determined smirk.

Dropping to his knees in front of the Cryptex, he brought the hammer down heavily. I winced as though the hammer had struck me too.

The Cryptex flashed a blinding gold light and shattered.

The pieces scattered.

My vision faded in a swirl of heavy mist.

I was planted to the ground, my feet like tree roots holding me in place.

The mist swirled and parted, showing a new vision.

The man who smashed the Cryptex lay on the ground.

His body was bent in an impossible position, eyes staring dead ahead, blank and lifeless.

Blood dribbled from his mouth; his clothes were soaked in it and a puddle of thick crimson glistened around his immobile form.

My hands started to shake and I looked down at them.

Those weren't my hands! Unable to stop myself, I ran toward the man's body, dropping to my knees beside him.

Tears wet my cheeks.

They weren't my tears.

Someone else, another woman, was mourning this man's death, and I was along for the ride. She reached out to him, a fatal mistake.

Black ink tendrils burst from inside the dead man, clinging to my arms —her arms like sticky spider webbing.

The tentacles curled around her arm, burrowing through her skin and sinking deep inside.

"No! What's happening!"

My mouth moved, but the voice that came out wasn't my own. She clawed at her arms trying to pull the inky tentacles away.

Once they got hold, they vanished inside so quickly, leaving faint traces of tattoo marks behind.

Those tattoos-I recognized them.

They were the same tattoos that Jared had.

Groaning, I could feel the ink latch onto her blood, sticky and thick like plaque in the arteries.

Instantly, her body became sluggish and heavy.

A shadow coursed through her, creeping into every corner of her body.

"Stop it! No!" she wailed, her arms instantly going to her stomach.

It was just barely starting to show roundness.

The woman whose body I was witnessing everything through was pregnant.

Oh! Was this Jared's mother?! Was I seeing what had happened through her eyes? It made sense.

If the man who destroyed the Cryptex was Prince Justin, then once he died, the curse passed to his mate and then to Jared because she was pregnant with him.

My vision shifted again.

Still inside the same woman, she knelt in front of a smiling child with floppy hair.

It was easy to recognize him-King Alexander, or Prince Alexander as he was back then.

The woman I was trapped inside ran her fingers through Xander's messy, floppy hair.

She leaned in and brushed the tip of her nose against his.

"You'll be home soon, right?" Alexander asked.

"Yes. You know I can't stay away long."

My heart sank.

I knew it was a lie and so did his mother.

I couldn't see her expression because I was witnessing everything through her eyes, but I could feel the heaviness in her heart as she said goodbye to her son...forever.

She kissed Xander on the forehead.

"I love you."

"Love you too."

Xander waved and hopped off into the gardens.

He hung his head a little as he went back to the garden, crushing dead flowers with his shoe.

It was a reflection of the recent loss of his father, but he was completely oblivious to the fact that he'd never see his mother again.

He was just a young child too young and innocent to realize what horrors existed in the world, and he was about to lose both parents.

Poor Xander.

Suddenly, my vision collapsed in a swirl of mist.

This time, the mist took longer to clear.

My limbs got really heavy like they were weighted down by bricks, pulling me onto the ground until I was lying down.

Pain shot through my arm and through my entire body.

My hand and arm felt swollen like I'd been stung by a million bees, throbbing, pounding, and swollen.

The rest of my body ached.

Groaning, I squinted my eyes closed.

When I opened them again, I was staring up into Jared's eyes.

Jared was looking down at me like I was something out of the depths of hell. I expected that. I'd seen what had happened to my hand before I was swallowed by total darkness and cast into a world of dreams, visions, and shadows. I glanced around, blinking to clear my vision as I gazed upon what looked to be a snug cave.

Abe was crouching on his heels surrounded by all of our belongings, which were scattered on the ground, drying out, from the looks of it.

His blue eyes pierced my own, waiting for me to say something, anything.

"You can get rid of me now" I said to both of them, my mouth curving into a smile.

I turned back to Jared, leaning my head against his head. He took a shuddering breath.

"What are you talking about?" he snapped, and from across the fire Abe chuckled, then blew out his breath.

"What happened out there? Why were you messing with the Cryptex?"

"It wanted me to," I replied, my voice full of gravel.

"She's obviously deranged," Abe muttered.

"What happened?"

Jared urged, his eyes narrowed on Abe. He shifted his weight then laid me down on a bedroll, flexing his arms. I wondered how long he'd been holding me like that.

"I...saw things..."

"See, I told you, deranged."

"Abe, why don't you collect more firewood?" Jared asked, shooting him a quick glare.

Abe grumbled to himself but left the cave in pursuit of firewood.

I glanced around and saw a large stack already neatly piled beside the firepit.

"Eliza, are you okay?"

His piercing eyes studied me, his mouth a thin line. It was like he was waiting for me to do something extra crazy.

"I'll be okay. I'm just sorting through it all."

I tapped the side of my head and yawned.

"Get some rest. Abe and I will handle setting up camp."

He patted the bedroll.

Sighing, I let myself relax a little.

My arm and hand still ached from when the Cryptex had latched onto me.

I lay on my side to avoid putting any pressure on that side of my body and propped myself up on my other arm.

Abe and Jared mulled about, taking stock of all the supplies that had been salvaged from the water.

I realized they'd come into the river after me, damaging a lot of the food and gear we'd brought with us for our journey to Myrel.

Whatever could be saved was around the fire drying.

Everything else had been tossed in a heap near the entrance of the cave.

Jared brought me a cup of water.

He also had a first aid kit in his hand.

"I need to check your hand and put on a fresh bandage."

He nodded toward my swollen, injured arm.

I winced.

Every time a cold draft came through the cave, it felt like someone was standing on my hand, grinding the heel of their boot into it.

The sutures felt tight, chafing against my sensitive skin.

"I put a pain killer in the water. It isn't as good as anesthetic, but it's better than nothing," he told me.

Nodding, I quickly drank the water.

Jared sat cross legged on the bedroll. He helped me into a sitting position. His large, strong, unusually rough hands handled me gently, careful not to touch my injured arm, holding me in place until he was sure I was steady.

"Alright, let me see it." He held his hand out to me.

I slowly extended my elbow, the joint stiff and crackling from the trauma of my injury. I turned my palm up and laid my hand in his.

"s**tt"

Jared gasped under his breath.

"What the f**k. It looks even more swollen."

Shaking his head, he slowly unwound the bloody bandage, the gauze fibers sticking to my skin.

Jared grabbed an antiseptic wipe and cleaned the wound around the stitches I gritted my teeth against the sharp sting that prickled my already sensitive flesh.

"Tell me what happened...you were mumbling a lot while you were unconscious. Do you remember?"

"Y-yeah," I gasped.

In my mind, I ran through everything I'd seen in the various visions.

Once I had it pieced together, I started telling Jared everything I'd seen about his father, the Cryptex, how the curse passed to his mother—all of it.

I could tell he was listening, but his eyes were focused on my hand as he poked at the sutures and examined the wound.

He was probably looking for signs of infection.

As long as I didn't look at it and kept talking, I could ignore the worst of the pain.

"I wonder why she ran away," he whispered so softly I almost didn't hear.

"Your mother?" Jared nodded. He pulled bandages and a tube of ointment out of the first aid kit. He squeezed a generous amount of the waxy, gel-like ointment into his hand and gently slathered it on my palm.

Immediately, the burning, throbbing pain subsided. It felt like my hand had been dipped in ice.

I sighed in relief and relaxed my arm.

"She always seemed so fragile and...weak, like she had a dark cloud hanging over her head."

"Like a shadow," I whispered.

Jared gave a wry, humorless smile.

"Exactly."

He wrapped the bandage around my hand just tight enough to be snug but not tight enough to be uncomfortable.

When he was done, he gently clasped my bandaged hand in both of his.

"Almost everything I know about her I learned from people that knew her in Saboreef. I don't even know if those stories were true. I always had the feeling that my aunt and uncle had a problem with her because when I asked about her, they'd give me this look."

Jared sighed and released my hand. I just nodded and cradled my bandaged hand against my chest. It was rare to get him to open up about his family and his past.

I didn't want to interrupt when he was being so reflective.

"Now, I wonder if that is because she left my brother behind," he sighed and shook his head.

"I got the sense that your mother left to protect Xander. It didn't feel like she wanted to leave him. I think it broke her heart," I offered, biting my lower lip.

Jared caught my eyes and smiled, nodding.

"Thank you, Eliza."

He brushed his fingertips down my uninjured arm. A shiver ran through me at the featherlight caress.

[Chapter 857](#)

After a night of rest, it was time to get moving again.

My arm and hand were still mangled, so Abe and Jared did the heavy lifting to pack up camp.

While they worked, I studied the rough map I'd drawn as our guide to Myrel.

It wasn't perfect, but it would get us there. I wandered out of the cave and looked at the river.

Then I looked at the map.

I turned in a complete circle and then lined the map up with the river so they were parallel.

From there, it was easy to figure out where we were going.

We'd saved as much as we could from the river, and the fire had dried everything out overnight.

With our shortage of gear and supplies, packing up camp took hardly any time at all.

Jared helped me get my backpack on since my hand was still too injured to use, and we set off again.

We headed along the bank of the river.

The further we got, the deeper the gorge around the river became.

Soon, it was a sheer drop into the rolling rapids below, and I heard the sound of rushing water more than saw it.

Around midday, we stopped for lunch.

I opened my pack and took out the Cryptex.

"What are you doing!?" Jared asked, wide-eyed.

"I'm just messing with it. There's a lot we don't know about it, and now that it is partially assembled, I think it is worth exploring."

"Remember what happened the last time you messed with it?"

He pointed to my bandaged hand.

"Look at this. These pieces still move, even though the Cryptex has locked itself together. I'm willing to bet there are hidden puzzles in this thing."

"Is losing your hand worth figuring out the puzzles?"

Jared's voice took on that overly protective tone I knew all too well.

I ignored him and started fiddling with the pieces of the Cryptex.

They reminded me of clock gears.

When I spun one, some of the other pieces would spin in a chain reaction along the curve of the device.

"Alright, put that away. We've got to keep moving," Jared said, standing up.

I bit my lip and reluctantly tucked the Cryptex back into its waterproof case. I slipped it back into my bag, patting it into place several times before I zipped my pack up again.

We continued walking along the river.

The sun had moved through the sky and was at our backs now.

Abe led the way, and we walked single file along the edge of the gorge.

On one side, there was a drop-off into the river.

On the other, there were scraggly rocks as tall as houses, making a narrow passage for us to traverse.

When we made camp for the night, I immediately took the Cryptex out again and started playing with it.

Jared was busy setting up our bedrolls and coming up with a meal that we could enjoy with what little rations we had.

Abe was checking the perimeter and stoking the fire.

For a while, neither of them bothered me.

I stared at the little moving parts of the Cryptex.

My eyes followed them in a line and I could see how several of them interconnected.

Grinning, I started turning one of the pieces.

Down a line, it turned another, then another, and another.

Click, click, click.

Pop! Zing.

"Whoa!"

I jumped back as a small compartment opened on the Cryptex.

"Are you playing with that damn thing again?" Jared asked, crouching down beside me.

"Look, I opened a secret compartment." I grinned at him.

Jared's eyes narrowed sternly and he shook his head.

"You're obsessed with this thing."

"I am not. There could be other compartments to open...."

"To what end, Eliza? That one looks empty. And the more you mess with it, the more you're putting yourself in danger. You could have died the last time this thing acted out."

He ended on a low growl.

"We barely know anything about it. I think it is worth studying. It might help us with breaking your curse."

I started turning another piece that connected to a separate line of gears from the ones I'd just turned. They whizzed and whirred, flashing gold as they reflected the firelight.

"No, no more."

Jared snatched the Cryptex away.

"Heyt"

"You're obsessing over this thing and it isn't healthy. I'm going to carry it from now on."

"But"

"Where is the protective case?"

His tone darkened, and he fixed me with a look that told me it was useless to argue with him. I stared at the shiny Cryptex in his hand.

The flat surfaces danced with reflections of the fire flames. It was so hard not to play with....

"Eliza?"

"Okay, okay."

I handed Jared the protective case. He quickly wrapped it and tucked it into his backpack.

"Are you hungry? We should eat."

He held an arm out to me.

Reluctantly, I went to him and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

I sucked in a sharp breath as his fingers curled around my upper arm, just under the edge of my short-sleeved shirt. His skin was warm, his fingers strong and firm.

Pleasant tingles ran through my arm.

"Hey guys, there's something you should check out,"

Abe said, jogging back toward us.

For the past few days, he would hurry ahead and scout out the area while Jared and I kept our own pace.

Rather, we kept my pace.

My arm and hand were healing, but it was still useless for climbing and we still had a lot of jagged rocks to scramble over.

Jared stayed with me to help me along.

More than a few times, that meant him standing behind me, hands gripping my hips or pressing against my backside as he lifted me or nudged me along.

At some points, I thought he was doing it on purpose and enjoying it.

"We can't afford any more delays," Jared argued.

"Oh, come on. We haven't deviated from our path for days. Besides, this isn't a detour. We don't even have to leave the path,"

Abe enticed with a confident smile.

"Well, I'm absolutely tickled pink by the prospect of a slight change of scenery," I said, smiling playfully.

"Alright, let's see what you found. After all this, it better be worth it."

Jared narrowed his eyes at us. Abe led us to a very large cave.

I stood in the mouth of it, tilting my head all the way back on my neck just to see the top.

Cool air gushed from inside. It smelled earthy and damp.

"Hello!"

Abe shouted into the cave.

"Hello, ello, ello, lo, lo" his voice echoed back.

"You know what this looks like?" I asked arching an eyebrow at y Jared.

He smirked and shook his head.

As grumpy as he was with me about messing with the Cryptex, I was glad to see I could still get him to smile.

"A perfect place to find some artifacts."

Setting my bag down, I pulled out a soft bristled brush, the kind used in archeology digs, and headed into the cave.

"Let me set up a light!" Abe called after me.

They followed me inside, each holding flashlights.

The beams illuminated enough of the cave for me to see that there were some old artifacts scattered around. I went to a pile of broken ceramic and wooden beads.

There were also bones scattered among the artifacts.

"Look at these!" I gushed.

Jared cast his light over the pile. I knelt down in the soft, moist earth on the cave floor and brushed some of the dust away with my archeology brush.

"Um... are those finger bones?" he asked, motioning to the bones.

"Looks like."

"Okay, that's weird. We should get out of here. There's still plenty of ground to cover before we make camp."

Jared walked away, leaving me in darkness.

A soft whisper of breath puffed out from the deep bowels of the cave.

Standing up, I faced the tunnel that led deeper underground, into the dark core of the mountain range.

My stomach lurched.

It felt like a hook looped around my insides, gently tugging me deeper into the cave. I stared into the darkness, transfixed.

My feet shuffled along the dirt floor, something from the depths called to me, whispering to me on the air.

"Eliza, come on!"

Shaking my head, I jolted out of my trance.

That was weird.

I pocketed my archeology brush and rejoined Abe and Jared outside the cave.

Abe was stroking his chin, staring at our backpacks.

Jared stood beside him, eyes darting around to all the rocks around us.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Abe pointed to our packs.

They'd been knocked over.

"It looks like someone was rummaging through our things. Grunting, he lifted each of our bags and handed them to us.

"It's best we put several more miles between us and this cave before we make camp," he grumbled.

"Agreed," Jared said.

He helped me get my pack on again and once more, we were off.

The rocks and mountains faded behind us, opening onto lush, green rolling hills.

The grass rippled like ocean waves as gusts of wind fluttered across the vast fields.

Wildflowers bobbed against the breeze, bending flexibly to keep from snapping off at the stem.

I was grateful to be out of the mountainous parts of the trail.

All that scrambling and climbing over rocks had slowed me down with my injured arm.

It was nice to walk in open fields with just some small, easy-to-navigate hills around us.

The further we walked, the larger the hills got.

In just a few more miles, they were starting to look more like mountains again.

I groaned and shuffled my feet along.

It was a miracle that Abe and Jared had saved my shoes after the attack at our first camp and their dive into the river.

Fortunately, they had, and I didn't have to do all this in bare feet.

"What's that ahead?"

Abe asked, coming to a dead halt.

Jared and I quickly pulled up behind him.

I nearly crashed into him but Jared grabbed my hips and pulled me back.

My stomach fluttered but he released me after a quick moment.

"The path ahead is blocked. It looks like a rockslide," Jared said.

"Eliza, is there any way around on the map you made?"

"Um..."

I ferreted the map out of my pack and looked it over. It didn't look like there was an easy way around the rockslide.

Something about where it was located bothered me. It seemed familiar, like from a vision or dream.

The only difference was this towering heap of rocks in my way. If I could just find...

"Hold this."

I handed Jared the map and got closer to the rockslide.

Abe and Jared came up behind me, their footsteps crunching on small pebbles and gravel.

Bending over, I studied the base of the rock slide. I pushed grasses and shrubs out of the way.

Under one of the shrubs were three stone pavers, clear as day.

Smooth, flat, and circular, the pavers were expertly positioned together.

There was no way they were naturally occurring rocks.

"We're here!"

I cheered, pointing to the stone pavers.

"How can you tell?" Jared asked skeptically.

His blue eyes narrowed on me.

"I recognize this place. This is it! We've reached Myrel."

Jared and Abe exchanged a look. I waited for Abe to call me deranged again.

[Chapter 858](#)

"You're sure this is the right spot?" Jared asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded and glanced around again.

It wasn't exactly like my vision, but I was certain this was the place.

The only problem was, there was this giant rockslide in our way.

We'd have to clear it away.

Silently, I thanked the Moon Goddess and White Queen for leaving those three pavers untouched.

Without them, I wouldn't have recognized the location.

"It's getting late. Why don't we camp here for the night?"

Abe suggested.

He sighed and dropped his pack from his shoulder, stretching until his spine popped.

"Good idea. It's too late to clear these rocks away, and I don't see another path around," Jared agreed.

It didn't take all that long to set up camp.

My hand wasn't swollen or aching anymore.

I set up the tents while Jared brought water from a nearby stream and Abe got the fire started.

By the time the fire was roaring and crackling, spitting sparks into the air, the sun had sunk below the horizon.

Fireflies glowed around the camp, mimicking the sparks from the fire.

We'd gotten pretty good at setting up camp quickly, just the three of us.

Despite the seriousness of our trip, I was almost enjoying the peaceful, simple nights spent under the stars.

"I'm going to keep a lookout for the night," Abe announced.

He ducked into his tent and closed the flap.

I heard him shuffling his clothes around.

He was probably going to shift so he could rely on stronger vision and sense of smell while he took sentry duty.

"If you get tired, wake me up and I'll relieve you," Jared offered.

Abe grunted from inside his tent.

The side poked out suddenly, like his elbow hit the fabric.

I covered my mouth, muffling my giggle in my palm.

Jared glanced sideways at me and shook his head.

"I'm probably not going to be up all night. I just want to make sure that no one is following us. And if they are, I want to get a good bead on their scent."

"Why would anyone be following us?" I asked, looking to Jared again.

"Someone messed with our packs today. But that doesn't mean we are being followed."

He shrugged and one corner of his mouth turned down in a frown.

"Better safe than sorry," Abe said.

His tent trembled and I heard him shift.

A big, black, wet nose poked the tent flap open.

Abe's wolf appeared. He shook himself from head to toe, his sleek, glossy fur shimmering in the firelight. He snorted out a cloud of breath and headed up the pile of rocks, nails clicking and scraping as he went.

"I should take a look at your hand and put a fresh bandage on it," Jared said as soon as we were alone.

He grabbed my wrist loosely and led me closer to the fire. I sat down on a folding camping chair and Jared knelt down in front of me.

"It is feeling a lot better."

"You're healing fast, which is comforting. At least there wasn't some kind of poison or magic that would prevent you from healing."

Jared carefully unwrapped the bandage.

"The swelling has gone down, and I can use it without feeling pain."

"That's all very good, Eliza. But we still don't know what the Cryptex did to you."

Jared glanced up at me and grinned. He tossed the soiled bandage aside and gently probed at my hand. His touch was so light and tender, sending warm tingles up my arm. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from squirming.

His touch had me going crazy, especially since the other night. I couldn't get enough of him, like a drug addict.

My palm was still a little red but the wound was almost entirely healed.

The stitches had fallen out on their own once it had healed enough.

The cuts the Cryptex had made were jagged, white scars.

"Hmm...."

"What? Is that a good 'hmm' or a bad 'hmm?'" I asked, my stomach gurgling uncomfortably.

"These scars... I've never seen anything like them."

"It feels fine. I mean, it isn't tight or uncomfortable at all." I shrugged.

"We'll need to keep an eye on them, just in case."

He lifted my hand and pressed his lips to the scars on my palm.

A shudder ran down my spine and my toes curled.

His lips were warm and gentle, applying the perfect amount of pressure to be comforting and sensual.

Jared's fingers lightly caressed my wrist and forearm, his lips moving to the tips of my fingers.

I closed my eyes, heat pooling between my legs.

My breath shook as Jared kissed my fingertips one at a time, starting with my thumb and ending with my pinky.

Gasping, I bit my lower lip and clenched my thighs.

Jared lifted his eyes to mine and he smirked.

He knew exactly what he was doing to me, and he was clearly enjoying my torture. I narrowed my eyes at him.

My skin flushed from head to toe, and I just knew I was beet red.

Jared pressed his lips to the inside of my wrist. He tilted his eyes up, looking at me from a low angle.

"As I said before, it is my turn to bring you to your knees."

His voice was husky and ragged and his blue eyes had turned to molten sapphire, penetrating me like laser beams.

Jared unrolled his bedroll by the fire and motioned me over.

I glanced in the direction Abe had wandered off.

"What if he comes back?"

Jared bounced his eyebrows.

"Maybe he'll learn something."

I giggled and sat down on the bedroll.

The heat of the fire wrapped around me like a blanket.

It was a warm night.

The sky was littered with millions of stars, and fireflies continued to glow around us.

On his hands and knees, Jared crawled toward me.

He licked his lips, eyes roaming over me like he was getting ready to devour me whole.

He pressed his lips to mine and I moaned into his mouth.

I looped my arms around his neck and lay back, pulling him on top of me.

His weight covered me, pressing against me in all the right places.

Jared kissed my neck, pressing his tongue against my skin as he trailed kisses down my throat.

He nibbled lightly on my collarbone.

I arched into his touch, whimpering.

"Feeling impatient?" he teased.

"Mhmm...."

Jared's hands slid under my shirt, pushing it up my torso.

His fingers dragged along my skin, leaving pleasurable tingles in their path.

I moaned and grabbed my shirt, pulling it over my head.

Every thought in my head was focused on getting him to touch me and feeling as much of his skin on mine as possible.

Jared's lips kissed the centerline of my abdomen.

His hand slid around my back and worked on the clasp of my bra as he kissed just above my belly button.

His warm breath tickled my skin.

My core tightened and my legs trembled in anticipation.

When my bra was gone, Jared covered my breasts with his hands.

He massaged them gently, pinching my n****s until they tightened into firm buds.

"J-Jared," I stuttered, throwing my arm over my eyes.

He kissed along the waistline of my pants, his tongue sliding across my skin.

My clit swelled and I clenched and unclenched my thighs.

I lifted my hips slightly, searching for more contact.

Grunting, Jared popped the button on my pants and hooked his fingers in my waistband.

He tugged my pants down, slowly pulling the rough denim along my soft, silky legs.

I bit my lip and bent my knees, pulling my feet from my pants.

Jared grabbed the underside of my knees tightly.

"Mm...."

I peeked out from under my arm.

He leaned in and kissed the inside of my thigh.

My toes curled and my p***y throbbed with desire. He kissed my thigh again, moving higher and higher with every kiss, getting closer and closer to my pulsing center.

Jared's lips closed around my p***y, his warm, wet tongue diving deep into my folds.

Moaning, I lifted my hips and threw my head back.

Pleasure coursed through my legs and stomach. His tongue explored my folds, stroking my most sensitive parts, tasting every inch of me.

The tip of his tongue pressed against my soaked entrance.

He teased my slit with his tongue and then pressed the tip to my swollen clit.

My legs trembled and I cried out.

My mind unraveled, and not a single coherent thought touched me.

All I could focus on was his tongue circling slowly and deliberately around my clit.

He flicked his tongue against me in quick, light strokes, his head bobbing between my legs.

I put my hand on the back of his head, arching my back as the pressure in my core built more and more.

"Oh... my... Goddess!"

I moaned, rolling my hips as warmth gushed from inside of me and a hard orgasm jolted through me as stars burst behind my eyes.

I panted, my breast rising and falling heavily as waves of pleasure crashed through me.

My blurred vision started to come back and I saw Jared nearby, completely naked.

When had he taken his clothes off? My mind wasn't working clearly.

His sleek, muscular body practically glowed in the firelight, the orange light haloing him as if he were some kind of god.

I reached out, tracing my fingers along the curve of his sculpted bicep.

He turned toward me, his hard, warm c**k pressed against my leg, jumping and pulsing.

Jared put his hand on my hip and pulled me toward him.

A thrill shot through me and I curled my leg around his waist, bending my knee and pulling him closer.

He guided his warm, swollen tip to my entrance.

Jared thrust into me, grabbing my hip and holding my leg around him.

He rolled on top of me, thrusting deeper and harder.

I rolled my hips, meeting his thrusts.

My insides tightened, clenching around his erection.

His c**k stroked my inside walls, spreading me apart in an intoxicating mix of pleasure and pain.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging to him, drunk on his touch.

Jared kissed me hard on the lips.

He pumped into me faster and faster.

"Oh... f**k,"

he gasped raggedly in my ear.

His c**k quivered, and I felt hot spurts release inside of me as he reached his climax.

He bowed his head into the crook of my neck, his shallow, steamy breath caressing my neck and shoulder.

I could have stayed like that all night.

I could have stayed like that forever, locked in his affectionate embrace, a blanket of stars covering us.

[Chapter 859](#)

Jared

I woke before the sun and pulled my arms from around Eliza.

For a moment, I just watched her. Her face was so soft and peaceful as she slept, hair curling around her soft features so perfectly.

It was hard to pull away. I could have laid with her in my arms forever.

But Abe and I had a lot of work to do.

I kissed Eliza's cheek and brushed my fingers lightly down her face.

She squirmed and turned away from me. I smiled to myself. She was perfect, and she was all mine.

Stretching, I threw some clothes on and nudged Abe's tent.

"Get up, sleepy. We've got a long day ahead of us."

Abe groaned and I heard him shifting around.

While he got ready, I lit a fire and threw together a quick breakfast for us—a few fried eggs, some coffee, and bacon. It was the perfect energy boost we needed.

Abe crawled out of his tent and took the coffee I offered him.

He guzzled it down and then devoured his breakfast.

Afterward, he stood up and stretched, yawning like a fog horn.

"Ready to get to it?" I asked.

Abe smirked.

"That rock pile doesn't look so bad. I bet we'll have it cleared by noon."

"Right..."

The first rocks we moved out of the way were small and easy to toss aside.

It was just like brushing pebbles or gravel out of the way.

But it didn't take long for Abe and me to get to the larger rocks.

One by one, we lifted them and hoisted them out of the way.

By the time Eliza woke up and started on her own breakfast, we'd been working for a few hours, and it barely felt like we'd made a dent.

I let my eyes wander toward Eliza as she moved around the camp.

Her tight pants clung to her hips, hanging low enough that I could see the edge of her underwear.

When she bent over, the hem of her shirt pulled up her back, revealing a lickable amount of her skin.

Unconsciously, I licked my lips.

"Hey, are you working, or am I going to do this whole thing myself!?" Abe snapped.

I shook myself out of my daze and looked at my friend. He was huffing and puffing as he shifted a massive rock. I went to him and helped lift.

"I just needed a little break," I smirked.

"Yeah, I know what you needed."

Abe shook his head. We tossed the large rock aside and each got back to work on some of the smaller, more manageable rocks.

The sun was getting higher in the sky and hotter.

Sweat soaked through the back of my shirt and dripped off my brow.

I pulled my shirt off and used it to wipe the sweat off my face and the back of my neck.

I tossed my shirt on the ground.

Abe did the same, only he tied his shirt around his head like a doo rag.

I shielded my eyes from the sun and looked at the rock pile.

For as long as we'd been working and for as much as we'd moved, it didn't even seem like we were a quarter of the way done.

We could spend every day from now until my birthday digging, and we might never get through it all.

My eyes wandered to Eliza again.

She was sitting at the fire, which had burned to coals since it was daytime and there was no need for it.

Her map was on her lap and her eyes were fixed on it.

I grinned, loving to see that look of concentration, the way her brow scrunched up just a tiny bit, and how her eyes narrowed in an almost surly way.

But I knew she was focused, not angry.

"We should have packed some dynamite," Abe said.

"Why?" I asked, creasing my brow.

"To blow this thing wide open! I mean, we're doing all this work and we don't even know for sure if this is the right way to Eliza's mythical city."

"I trust her. If she says this is the way, then this is the way."

"Hey guys!"

Eliza's voice immediately drew my attention. She clamored up the rock pile, waving the map around. Her feet slipped on the shifting rocks, causing several to knock loose and slide down the pile.

"Be careful! We'll come to you," I said.

Eliza shook her head and reached us at the top before I could make a move closer to her.

"What is it?" Abe asked.

"First, you two need water." She handed us each a canteen.

"Oh, you're a Goddess!"

Abe gushed. He snatched the canteen and guzzled water down, streams flowing over the edge of the canteen, around the corners of his mouth, and down his throat. I shook my head and took a swig of the fresh, cool water.

It was like drinking the nectar of heaven.

Sighing, I took several more sips.

"Alright, I'm hydrated.

What's the big deal?"

I asked, handing Eliza the canteen again.

She slipped it over her shoulder and pointed to the map.

"I've been studying the map, and I think I might have overlooked something."

She smiled sheepishly and bit her lower lip.

"As long as it means we don't have to dig through these rocks anymore, all is forgiven," Abe said.

He sighed and flopped down on the nearest boulder.

My knees ached from all the squatting and lifting but I knew if I sat down, I wouldn't want to get back up again.

"Well, I think there is another way into the city. I can't promise it will be cleared, but it might be a lot easier to get through." She shrugged.

"Oh, hallelujah! What other way is there?"

Abe sang, throwing his head back.

Elize pointed to the map and ran her finger along a few of the lines.

"Here."

She tapped the map.

"I think this is supposed to be a river that goes into the city. But I didn't realize it because... it looks like it's underground."

"An underground river?" I asked.

I leaned closer and looked at the rough map she'd drawn.

"Yeah. This is that cave we went into with the finger bones."

She pointed out that cave and then the original line she'd shown me.

"I think that cave is our way into the city."

"By following an underground river?" I arched an eyebrow.

The whole thing sounded a little far-fetched to me.

Underground rivers weren't something that came up commonly in conversation.

Then again, a mythical city might have a mythical underground river leading to it.

"I'm pretty sure I saw the cave in my vision. It was so big and imposing, just like in real life. But I honestly didn't think much of it because I was focused on this road. Now, I'm thinking it is worth going back and exploring some more."

"Yes!"

Abe jumped up and threw his fist in the air.

"I agree. We should explore the cave more. I mean, I was the one that pointed it out after all."

Eliza glanced at me.

Sighing, I looked over the rock pile.

We'd worked so hard but made hardly any progress.

If we took some time to go look at the cave and it turned out to be a dead end, it wasn't like the rock pile was going anywhere.

We could just come back and get back to digging.

Losing half a day wouldn't mean that much in the grand scheme of things when it came to moving this rockslide.

"Alright, we'll take a look. But I don't want to spend days exploring the cave in hopes of finding something so we don't have to come back and work," I admonished.

"Well, if you're that concerned about it, Eliza and I can check the cave while you keep working on the pile," Abe suggested with a smirk.

"That way, we don't lose any time clearing the path." I rolled my eyes.

"Get your things. Let's go."

We packed up the campsite quickly.

Even if we ended up coming back, it was better to clean up our trail.

If there was anyone following us, it would make it harder for them to track us.

Fortunately, Abe hadn't picked up on anyone last night, but that didn't mean they weren't out there.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Eliza asked as we loaded up our packs.

Turning to her, I cupped her cheek. She knew me so well it was like she could read my mind sometimes.

Maybe that had more to do with our mate bond, if we really were mates. But small moments like this made me feel like it was true, even if we couldn't fully sense it until she got her wolf.

"If you're sure about this, I trust you."

"Do you?" I sighed.

"Of course, I do. But it took so long to find this path and you were sure about it."

"I am still sure about this path. But if there is another way, I think it's worth exploring." I chuckled lightly and nodded.

"You're absolutely right."

The walk back to the cave didn't take that long.

We'd already familiarized ourselves with the trail.

We'd spent more time digging at the rock pile than I thought.

By the time we reached the massive cave entrance, the sun was setting.

The shadow of the cave extended in the setting sun, like a hungry mouth searching farther and farther for something to devour.

Would we be its next meal?

"Let's get some torches. I want to save the flashlight batteries as much as possible," Abe said.

I grabbed some sticks and we wrapped our old, sweaty shirts around them.

There was a nearby pine tree.

I cut into the bark and we rolled our shirts in the sap, coating them.

Abe pulled out a lighter and the shirts burst into flame, the pine pitch causing them to burn slowly. Eliza stood beside me and grabbed my hand, squeezing my fingers.

I caught her eye and nodded.

The three of us plunged into the endless, consuming darkness.

We walked into the cave, past the point where Eliza had found the finger bones.

A shudder ran down my spine.

The idea of there being shifter finger bones lying around... or other body parts—we had no idea how long they'd been there.

Part of me wondered if someone would come here looking for our bones someday.

Our torchlight flickered against the cave walls.

Eliza went to one of the walls and ran her fingers along it.

She frowned slightly.

"What is it?" I asked, coming up behind her.

"I don't know. Some of the rocks feel like they were smoothed by water. But it could have been something else."

"Water would align with this underground river theory,"

Abe chimed in from up ahead.

He'd taken the lead and he didn't seem to want to slow down, even when Eliza stopped.

We were so deep in the cave now that I could barely see the outline of the cave entrance or the moonlight beyond it.

"Let's keep going."

I put my hand on the small of Eliza's back. She bit her lower lip, her cheeks flushing with the perfect, crimson glow in the dim torchlight.

We walked a little further.

The air began to close in around me.

It felt like a vice, getting tighter around my chest and my ribs.

"Uh..."

I gasped for breath.

My limbs got too heavy to keep moving and I dragged my feet until I had to stop walking completely. My blood felt like it was full of lead and I dropped the torch, my arms hanging uselessly at my sides.

"Jared?" Eliza called to me.

Her voice sounded so far away.

Suddenly, my chest felt like it was being ripped apart by bolt cutters.

Groaning, I clawed at my shirt and dropped to my knees.

I gasped, my insides feeling like they were being pulled in every direction like my organs had been drawn and quartered.

"AHHHH!"

"Jared, Jared, what's wrong?" My vision blurred.

I could barely make out Eliza running toward me. She put her hand on my shoulder and everything went black.

[Chapter 860](#)

Eliza "Jared! What's happening, talk to me!"

I shook him trying to get him to open his eyes again.

My ears rang with his screams of pain.

What was happening to him? Was it because of this cave?

"What's going on?" Abe asked, running back to us.

"I don't...."

The air around Jared's body quivered and bursts of dark energy flowed out of him, his power erupting around us.

This was not good....

"Jared...."

"Eliza, we've gotta get out of here," Abe said, grabbing my wrist.

I yanked out of his grasp.

"No, I'm not leaving him." I dropped to my knees and put my arms around Jared's neck, hugging him tightly.

"Eliza!"

"He's trying to fight it," I said.

I could see it in his face.

His eyes were closed, but every muscle in his body was tense beyond belief.

The struggle might have been internal, but he was fighting.

"Eliza...."

I snapped my head up.

That voice... some soft whisper in the darkness called to me.

Had I actually heard a voice or was I imagining things? "Eliza...."

No, I was definitely not imagining it.

I glanced at Abe, and he was just staring at me and Jared.

I didn't think he'd heard the voice.

Did that mean...? I looked around the cave.

Suddenly, a young boy appeared from the shadows.

It was the same boy I'd seen before.

He moved through the cave shadows like he was part of them.

They concealed bits of his body, but I could always see his face.

"Eliza."

"I see you.What do you want?" I asked, hugging Jared's neck tighter.

"I want to help you."

The boy pointed to Jared.

"Do you know how I can help him? Do you know what I need to do?"

I practically begged.

Seeing little boys hanging around with mysterious wisdom who didn't seem visible to other people shouldn't have been such a relief to me.

But if this kid could give me what I needed to help Jared, I wasn't going to turn him away.

"Uhh... Eliza, what's going on?" Abe asked.I shook my head, focused on the boy.

"Tell me!"

"It is simple, really.Just give him your blood."

"Give him my blood? What do you mean? Does he need to drink it?"

"What do you think?" the boy asked, grinning.

"Okay, I can do that.I'll give him my blood." I looked at Abe.

"Do you have a knife?"

"What? Eliza, what are you talking about? Who are you talking to? What is this nonsense about giving someone blood?"

He shrugged helplessly.

"I know how to help Jared," I insisted.I held a hand out, hoping he'd give me a knife.

"Good luck," the boy said.

I looked back at him, but he was gone.

He'd disappeared in the shadows.

The shadows shifted and whooshed through the cave like a strong wind.

My hair whipped around and Jared groaned, falling on the floor.

I immediately covered him with my body, protecting him from the spirit of that child and the weird wind he'd created.

The wind howled through the cave-turned-wind tunnel, a dark, eerie howl that shook me to the bone.

The torches flickered in the strong wind and then went out, surrounding us in solid darkness.

"Abe, are you still there?" I asked, glancing up.

I could barely see anything, but Abe's outline was clear.He was standing at the nearest wall.

I saw him moving around, his hands flailing like he was looking for something. I heard the way his fingers scraped against the wall. I turned my attention back to Jared and brushed his hair out of his face.

"It's going to be okay. I've got you. I'll make sure you're okay,"

I promised him.

"Eliza, get over here. I think I found something!"

Abe screamed to me over the rushing wind.

"I'm not leaving Jared!"

"Come on!"

Abe grabbed my arm and yanked me to the wall.

"There's a door over here. We need to keep moving. This cave is.... We've got to keep moving."

He half threw me through the door in the cave wall.

It was on the opposite side of the cave where I'd been feeling the smooth stone.

That was why we hadn't seen the door before; our torches hadn't cast light on it.

"Abe, let go of me!"

I struggled, trying to break from his hold. His fingers curled tighter around my arm as he pushed his way through the doorway with me.

"We need to go back for Jared. I'm not leaving him there, helpless. He's counting on us!"

"Hang on. Take a deep breath and think for a moment," Abe ordered.

He was right; I was panicking a little. I took a deep breath and he finally released my arm. I rubbed the spot he'd been clinging to.

Abe pulled something from his bag and struck it against the wall.

Sparks danced against the stone and a flare burst to life in his hand.

It was an emergency flare, one he'd probably been saving for a time just like this.

Abe held the flare up and we looked around the corridor.

It was much, much narrower than the cave.

We could barely stand side to side, and the top of Abe's head brushed the ceiling.

The passageway was damp.

I heard water dripping somewhere nearby.

Cobwebs clung to every corner and I saw creepy, crawly spiders with big, hairy legs wandering around.

A shiver ran down my spine.

"Ewww." I shuddered.

"Do you hear that, Eliza?" Abe asked.

"What?"

"There's running water nearby."

He pointed down the corridor.

"That's not the wind on the other side of the door?" I asked.

Abe shook his head.

"The water is definitely coming from that direction. We should head that way."

I put my hands on my hips and firmly planted my feet on the ground.

"No! I'm not leaving without Jared."

"Hold this. I'll get him."

He handed me the torch and headed back to the door.

I waited, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

If he'd woken up, he would have found us already, right? I didn't know what was happening to him, and it still terrified me.

Abe got to the door and started pushing it open.

THUD! Something smashed into the door.

"Argh!"

Abe slammed his body against it, keeping the door closed.

"Abe, what's going on?"

I took a step toward him.

My heart leaped into my throat and blood rushed in my ears.

"Don't come over here, Eliza! Run, run down the corridor, now!"

He looked at me over his shoulder, teeth clenched, eyes wide and bloodshot.

"What!? I'm not leaving you and Jared! What is happening?"

"Please, just go!"

Abe screamed.

"Go, now!"

"No!"

I screamed back.

"Let me help."

I tried to step closer again.

Abe roared and slammed his body against the door again.

The door trembled.

I stopped dead.

Whatever was on the other side was something horrible and terrible... something Abe didn't want me to see.

My heart sank.

Was it Jared? Had something gone that horribly wrong? "Eliza, RUN!"

Shaking, I turned on my heel and ran down the narrow corridor.

Tears stung my eyes as I ran away from Jared and Abe.

What was going on? I felt so weak and stupid for running from them.

Abe was my friend, Jared was the man I loved, and I was just leaving them there to some unknown danger.

But he wouldn't tell me to leave if he didn't think he could handle whatever was behind the door, right? I held the flare up higher, trying to see where I was going.

My vision blurred with unshed tears and I ran faster.

My calves ached; my heart raced.

I could barely see where I was going and I had no idea where this corridor ended.

Every breath stung my lungs and I knew I'd have to stop running soon to catch my breath.

But now that I was running, I couldn't stop.

I just had to keep going until....

"Ah!"

I skidded to a stop right at the edge of a ledge.

I dug my heels into the ground, my knees wobbling as I stared over the precipice at the massive drop-off.

My heart was in my throat, my tongue and ears numb, and I was completely transfixed, staring down at the depths I had nearly tumbled into.

If I'd fallen down there, I'd never come back out.

Clutching my chest, I breathed deeply, forcing myself to calm down.

I wiped my tears away and took a moment to gather myself.

Now was not the time to panic or freak out.

First of all, Jared was in trouble and Abe was under attack.

I needed to think of a way to help them. Second of all, I was an archeologist literally standing on the edge of some unknown underground discovery.

I needed to focus.

This could be our way into Myrel.

I closed my eyes and sighed, centering my breathing and my thoughts.

The blood rushing in my ears didn't quiet down, and it took me a moment to realize that the roaring wasn't my quick pulse.

It was coming from somewhere inside the cave.

When I opened my eyes again, my vision was completely cleared.

I could see what was causing the roar.

A huge underwater river raged at the bottom of the precipice.

The frothing rapids caught the light from my flare, sparkling and twinkling deep in the bowels of the cave.

This was it, the underwater river.

It was the secret passage into Myrel.

I gasped and lifted the torch higher.

Further up the river, I saw a massive waterfall cascading down.

The water plummeted into the river below, casting mist throughout the cave.

It was why it felt so damp in the corridor I was in.

An underground river and an underground waterfall... what was this place? Were the rumors about Myrel true? Looking up, I noticed that the cave opened up above the river too.

I couldn't even see the ceiling from where I was standing.

I wanted to get a closer look.

There was another ledge, a little higher up.

I climbed up, using my free hand to help get up on the higher surface.

I stood up and brushed myself off quickly.

Holding the flare up again, I gasped, my eyes nearly popping out of my head.

This wasn't the secret way into Myrel.

It was Myrel.

Levels and levels of the city existed in the space above the river.

I could make out buildings and structures carved into the rock.

I'd found it... the ancient city.

Suddenly, a light flickered on.

Another light came on several levels above that.

More and more lights came on until there were dozens of them.

There were still people in Myrel?