

## **Kings Breeder 881**

### [Chapter 881](#)

\*Jared\*

After we settled in for a few days, I noticed that a lot of the villagers were gathering together and whispering about big plans.

I approached one of the groups while they were standing outside a bakery one afternoon.

"What's the big secret?" I asked.

They stopped talking immediately and gave me sheepish looks.

"Ummm... well..."

"Come on, guys, I know when something is going on. As the overseer of this village, it is my responsibility to handle any issues or problems that may arise. So, let me help you."

"Well, that's just it," one of them said, rubbing the back of his neck.

I arched an eyebrow at the others.

"It isn't that there's something wrong or that there's a problem."

"What's going on!?" I demanded.

"You were gone for so long that we thought it might be nice to have a celebration now that you're back.

So, we've been planning a welcome home feast for you."

I opened my mouth and then clamped it shut. It was hard to argue with that. My village didn't have endless resources but we did know how to throw a good party.

"Alright, I can get behind that plan. Why don't you host it in the packhouse garden? The weather is nice and the evenings are warm. There's more than enough space there and it is a beautiful setting," I suggested.

The three planners lit up excitedly.

"That's a great idea!"

They headed toward the packhouse to keep planning.

I went to the bedroom where Eliza was resting. She'd been doing that a lot. I was trying not to be worried about it but it was hard when she barely left our room anymore.

Standing in the doorway, I leaned my shoulder on the doorframe and watched her sleeping.

Her curly hair was scattered all over the place, covering her face and the pillow. Eliza hugged a pillow tightly, her mouth parted slightly as she slumbered. Every now and then, her face scrunched up and she hugged the pillow tighter.

Sighing, I went to the bed. I hooked her hair on my finger and pushed it out of her face.

"Eliza," I whispered. Leaning down, I kissed her soft, warm cheek.

She'd been eating a lot better since we got back to the village and the color and roundness had returned to her face.

"Mmm...." She mumbled and swatted at me with a limp wrist.

"Wake up..." I kissed her cheek again.

"What?" she whined, sitting up. Her eyes widened and then her face softened when she saw it was me.

"Haven't you ever heard not to wake a sleeping pregnant woman?"

I chuckled. "I'll remember that for the future. The village is throwing a big welcome home feast tonight. I figured you'd want to have time to get dressed up."

"Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun." Eliza yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Yes, I need all the time I can get. I'm sure I have major bedhead!"

When she sat up, I covered my mouth to muffle my giggle. Several of her curls stuck out at funny angles.

"What?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"Nothing. I'll leave you to get ready. Dress up, tonight is going to be special." Sticking my hand in my pocket, I rolled a small object around that I'd been carrying around for a few days.

I blew her a kiss and left the room. As soon as the door clicked shut, I chuckled and sighed, shaking my head.

Was it possible to love her anymore than I did? She was the perfect combination of wild, crazy, adorable, sexy, goofy, and smart.

\*\*\*

When the sun set, the feast began.

The garden was entirely transformed. Several picnic tables had been set up with gorgeous flower centerpieces. String lights had been hung up around the garden giving it a fairy forest vibe and someone had gotten one of the fountains going again.

There were live musicians playing some mellow music and a space had been cleared for dancing.

All the food had been laid out on the picnic tables and villagers were already there nibbling and chatting.

I was really impressed with the way the feast had come together and it solidified my plans for that night.

Suddenly, the music stopped and everyone turned to look at the garden door. I turned my head to see what they were all looking at and gasped.

My heart hammered in my chest.

Eliza stood in the center of the doorway with Giselle and Scarlett on either side of her.

She wore an emerald green, tight fitting, sheath of a dress that hugged her from her torso, over her hips, and down her thighs, to just above her knees, revealing her long, toned legs.

The dress was low cut in the front, her cleavage popping out. The dress had long, dark green sleeves of lace.

My mother's golden necklace glinted on her neck in the low lighting.

As Eliza walked toward me, I felt like a little boy who'd seen a pretty girl for the first time. My hands shook and my heart galloped. I didn't even know what to say to her!

In the background, the music picked up again and people started talking.

I took Eliza's hands, and without a word, I led her onto the dancefloor. Pulling her close, I looped one arm around her hips and put my other hand on the back of her neck. I led her close to me and moved around the dancefloor.

"You look... amazing," I said, my mind too blank to think of anything else to say.

Eliza's cheeks turned red and she hugged me, resting her head on my chest.

"You said tonight was special."

"And it is."

"Why's that?" she tilted her head up to look at me.

"You'll see."

We danced until the song ended and I led Eliza off the dancefloor. I got her some water and myself some wine. I tapped a fork against my wine glass, making a ting, ting sound, until everyone in the garden was looking at me.

"Thank you everyone, for throwing this welcome home feast. It is such an honor to be among such honorable shifters."

I raised my wine glass and drank. Everyone else cheered and drank.

"Now, since you all got together and planned this feast for me, I decided to do something for you in return. From now on, we aren't just a village, we are a pack. Tonight, I declare us all members of the Midnight Sun pack!"

The garden filled with cheers. Everyone clapped and drank and started partying again.

When I looked at Eliza, her eyes were wide and glassy.

"Why didn't you tell me this was what you were planning?" She grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"Because, it is only the first surprise. We are now a pack, and a pack needs a Luna."

"What?" She gasped.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the ring I'd been carrying around since I found out she was pregnant. It was one of the last things I purchased in the Light Realm before we left because I wanted

her to have a little piece of home.

Dropping down on my knee, I took Eliza's hand and held the ring up.

It was a platinum banded ring with Moon Goddess symbols etched into the band. The center stone was an opalescent moonstone that reflected shimmering rainbow colors in different lighting. There was a ring of smaller diamonds around the center stone and outside the ring, two more, smaller moonstones on each side of the band.

"Jared..."

"Eliza, if you'll have me, I'd like you to be my Luna and my wife. I want us to be a real family." I touched her stomach with my free hand.

Eliza covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes wide. I could see the ring reflected in her eyes and there was no doubt in my mind that she was happy and excited.

"Yes... of course, I will marry you!"

Grinning foolishly, I jumped up and slid the ring on her finger. I grabbed Eliza's face and kissed her hard on the lips.

Breathing heavily, she pulled back. Her eyes shifted to the side and she smiled shyly, stepping away.

I looked over and realized everyone in the garden was watching us.

"Umm..."

"Congratulations!" someone yelled.

The entire garden erupted in happy cheers and clapping. The music picked up again, a much happier, faster melody and everyone started dancing and celebrating.

I held my hand out to Eliza. "May I have this dance, my beautiful fiancé?"

Her cheeks turned a dark shade of crimson and she took my hand. I pulled her to the dancefloor and spun her around.

All night, we danced and laughed, enjoying the feast and the festivities.

As the fun wound down, Eliza hooked her arm through mine.

"I'm getting a little tired. I think I'm going to head upstairs."

"Mmm. It is getting late, why don't I join you?" I smirked and bounced my eyebrows.

Eliza giggled. "If you think you can catch me."

She took off into the crowd, disappearing.

Growling, I hurried after her.

Eliza was in the bedroom when I caught up to her. Her back to me, I could see the line of her spine with the low cut back of her dress. She pulled the pins out of her hair and shook her head, her curls dancing

around her neck.

I put my arms around her and hugged her from behind. I kissed her neck and her shoulder with warm, slow kisses, pressing my tongue against her skin.

Eliza shuddered and leaned against me.

I hooked my fingers into her sleeves of her dress and pulled them down her arms. The dress was so tight, it clung to her curves. I bunched the fabric up in my fists and pulled the dress all the way down.

Gasping, Eliza turned to me. She cupped my cheeks in her hands and kissed me hard on the lips.

I felt the cool, smooth metal of her new engagement ring and my abdomen tightened, my arousal becoming more urgent.

Eliza's fingers unbuttoned my shirt in a flurry and she pushed it off my shoulders. She hugged me close, her supple breasts pressing against my chest.

I grabbed her hips and lifted her up. She wrapped her legs around me and I carried her to the bed. I lay her down, running my hands up and down her sides.

She trembled and moaned against my touch.

My c\*\*k ached in my pants and I let go over her just long enough to push my pants down. I knelt on the bed, hovering over her. Leaning in, I kissed Eliza's lips, then nipped and sucked at her neck.

She moaned and gasped, tightening her arms around my neck. Eliza rolled her body against mine and

I felt every inch of her smooth, warm, soft skin.

Grunting, I gripped her hips and pushed my way into her scorching, wet insides. Eliza's p\*\*\*y clenched around my throbbing c\*\*k and I nearly lost it!

Holding her close, I kissed her sweetly and made love to her all night long.

## [Chapter 882](#)

\*Eliza\*

Yawning, I looked through another swatch of fabrics that a local dressmaker had brought for me. My stomach rumbled but when I reached for some fruit, bile rose in my throat and I put it back.

Sighing, I went back to the fabrics.

Half the time, I was starving. The other half, I was too nauseated to eat and it flipped back and forth so quickly.

But I was tired all the time!

Trying to plan a wedding while battling fatigue and nausea wasn't the easiest.

I rubbed a swatch of lace between my thumb and forefinger. It was soft and pliable, unlike some stiffer, scratchier laces.

"How's it coming?" Jared asked, popping his head into the bedroom.

I laid out the different fabrics I was studying. There were several lace options, satin, silk, and chiffon.

"I'm still trying to decide on the right fabric for my dress. I haven't even looked at the swatches for bridesmaid dresses." I pointed across the table where there were several more swatches of colored fabrics that I'd requested for bridesmaids' dresses.

"Eliza, you don't need to push yourself so hard to make this happen. I thought we said we wanted something simple."

Jared came up behind me and started massaging my shoulders.

"Oh..." I leaned into his touch as his fingers worked down into the thick, knotted cords of my muscles. "You do know how to spoil a girl."

I knew Jared wanted something simple for a wedding. He hadn't even wanted to invite family!

It wasn't like I didn't understand his reasoning. Who would he invite? Ciana and Theo? He'd only met them once. King Xander? They didn't know each other at all.

I could invite my cousin and then the Alpha King would probably come along as well but did I want to force the two of them together?

No, I didn't.

But getting married was a big deal for me. I wanted to share it with my family. Especially if I was going to remain in the Dark Realm with Jared, I wanted my family there for some of my big life events. I didn't know how often I'd get to see them going forward.

"These are some really nice fabrics," Jared commented. He stopped massaging my shoulders and grabbed the swatch.

I whimpered at the loss of contact. I'd finally started relaxing!

"Well, it is a big event. And I don't mean big as in the event itself is big. I just mean it is important. I want it to be memorable, even if it gets a little expensive." I tilted my head back and smiled at him.

Jared smiled back. He put his hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, and kissed me quickly on the lips.

"You're right, it should be important. I was thinking about what I wanted for a tux, and my groomsmen too."

"Oh, you finally decided to get dressed up?" I teased, sticking my tongue out at him.

"Well, if you're getting an expensive seamstress, we might as well get our money's worth."

I looked at the fabrics I'd collected and fingered one of the silkier fabrics. "Jared, are you sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes, I'm more than okay with this. You deserve your dream wedding. I'm not going to hold you back," he assured. He kissed the top of my head and rubbed my back.

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you. That really means a lot to me."

"If you'd like, I can even make a trip to the capitol to pick up the fabrics once you know what you want to order," he offered.

"Really!?! That would be great!" I beamed a bigger, wider smile at him.

"Anything for you, my dear. I've got a description of what I want for my tux and the groomsmen. If I leave it with you, can you add it to your order?"

"Yes, I will."

Jared handed me the page and I laid it out on the table with the rest of my notes. Piece by piece, the whole wedding was coming together.

"Just let me know when you make the order and I'll head out."

Later that day, I followed up with Giselle and Scarlett.

"Don't worry, we've got your hair and makeup covered. Once we see your dress, the two of us will come up with the perfect makeup palette and the best hairstyle for you," Giselle assured.

I tugged on some of my curls. "Yeah, good luck taming all of this mess."

Scarlett winked at me. "Honey, I've tamed wilder."

"Thank you. You guys are the best."

"Oh, Miriam was looking for you. She had questions about the catering. You should touch base with her, since you seem to be on the warpath to get this all organized," Giselle said, touching my arm.

"She's my next stop. Thank you, guys, I never would be able to get this all done without you," I said. I waved to them as I left to track down Miriam.

She was in the kitchen and had several slices of cake laid out.

"I've been trying to come up with the best wedding cake but I need your input," she said, pointing to the slices. "Tell me what you like and I'll make it happen."

She was very abrupt today, no greeting, all business.

"Okay..."

I picked up the closest cake slice and took a bite. The thick chocolate was so smooth in my mouth and the buttercream frosting was perfect.

"This cake is a little denser than I like."

"Try this one, then." Miriam handed me a slightly lighter chocolate cake.

I tasted that one. The cake was so fluffy and light. The frosting was sweet and airy.

"This one, definitely."

"Alright. And for the rest of the menu..."

Miriam went over what she was planning to make for the guests. It all sounded great. She had such a creative eye for good food.

As we talked about the menu, I couldn't help but wish my mom was there. I was planning my wedding and it seemed like something I should be doing with my own mother.

"Eliza, are you listening?" Miriam's voice cut through my thoughts.

Sighing, I shrugged. "I really appreciate everything you're doing. I just had a moment where I... was missing my mom."

Miriam smiled a rare soft, tender smile. "You wish she was here to help with the wedding planning?"

"Yes, I do."

Miriam put her hand to my cheek in a maternal gesture. "I know I'm not the real thing, but I'm here for all the younger shifters of this pack. Whatever you need to make this day memorable, let me know."

"Thank you, Miriam, I really appreciate that." I covered her hand with mine and sighed heavily.

Maybe it was because I was pregnant and I was going to be a mother soon but I felt a strong desire to be around my own mother or have some kind of maternal connection.

Absently, I touched the locket around my neck and thought of Jared's mother, too. He'd be without his mother on this special day as well.

If I was being honest, that was a part of me that was a little scared about doing the motherhood thing alone. I would have liked my mother to be there to guide me through it all. She'd had two kids and would be able to answer all my questions.

I left the kitchen and walked outside for some fresh air. With the notebook in hand, I wandered through the peckhouse gardens, taking notes on what flowers I liked most.

Some of them were so gorgeous I paused and leaned in to smell them. The wonderful floral fragrances eased all the tension around me.

The peckhouse gardens had always been beautiful. Now in the summer, there were roses and tulips, some colorful carnations and a whole bunch of flowers I didn't know the names of.

A wall of twisting vines wound up one of the fences making a dense, leafy, green barrier.

Suddenly, my arms started to weaken and I felt like my notebook was made of lead.

Fatigue crept up on me so quickly!

I headed back to the peckhouse and frowned. One of the corners was crumbling a little and the paint had been scraped off.

That would need to get fixed.



Forgetting my fatigue, I turned the page in my notebook and wrote down the extent of damage and the extent of the damage.

A window one floor up caught my eye. It was cracked and the window sill was sagging.

Quickly, I made another note.

This house was falling apart!

With the bulk of the wedding plans out of the way, it seemed like a good time to take stock of the damages on the exterior and interior of the peckhouse so Jared and I could start focusing on repairs.

I headed inside to scour the place from top to bottom for anything else that needed to be repaired.

The front doors were open, because it was so nice. They let a summer breeze into the peckhouse.

The garden doors were open, too, making a sort of wind tunnel through the house. It had a nice cooling effect.

On the front porch, I could hear some peck members talking.

"Jared's pulling up now. He went all the way to the capitol."

A smile tugged at my lips. He'd already gone to get the fabrics I'd ordered! How perfect was he?

I tossed my notebook and pen on the nearest table and rushed out the front doors to greet him. Jared had earned himself a big hug and a kiss for everything he'd been doing for me, lately. Least of all, helping get this wedding planned!

Besides, I wanted to inspect the fabrics.

I ran down the steps towards Jared's car. He was just getting out of the driver's seat.

My cheeks ached with how much I was smiling. I ached to hug him and throw my arms around him. It always seemed like I got tired and weaker faster when he wasn't around. Maybe, a big hug from him would reenergize me enough to get the rest of the things done that I needed to get done!

Jared waved at me. He was smiling but there was something... almost bashful in his smile.

I started to slow down. Worry twinged in my stomach.

What was he being secretive about?

Jared went to the back passenger door of his car and pulled it open.

Two figures popped out, standing with their arms around each other. Their eyes wide as they surveyed the scene.

I stopped short. My heart jumped into my throat.

What was going on here?

The two people that got out of the car, I recognized them. But how were they here? How had Jared found them?

"Mom? Dad?"

It was my parents.

I left the kitchen and walked outside for some fresh air. With a notebook in hand, I wandered through the packhouse gardens, taking notes on what flowers I liked most.

Some of them were so gorgeous I paused and leaned in to smell them. The wonderful floral fragrances eased all the tension around me.

The packhouse gardens had always been beautiful. Now in the summer, there were roses and tulips, some colorful carnations and a whole bunch of flowers I didn't know the names of.

A wall of twisting vines wound up one of the fences making a dense, leafy, green barrier.

Suddenly, my arms started to weaken and I felt like my notebook was made of lead.

Fatigue crept up on me so quickly!

I headed back to the packhouse and frowned. One of the corners was crumbling a little and the paint had been scraped off.

That would need to get fixed.

Forgetting my fatigue, I turned the page in my notebook and wrote down the area of damage and the extent of the damage.

A window one floor up caught my eye. It was cracked and the window sill was sagging.

Quickly, I made another note.

This house was falling apart!

With the bulk of the wedding plans out of the way, it seemed like a good time to take stock of the damages on the exterior and interior of the packhouse so Jared and I could start focusing on repairs.

I headed inside to scour the place from top to bottom for anything else that needed to be repaired.

The front doors were open, because it was so nice. They let a summer breeze into the packhouse.

The garden doors were open, too, making a sort of wind tunnel through the house. It had a nice cooling effect.

On the front porch, I could hear some pack members talking.

"Jared's pulling up now. He went all the way to the capitol."

A smile tugged at my lips. He'd already gone to get the fabrics I'd ordered! How perfect was he?

I tossed my notebook and pen on the nearest table and rushed out the front doors to greet him. Jared had earned himself a big hug and a kiss for everything he'd been doing for me, lately. Least of all, helping get this wedding planned!

Besides, I wanted to inspect the fabrics.

I ran down the steps towards Jared's car. He was just getting out of the driver's seat.

My cheeks ached with how much I was smiling. I ached to hug him and throw my arms around him. It always seemed like I got tired and weaker faster when he wasn't around. Maybe, a big hug from him would reenergize me enough to get the rest of the things done that I needed to get done!

Jared waved at me. He was smiling but there was something... almost bashful in his smile.

I started to slow down. Worry twinged in my stomach.

What was he being secretive about?

Jared went to the back passenger door of his car and pulled it open.

Two figures popped out, standing with their arms around each other. Their eyes wide as they surveyed the area.

I stopped short. My heart jumped into my throat.

What was going on here?

The two people that got out of the car, I recognized them. But how were they here? How had Jared found them?

"Mom? Dad?"

It was my parents.

### [Chapter 883](#)

I couldn't stop staring at my parents.

My heart longed to run to them and hug them. To jump into their arms like a little girl.

So much had happened since the last time I'd seen them, though. And from what Charlie and Oliver said, my parents had come here to drag me home. Did that mean they didn't trust me to look after myself?

I knew they'd be mad at me for running off.

They both just stood there, looking around. Why weren't they saying anything? Why weren't they looking at me?

Jared came over and put his arm around me. I glanced at him and saw the sheepish look in his eyes.

"You couldn't give me a little warning?" I mumbled.

Jared shrugged and gave me an encouraging smile. He nudged me toward my parents.

I studied my father's face first. His expression was unreadable.

He had his arm around my mother and pulled her forward so they could greet me.

I glanced at my mother next. Her lips were a thin line, the faintest essence of a frown. The rest of her expression was entirely unreadable.

Uh oh... that wasn't good. When I couldn't tell what she was thinking, it usually meant she was holding her emotions back and... well... that usually happened right before she grounded me or something.

"Eliza, it is good to see you well." My father stepped forward and hugged me.

Tears stung my eyes and I hugged him back, my concerns melting quickly. He gave me a tight squeeze and then handed me over to my mother.

"You look good." She hugged me quickly.

Her hug was brief and a little cold, and she wouldn't make eye contact with me when it was done.

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm to look at my tattoo marks. She twisted my arm from side to side, just like Miriam had, and she studied the marks closely. Her lips turned down in an obvious frown.

Next, she looked at Jared, then at me again.

"Alright, Eliza, we need to have a serious talk."

My stomach twisted and I grimaced.

Yeah, that's what I was afraid of.

"Well, come in, come in. Eliza's parents are more than welcome in my home."

Jared led the way inside. I followed him closely but I could feel my mother's eyes on me from behind.

Miriam greeted us in the entryway. She immediately shook my parents' hands.

"It is wonderful to meet you. Come, I've fixed up a guest room for the two of you. You can stay as long as you'd like."

Miriam left us at the door of the guest room. I waited in the doorway while my parents looked around the room.

"Do you need anything?" I asked.

My mother pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I think we're all set, my dear." My father smiled at me.

"Well, I'll be here to help you get settled. I just have a few things to take care of first..."

"Oh, you won't need to help us. We're not going to be staying long," my mother said coolly.

My heart twinged in my chest and I forced a smile, backing out of their room. What was going on with my mom? I knew she'd be mad that I ran off but I didn't expect her to be harsh with me.

Turning away from them, I grabbed Jared's arm and pulled him down the hall a little way. As soon as we were out of earshot, I turned to him and glared.

I wanted to scold him for going behind my back and bringing my parents. I wanted to tell him he should have warned me!

No words came out as I stared at him.

Smirking, Jared wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close.

"Eliza, I know how much you wanted your parents to be here for the wedding. I didn't tell you beforehand because I didn't want you to get your hopes up... In case they couldn't come. Seeing you that disappointed would have crushed me."

Jared kissed my forehead. He took his mother's locket in his hands for a moment. When he released it, the necklace was warm against my skin.

I could tell what he was thinking. He was upset that his mother couldn't be there and if he could give me my parents for our special day, then that would make up for the absence he felt.

My heart swelled and all the anger I was feeling toward him evaporated. I couldn't be mad at him!

But I wasn't totally convinced my parents wanted to be here.

"I don't know... my mother made it sound like they wouldn't be staying long enough for the wedding..."

Jared took my cheek in his hand and tilted my head up.

"I'm sure they will both be here to celebrate with us."

"I'm going to go talk to them. I think my mom wants to have that chat sooner than later." Reluctantly, I pulled away from Jared's comforting embrace.

"Do you want me to come along?"

I shook my head. "I appreciate it but this is something I should do on my own."

"Alright. I'll be around if you need me."

I went back to my parents' room. The door was still open and I could see them inside, talking in hushed whispers. I knocked on the door and they both looked up.

"Come on in, sweetie. We've got some catching up to do." My father beckoned me into the room.

I sat in a chair near the bed where they were sitting next to each other.

My mother's eyes followed me and she looked me over with a sharp, harsh look. When I met her gaze, her eyes softened and I saw deep concern hidden in the depths of her eyes.

I sighed, relaxing a little.

"We've heard from a few different sources that you've been very busy, traveling all over two worlds."

"I've had my share of adventures," I said, nodding.

My mother sniffed. "You know you shouldn't be running around like that."

"Really, Mom, I've been careful. I'm having a good time and I've made a lot of really awesome friends."

"Good experiences are important for young women to have," my father interjected.

"Just because I'm not living life your way doesn't mean I'm not living a fulfilling, rich life."

"Rich?" My mother's eyes roamed around the room.

I noticed how her eyes lingered on the peeling paint and the loose floorboards.

"Eliza, I'm concerned about you. You're playing a very dangerous game with your life..."

"I know it might look like that but there's more to it than that..."

Quickly, my mother held up her hand, stopping me from saying any more. "This needs to stop, Eliza, before you get into real trouble... before something happens that you can't undo."

My heart ached like a knife sliced into me. I put my hand on my chest, breathing deeply to keep myself steady.

Was I a bad daughter for hiding the curse from my concerned parents? I had a feeling it would upset my mother even more and that was the last thing I needed. Chuckling nervously, I rubbed my arm with the curse marks.

Not to mention... ebsently, I touched my flet stomech. I wesn't showing yet, but I couldn't hide thet forever.

Would my pregnancy help my mother's mood or would she consider thet one of those things thet heppened thet I cen't undo?

I felt my mother's eyes on me egein end I bit my lower lip. She stered et me, her mouth henging open. I looked down et my hend rubbing my stomech.

It geve me ewey!

"I..."

My words feiled when I sew the bright, heppy grin on my fether's fece.

My mother looked et my fether end shook her heed.

"Elize, whet ere you thinking? You've been running around like some wild child with no upbringing or menners. You're playeing house in e mension thet is felling down around you. This is..."

"Gemme." My fether put his hend on my mother's beck, cutting her off.

"Whet? She cen berely teke cere of herself. Do you went to see our grendchild reised in e plece like this?" My mother threw her erms out to the sides.

Her words stung me like e firm slep. I senk deeper into the cheir, wishing she wouldn't telk about me like I wesn't there.

"Whet I went is for my daughter end grendchildren to be heppy. Look et her. She looks heppier then I've ever seen her."

"Thenks, Deddy."

He winked at me. "She found the men that loves her enough to make sure we were here for her wedding. He could have just as easily not tried to contact us."

"Elize, I think you're being very hasty in marrying this boy and having the baby." My mother gave me the stern look.

I knew that look well. She'd been giving it to me ever since I was the child. I was always too wild, too undisciplined, never "proper."

"This is me, Mom. I'm sorry I'm not who you wanted me to be."

"Elize, don't apologize. You've grown into the strong, beautiful woman. I could not be prouder of you as my daughter. And I know you are going to be the great mom."

My dad's eyes twinkled as he looked at me.

My heart lifted and I smiled uncontrollably. It was so good to hear that I had my dad's support through all of this.

"That means a lot, Daddy, thank you." I looped my arms around myself protectively. No matter what my mother thought, I didn't think this baby was the mistake. I didn't think that what Jered and I were doing was the mistake.

Scoffing, my mom threw her arms out to the sides again.

I could practically feel her frustration rolling off of her in waves. Despite my father's kind words, my mother's reaction was still too harsh.

How could she so callously dismiss my life and what I'd done? I was her daughter and she was treating me like trash!

Sighing, I stood up and brushed myself off.

"I really want you to be at my wedding, both of you. It means the world to me that Jered contacted you and brought you here. The entire time I've been planning it, all I could think about was how much I missed you and wanted you to be a part of this special day with me."

My parents looked at each other and for the moment, I thought I saw my mother's hardened expression waver.

"You guys can relax for now, after your long trip. It is getting late. You can meet everyone else at dinner... I'm really glad you're both here."

I left them in the room to think about what I said.

Sometimes, it was about killing them with kindness.

Not to mention... absentmindedly, I touched my flat stomach. I wasn't showing yet, but I couldn't hide that forever.

Would my pregnancy help my mother's mood or would she consider that one of those things that happened that I can't undo?

I felt my mother's eyes on me again and I bit my lower lip. She stared at me, her mouth hanging open. I looked down at my hand rubbing my stomach.

It gave me away!

"I..."

My words failed when I saw the bright, happy grin on my father's face.

My mother looked at my father and shook her head.

"Eliza, what are you thinking? You've been running around like some wild child with no upbringing or manners. You're playing house in a mansion that is falling down around you. This is..."

"Gamma." My father put his hand on my mother's back, cutting her off.

"What? She can barely take care of herself. Do you want to see our grandchild raised in a place like this?" My mother threw her arms out to the sides.

Her words stung me like a firm slap. I sank deeper into the chair, wishing she wouldn't talk about me like I wasn't there.

"What I want is for my daughter and grandchildren to be happy. Look at her. She looks happier than I've ever seen her."

"Thanks, Daddy."

He winked at me. "She found a man that loves her enough to make sure we were here for her wedding. He could have just as easily not tried to contact us."

"Eliza, I think you're being very hasty in marrying this boy and having a baby." My mother gave me a stern look.

I knew that look well. She'd been giving it to me ever since I was a child. I was always too wild, too undisciplined, never "proper."

"This is me, Mom. I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be."

"Eliza, don't apologize. You've grown into a strong, beautiful woman. I could not be prouder of you as my daughter. And I know you are going to be a great mom."

My dad's eyes twinkled as he looked at me.

My heart lifted and I smiled uncontrollably. It was so good to hear that I had my dad's support through all of this.

"That means a lot, Daddy, thank you." I looped my arms around myself protectively. No matter what my mother thought, I didn't think this baby was a mistake. I didn't think that what Jared and I were doing was a mistake.

Scoffing, my mom threw her arms out to the sides again.



I could practically feel her frustration rolling off of her in waves. Despite my father's kind words, my mother's reaction was still too harsh.

How could she so callously dismiss my life and what I'd done? I was her daughter and she was treating me like trash!

Sighing, I stood up and brushed myself off.

"I really want you to be at my wedding, both of you. It means the world to me that Jared contacted you and brought you here. The entire time I've been planning it, all I could think about was how much I missed you and wanted you to be a part of this special day with me."

My parents looked at each other and for a moment, I thought I saw my mother's hardened expression waver.

"You guys can relax for now, after your long trip. It is getting late. You can meet everyone else at dinner... I'm really glad you're both here."

I left them in the room to think about what I said.

Sometimes, it was about killing them with kindness.

#### [Chapter 884](#)

I couldn't stop staring at my parents.

My heart longed to run to them and hug them. To jump into their arms like a little girl.

So much had happened since the last time I'd seen them, though. And from what Charlie and Oliver said, my parents had come here to drag me home. Did that mean they didn't trust me to look after myself?

I knew they'd be mad at me for running off.

They both just stood there, looking around. Why weren't they saying anything? Why weren't they looking at me?

Jared came over and put his arm around me. I glanced at him and saw the sheepish look in his eyes.

"You couldn't give me a little warning?" I mumbled.

Jared shrugged and gave me an encouraging smile. He nudged me toward my parents.

I studied my father's face first. His expression was unreadable.

He had his arm around my mother and pulled her forward so they could greet me.

I glanced at my mother next. Her lips were a thin line, the faintest essence of a frown. The rest of her expression was entirely unreadable.

Uh oh... that wasn't good. When I couldn't tell what she was thinking, it usually meant she was holding her emotions back and... well... that usually happened right before she grounded me or something.

"Eliza, it is good to see you well." My father stepped forward and hugged me.

Tears stung my eyes and I hugged him back, my concerns melting quickly. He gave me a tight squeeze and then handed me over to my mother.

"You look good." She hugged me quickly.

Her hug was brief and a little cold, and she wouldn't make eye contact with me when it was done.

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm to look at my tattoo marks. She twisted my arm from side to side, just like Miriam had, and she studied the marks closely. Her lips turned down in an obvious frown.

Next, she looked at Jared, then at me again.

"Alright, Eliza, we need to have a serious talk."

My stomach twisted and I grimaced.

Yeah, that's what I was afraid of.

"Well, come in, come in. Eliza's parents are more than welcome in my home."

Jared led the way inside. I followed him closely but I could feel my mother's eyes on me from behind.

Miriam greeted us in the entryway. She immediately shook my parents' hands.

"It is wonderful to meet you. Come, I've fixed up a guest room for the two of you. You can stay as long as you'd like."

Miriam left us at the door of the guest room. I waited in the doorway while my parents looked around the room.

"Do you need anything?" I asked.

My mother pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I think we're all set, my dear." My father smiled at me.

"Well, I'll be here to help you get settled. I just have a few things to take care of first..."

"Oh, you won't need to help us. We're not going to be staying long," my mother said coolly.

My heart twinged in my chest and I forced a smile, backing out of their room. What was going on with my mom? I knew she'd be mad that I ran off but I didn't expect her to be harsh with me.

Turning away from them, I grabbed Jared's arm and pulled him down the hall a little way. As soon as we were out of earshot, I turned to him and glared.

I wanted to scold him for going behind my back and bringing my parents. I wanted to tell him he should have warned me!

No words came out as I stared at him.

Smirking, Jared wrapped his arms around me and hugged me close.

"Eliza, I know how much you wanted your parents to be here for the wedding. I didn't tell you beforehand because I didn't want you to get your hopes up... In case they couldn't come. Seeing you that disappointed would have crushed me."

Jared kissed my forehead. He took his mother's locket in his hands for a moment. When he released it, the necklace was warm against my skin.

I could tell what he was thinking. He was upset that his mother couldn't be there and if he could give me my parents for our special day, then that would make up for the absence he felt.

My heart swelled and all the anger I was feeling toward him evaporated. I couldn't be mad at him!

But I wasn't totally convinced my parents wanted to be here.

"I don't know... my mother made it sound like they wouldn't be staying long enough for the wedding..."

Jared took my cheek in his hand and tilted my head up.

"I'm sure they will both be here to celebrate with us."

"I'm going to go talk to them. I think my mom wants to have that chat sooner than later." Reluctantly, I pulled away from Jared's comforting embrace.

"Do you want me to come along?"

I shook my head. "I appreciate it but this is something I should do on my own."

"Alright. I'll be around if you need me."

I went back to my parents' room. The door was still open and I could see them inside, talking in hushed whispers. I knocked on the door and they both looked up.

"Come on in, sweetie. We've got some catching up to do." My father beckoned me into the room.

I sat in a chair near the bed where they were sitting next to each other.

My mother's eyes followed me and she looked me over with a sharp, harsh look. When I met her gaze, her eyes softened and I saw deep concern hidden in the depths of her eyes.

I sighed, relaxing a little.

"We've heard from a few different sources that you've been very busy, traveling all over two worlds."

"I've had my share of adventures," I said, nodding.

My mother sniffed. "You know you shouldn't be running around like that."

"Really, Mom, I've been careful. I'm having a good time and I've made a lot of really awesome friends."

"Good experiences are important for young women to have," my father interjected.

"Just because I'm not living life your way doesn't mean I'm not living a fulfilling, rich life."

"Rich?" My mother's eyes roamed around the room.

I noticed how her eyes lingered on the peeling paint and the loose floorboards.

"Eliza, I'm concerned about you. You're playing a very dangerous game with your life..."

"I know it might look like that but there's more to it than that..."

Quickly, my mother held up her hand, stopping me from saying any more. "This needs to stop, Eliza, before you get into real trouble... before something happens that you can't undo."

My heart ached like a knife sliced into me. I put my hand on my chest, breathing deeply to keep myself steady.

Was I a bad daughter for hiding the curse from my concerned parents? I had a feeling it would upset my mother even more and that was the last thing I needed. Chuckling nervously, I rubbed my arm with the curse marks.

Not to mention... ebsently, I touched my flet stomech. I wesn't showing yet, but I couldn't hide that forever.

Would my pregnancy help my mother's mood or would she consider that one of those things that heppened that I cen't undo?

I felt my mother's eyes on me egein end I bit my lower lip. She stered et me, her mouth henging open. I looked down et my hend rubbing my stomech.

It geve me ewey!

"I..."

My words feiled when I sew the bright, heppy grin on my fether's fece.

My mother looked et my fether end shook her heed.

"Elize, whet ere you thinking? You've been running around like some wild child with no upbringing or menners. You're plying house in e mension that is felling down around you. This is..."

"Gemme." My fether put his hend on my mother's beck, cutting her off.

"Whet? She cen berely teke cere of herself. Do you went to see our grendchild reised in e plece like this?" My mother threw her erms out to the sides.

Her words stung me like e firm slep. I senk deeper into the cheir, wishing she wouldn't talk about me like I wesn't there.

"Whet I went is for my deughter end grendchildren to be heppy. Look et her. She looks heppier then I've ever seen her."

"Thenks, Deddy."

He winked et me. "She found e men that loves her enough to meke sure we were here for her wedding. He could heve just es eesily not tried to contect us."

"Elize, I think you're being very hesty in merrying this boy end heving e beby." My mother geve me e stern look.

I knew that look well. She'd been giving it to me ever since I wes e child. I wes elweys too wild, too undisciplined, never "proper."

"This is me, Mom. I'm sorry I'm not who you went me to be."

"Elize, don't epologize. You've grown into e strong, beautiful women. I could not be prouder of you es my deughter. And I know you ere going to be e greet mom."

My ded's eyes twinkled es he looked et me.

My heert lifted end I smiled uncontrollably. It wes so good to heer that I hed my ded's support through ell of this.

"Thet meens e lot, Deddy, thank you." I looped my erms around myself protectively. No metter whet my mother thought, I didn't think this beby wes e misteke. I didn't think thet whet Jered end I were doing wes e misteke.

Scoffing, my mom threw her erms out to the sides egein.

I could precticelly feel her frustreretion rolling off of her in weves. Despite my fether's kind words, my mother's reection wes still too hersh.

How could she so cellously dismiss my life end whet I'd done? I wes her deughter end she wes treeting me like tresh!

Sighing, I stood up end brushed myself off.

"I reelly went you to be et my wedding, both of you. It meens the world to me thet Jered contacted you end brought you here. The entire time I've been plenning it, ell I could think about wes how much I missed you end wanted you to be e pert of this speciel dey with me."

My perents looked et eech other end for e moment, I thought I sew my mother's herdened expression wever.

"You guys cen relex for now, efter your long trip. It is getting lete. You cen meet everyone else et dinner... I'm reelly gled you're both here."

I left them in the room to think about whet I seid.

Sometimes, it wes about killing them with kindness.

Not to mention... absently, I touched my flat stomach. I wasn't showing yet, but I couldn't hide that forever.

Would my pregnancy help my mother's mood or would she consider that one of those things that happened that I can't undo?

I felt my mother's eyes on me again and I bit my lower lip. She stared at me, her mouth hanging open. I looked down at my hand rubbing my stomach.

It gave me away!

"I..."

My words failed when I saw the bright, happy grin on my father's face.

My mother looked at my father and shook her head.

"Eliza, what are you thinking? You've been running around like some wild child with no upbringing or manners. You're playing house in a mansion that is falling down around you. This is..."

"Gamma." My father put his hand on my mother's back, cutting her off.

"What? She can barely take care of herself. Do you want to see our grandchild raised in a place like this?" My mother threw her arms out to the sides.

Her words stung me like a firm slap. I sank deeper into the chair, wishing she wouldn't talk about me like I wasn't there.

"What I want is for my daughter and grandchildren to be happy. Look at her. She looks happier than I've ever seen her."

"Thanks, Daddy."

He winked at me. "She found a man that loves her enough to make sure we were here for her wedding. He could have just as easily not tried to contact us."

"Eliza, I think you're being very hasty in marrying this boy and having a baby." My mother gave me a stern look.

I knew that look well. She'd been giving it to me ever since I was a child. I was always too wild, too undisciplined, never "proper."

"This is me, Mom. I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be."

"Eliza, don't apologize. You've grown into a strong, beautiful woman. I could not be prouder of you as my daughter. And I know you are going to be a great mom."

My dad's eyes twinkled as he looked at me.

My heart lifted and I smiled uncontrollably. It was so good to hear that I had my dad's support through all of this.

"That means a lot, Daddy, thank you." I looped my arms around myself protectively. No matter what my mother thought, I didn't think this baby was a mistake. I didn't think that what Jared and I were doing was a mistake.

Scoffing, my mom threw her arms out to the sides again.

I could practically feel her frustration rolling off of her in waves. Despite my father's kind words, my mother's reaction was still too harsh.

How could she so callously dismiss my life and what I'd done? I was her daughter and she was treating me like trash!

Sighing, I stood up and brushed myself off.

"I really want you to be at my wedding, both of you. It means the world to me that Jared contacted you and brought you here. The entire time I've been planning it, all I could think about was how much I missed you and wanted you to be a part of this special day with me."

My parents looked at each other and for a moment, I thought I saw my mother's hardened expression waver.

"You guys can relax for now, after your long trip. It is getting late. You can meet everyone else at dinner... I'm really glad you're both here."

I left them in the room to think about what I said.

Sometimes, it was about killing them with kindness.

### [Chapter 885](#)

\*Eliza\*

On the day of the wedding, my heart fluttered uncontrollably.

I hadn't seen Jared at all. He insisted we not see each other until I was walking down the aisle. It seemed silly, but my excitement and anticipation was getting stronger by the second.

Maybe it was a good idea to stay apart from each other.

Giselle and Scarlett were helping me with my dress, hair, and makeup.

Even my mom joined us to help out.

Giselle and Scarlett were dressed in the royal blue bridesmaids' dresses I'd picked out. The fabric was satin. They had spaghetti straps and made both Giselle and Scarlett look stunning.

"How are you feeling, Eliza?" my mother asked. She set my shoes on the floor and held my elbow, supporting me as I stepped into the heels.

"A little nervous. I wanted something meaningful and... now I'm worried about standing up in front of everyone."

"I thought you might say that. So, I got you a little something to help you relax."

My mother pulled out a jewelry box. She opened it up, revealing a beautiful gemstone necklace with blue stones that matched my bridesmaids dresses.

"Oh... it is gorgeous..." I reached up, holding the locket around my neck. "But I don't want to take this necklace off."

I couldn't explain it but I never liked taking the locket off. It was like I held a part of Jared's mother with me and I knew how important it was to him.

On a special day like today where he couldn't be with his mother or his family, I wanted him to have the reminder that she was still with us, in spirit.

My mother frowned slightly.

"I'm sorry, mother, the necklace is gorgeous. It's just... this locket belonged to Jared's mother."

My mom's eyes softened and she nodded. "I understand. I bet I can shorten the links on this necklace and make it a bracelet. How does that sound?"

"Good, thank you."

My mom took the necklace to the nearby table and started working on shortening the links.

"Well, are you ready to see what you look like?" Giselle asked. She grabbed my shoulders and turned me toward the full-length mirror.

My dress was pure white. It was sleeveless with a very open back, all the way down to my sacrum. From there, a line of silk covered buttons held the dress together.

In the front, my dress came down in a low V between my breasts. The bodice of my dress clung to my curves down my torso to my thighs. The front fell straight to my ankles. The back of the dress stretched behind me in a medium length trail.

Other than the buttons, the only other decoration on the dress was the lace down the low V in the front and a sparkling belt around my waist.

"You look absolutely stunning!" Scarlett gushed.

True to her word, she had been able to tame my hair. It was mostly pinned up with decorative barrettes in a bun on my head. Several curls had been left loose, hanging down around the bun, tickling my neck and shoulders.

"Here you go, I got the bracelet ready." My mother held it up.

I extended my wrist and she clipped the bracelet on.

"I think you're ready," Giselle said, fluffing my train one last time.

I looked down at myself. It wasn't a very elaborate dress but I still felt as elegant as a princess in this dress.

"I'm ready."

Giselle and Scarlett left to get ready to walk down the aisle ahead of me.

My mother walked with me until we met up with my father. He was the one that was giving me away.

"Oh, Eliza, you look absolutely beautiful!" My father said. He took my hands and kissed them.

"Thanks, Daddy." I felt my cheeks warm.

He looped his arm through mine and we waited for the right music to signal it was our turn to go down the aisle.



"Wait, wait, you are missing one more thing," my mother said. She hurried back to us holding my bouquet.

I took the large collection of summer garden flowers and held them in my free hand.

"Now, you are ready." She patted my cheek and headed out to sit in the crowd.

When the music changed, my father took a deep breath and we headed down the aisle.

Jared and I had decided to get married in the garden. It had been so beautiful when the pack hosted a feast for us. All we had to do was move the tables around, set up some chairs, and roll out a white carpet for an aisle.

There were fresh pink rose petals scattered over the aisle.

Jared was standing by the fountain. We didn't have an altar but the fountain was perfect! The lovely sound of trickling water added to the romantic atmosphere.

Jared stood by the fountain, a large goofy grin on his face.

My heart fluttered the entire walk down the aisle. It was a short aisle but I felt like it was the longest walk of my life!

I just wanted to run down the aisle and jump into his arms. As much as I wanted to do that, I refrained.

"Steady now, Eliza," my father mumbled as if he could sense my anticipation.

Archer stood in front of the fountain. When my father and I stopped before him, he nodded to us.

"And who is it that gives this woman away?" he asked.

"I do," my father said. He nudged me toward Jared and released my arm.

Jared took my hand and pulled me toward him until we were standing across from each other.

I glanced at my father. He winked at me and went to sit with my mother. They held hands and I could already see my mom's eyes glistening with tears.

"We are gathered together today, bearing witness to this union, before the very Moon Goddess..." Archer began.

I turned back to Jared. He was still grinning, his eyes full of love and adoration.

My entire body hummed, and again, I just wanted to throw myself into his arms and hug him all night.

'I love you,' he mouthed.

I smiled, my cheeks getting so hot, I thought I might burst into flames!

"... to celebrate this bond between Jared and Eliza. Do you have the rings?" He eyed Jared.

"Oh, right, rings," Jared said, chuckling. He released my hand and dug around in his pocket.

I handed my bouquet to Giselle so both my hands were free.

Jared pulled out two matching wedding bands. They were made of the same metal as my engagement ring. The smaller one had small opalescent moonstones inlaid around the band, matching my engagement ring. The larger band had Moon Goddess symbols engraved on the band to match my engagement ring.

It was the perfect set!

"Jared, do you take Eliza to be your wife, your mate, and your Luna? Do you promise to love her and cherish her through the good times and hard times, through sickness and in health?" Archer asked.

Jared nodded, sliding the wedding band onto my finger next to my engagement ring. "I do. Of course, I do!"

And do you, Eliza, take Jared to be your husband, your mate, and your Alpha? Do you promise to love her and cherish her through the good times and hard times, through sickness and in health?"

I slid Jared's ring on his finger. "Yes. Yes, I do!"

"Then, by the power vested in me and with the Moon Goddess's blessing, I pronounce you man and wife."

Jared grabbed me before Archer even finished his sentence. He pulled me into a deep, passionate kiss.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and returned his kiss, closing my eyes.

Jared bent me backward in a low dip, deepening the kiss more.

Blood rushed in my ears. Or was that the crowd cheering?

He pulled me back up and pressed his forehead to mine. Jared and I stared into each other's eyes, breathing heavily. The whole world fell away and it was just him and me. Forever.

"I'd like to invite the guests to stay in the garden for the reception. We'll have the chairs removed and food and drinks will be served shortly," Archer announced.

I didn't pull away from Jared, still staring into his eyes. They were glossy, and for a moment I thought he might cry with joy.

I tightened my arms around his neck, hugging him as close as possible.

"I love you."

"I love you too," he whispered back.

It didn't take long for the garden to be transformed into the perfect reception area. We still had the string lights up from the feast.

Food and drinks were brought out and an open space was cleared for the dancefloor.

Everyone mingled, and a lot of them came up to me and Jared to congratulate us personally.

"So, was it the wedding of your dreams?" Jared asked, his arm a heavy comfort on my shoulders.

I looked up at him, his face glowing in the low lighting.

Dressed in his fine, clean-cut suit, he looked like a true prince. I always thought he looked handsome but, in this lighting, the way he was dressed, for the first time, I saw that he was really, he looked like royalty.

"It was everything I wished for," I admitted.

"Then, can I have this dance?" he held his hand out to me.

"There's nothing I'd like more!" I took Jared's hand and he spun me onto the dancefloor. He caught me in his strong, bulging arms and whisked me around the dancefloor.

I never wanted to leave his arms! I could have danced with Jared all night.

Ting. Ting.

My father struck his glass with a knife and everyone turned to him. The music stopped and my dance with Jared ended far too soon.

"May I be the first to say, congratulations to the happy couple," my father said, lifting his glass. "I couldn't be happier for my daughter and her new husband."

Everyone else raised their glasses, cheering.

Other people started to lift their glasses and make toasts, too. By the end of it, I was so flushed, I thought I might get a nose bleed!

The music picked up again and more people went onto the dancefloor. I watched as my parents went out on the dancefloor and sighed. I glanced at Jared. When we'd been together as long as my parents, I hoped we still enjoyed dancing together like that.

"I've got one more toast!"

A voice boomed through the crowd.

The music and dancing stopped again. That voice was familiar, sending a shiver down my spine.

Jared whipped around to the garden entrance. He pulled me behind him as he glared at the unwelcome guest.

Aries stood at the garden entrance, with a dark, smug look on his face and a raised glass in hand.

"To the happy couple. And to the soon to be Alpha King!"

I slid Jared's ring on his finger. "Yes. Yes, I do!"

"Then, by the power vested in me and with the Moon Goddess's blessing, I pronounce you man and wife."

Jared grabbed me before Archer even finished his sentence. He pulled me into a deep, passionate kiss.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and returned his kiss, closing my eyes.

Jared bent me backward in a low dip, deepening the kiss more.

Blood rushed in my ears. Or was that the crowd clapping?

He pulled me back up and pressed his forehead to mine. Jared and I stared into each other's eyes, breathing heavily. The whole world fell away and it was just him and me. Forever.

"I'd like to invite the guests to stay in the garden for the reception. We'll have the chairs removed and food and drinks will be served shortly," Archer announced.

I didn't pull away from Jared, still staring into his eyes. They were glassy, and for a moment I thought he might cry with joy.

I tightened my arms around his neck, hugging him as close as possible.

"I love you."

"I love you too," he whispered back.

It didn't take long for the garden to be transformed into the perfect reception area. We still had the string lights up from the feast.

Food and drinks were brought out and an open space was cleared for the dancefloor.

Everyone mingled, and a lot of them came up to me and Jared to congratulate us personally.

"So, was it the wedding of your dreams?" Jared asked, his arm a heavy comfort on my shoulders.

I looked up at him, his face glowing in the low lighting.

Dressed in his fine, clean-cut suit, he looked like a true prince. I always thought he looked handsome but, in this lighting, the way he was dressed, for the first time, I saw that he was regal, he looked like royalty.

"It was everything I wished for," I admitted.

"Then, can I have this dance?" he held his hand out to me.

"There's nothing I'd like more!" I took Jared's hand and he spun me onto the dancefloor. He caught me in his strong, bulging arms and whisked me around the dancefloor.

I never wanted to leave his arms! I could have danced with Jared all night.

Ting. Ting.

My father struck his glass with a knife and everyone turned to him. The music stopped and my dance with Jared ended far too soon.

"May I be the first to say, congratulations to the happy couple," my father said, lifting his glass. "I couldn't be happier for my daughter and her new husband."

Everyone else raised their glasses, cheering.

Other people started to lift their glasses and make toasts, too. By the end of it, I was so flushed, I thought I might get a nose bleed!

The music picked up again and more people went onto the dancefloor. I watched as my parents went out on the dancefloor and sighed. I glanced at Jared. When we'd been together as long as my parents, I hoped we still enjoyed dancing together like that.

"I've got one more toast!"

A voice boomed through the crowd.

The music and dancing stopped again. That voice was familiar, sending a shiver down my spine.

Jared whipped around to the garden entrance. He pulled me behind him as he glared at the unwelcome guest.

Aries stood at the garden entrance, with a dark, smug look on his face and a raised glass in hand.

"To the happy couple. And to the soon to be Alpha King!" y

### [Chapter 886](#)

Jared\*

I stared at Aries. How dare he interrupt my wedding!

Growling, I clenched my fists.

Eliza grabbed my arm. "Careful. He has the diadem in his vaults. We need to get in there and get it."

I nodded slowly and relaxed my fists. As much as I wanted to throw him out, it wasn't worth making a scene. Eliza was right, we did need to be on good terms with Aries until we could get into his vault.

"Congratulations, Jared and Eliza. I've got the perfect idea for your honeymoon." Aries smirked and drained his champagne glass.

Eliza and I quickly sent the guests away, making excuses that Aries came with important news.

I realized that Aries had brought his entire army with him. They were spread out throughout the village. I got the sense that they would not hesitate to make trouble if Eliza and I didn't play along.

But I wouldn't leave my pack vulnerable.

I reached out to Archer and my warriors with the mindlink.

'Make sure the village is safe. Keep an eye on his soldiers. If anything comes up, handle it discreetly.'

'Why not just throw him out?'

'We still need him... as much as I hate to admit it. He has the diadem, an important artifact to help break the curse. We need to work with him long enough to get it.'

'Alright, I'll keep the others in line.'

'Report back to me if any of them stir up trouble. Eliza and I are going to talk to Aries, privately.'

I motioned Aries to follow us and we went into the library. I shut the door so we wouldn't be interrupted. I shot a quick glance at Eliza, she nodded.

We both knew we had to handle this carefully.

"What do you want from us?" I asked sternly.

It would be too suspicious if Eliza and I jumped right in and agreed with him.

"I told you, I'm here to celebrate and take you on your honeymoon." Aries grinned slyly.

"And what is your idea for our honeymoon?" Eliza crossed her arms.

"Why, it is time to journey to the palace. It is time for you to take your place on the throne." He nodded to me.

I looked at Eliza. She shrugged.

Sighing, I tapped my fingers against a desk. There was a map laid out on the desk. It was a map to the capital.

"How do you plan to go about this? Are you going to leave your soldiers here to keep my people in line in order to gain our cooperation?"

Aries scoffed and waved dismissively at me. "No. We're going to need my soldiers in this fight. First, we need to stop off at my mansion and make the final preparations. Then we will head straight for the capitol."

"I'd like a word with my wife, alone," I insisted, pointing to the door.

"Yes, of course."

Aries backed out of the room. Silently, I cursed him for ruining the happiness I should have felt about calling Eliza my wife for the first time.

As soon as Aries was gone, a smile spread across her face. She looped her arms around herself.

"You know, I really liked hearing you call me your wife." She bit her lower lip.

Chuckling, I held a hand out to her. She came right to me and I pulled her into my arms.

"What are you thinking about all of this?"

"We have to get into Aries's vault. Jared... the vault is at his mansion. If he thinks we are going along with him, he might agree to let me in there."

"And if he already plans to take us to his mansion..."

"Exactly. This could be our one and only chance. If he finds out he has something we want before we get it..." she glanced around like she thought someone was listening to us and she dropped her voice to a low whisper. "We have to do this."

"Agreed." I kissed her forehead.

She sighed and frowned slightly.

"What is it?" I hooked my finger under her chin and lifted her gorgeous eyes to mine.

"I didn't think this was how we'd be spending our wedding night."

"Oh, don't worry, I will make up for that later, over and over again." I kissed her sweetly on the lips.

Eliza moaned and melted into my kiss.

\*\*\*

\*Eliza\*

Jared left the village in the care of Archer and others he trusted. We traveled with Aries and his army back to Aries's mansion.

I had my backpack on. Snuggly inside, we had the Cryptex hidden in the safety, waterproof box that we'd gotten for it. It was safe and hidden, wrapped in some of our clothes.

And of course, I had the pendant around my neck. Once we got the Diadem, we'd have everything we'd need to break the curse.

"And to celebrate the two of you, I will be hosting a ball in your honor," Aries was saying.

I'd tuned out a lot of what he said until he started talking about throwing parties for us.

"That sounds great..."

I tried to stay out of the conversations as much as possible. Jared was good at the political stuff and I was more focused on getting all the pieces we needed to break the curse.

Traveling again wasn't easy for me. I was still tired a lot and the shadow of my curse stirred angrily, hungrily, whenever I started to feel tired.

When we got to Aries' mansion, he immediately wanted to start making plans to storm the capitol.

"Eliza, Jared, if you want to take a moment to freshen up, you can meet me in my study and we can discuss the details," he said after showing us to our room.

"We'll be right down." Jared nodded.

"Actually..."

Jared and Aries raised their eyebrows at me.

I laughed nervously and rubbed my covered, tattooed arm.

"Aries, would you mind if I went down into your vault again?" I bit my lower lip and looked at him as innocently as possible.

"You want to get into my vault?" he creased his brow.

I glanced at Jared. He rolled his eyes, telling me that I should have been a little more discreet.

"Well, I only got to see a fraction of it last time. You have so many artifacts down there I could literally spend days combing through all that stuff and studying it."

Jared chuckled. "Once an archeologist, always an archeologist."

Aries sighed and shrugged. "Well, if that's really how you want to spend your time."

I nodded. "I trust you and Jared to come up with the details of this plan. Honestly, I'd be much happier playing with the artifacts in your vault."

"You're a peculiar woman, Eliza," Aries muttered.

"Hey. If it makes my wife happy, then I say you should let her do it. What's the saying... happy wife, happy life?" Jared grinned.

He glanced sideways at me and winked.

I would have rolled my eyes if Aries wasn't watching us so closely.

Suddenly, Aries broke out in laughter. He clutched his chest as his laugh rumbled through him.

"You've got that right. Alright, Elize, you are more than welcome to play in the vault, to your heart's content."

"I appreciate that. But you know... if I find anything I want to bring with me to study in more depth, do you have a problem with that?"

Again, I gave Aries the most innocent look I could muster. So far, he didn't appear suspicious of me and I was being as delicate as possible presenting him with these tidbits.

Aries sighed and shrugged.

"Well, seeing as you are going to be my Queen soon, I won't deny you a few pleasures." Aries waved dismissively at me. "Come on, I'll let you in."

Jared and I followed Aries to the vault. He opened the door. I tried to go in but Jared grabbed my hand. He pulled me back and kissed me on the lips.

I leaned against him, melting into his kiss.

"Geez, the two of you aren't going to be apart that long." Aries scoffed.

Jared smirked at him. "I did say this was our honeymoon."

Aries rolled his eyes. "Just... meet me in my study." He stalked off, shaking his head at us.

"How far are we really going to go with this?" I whispered.

"Once we have the diadem, we won't need to tag along anymore and we can make our escape. I'll keep Aries busy as long as possible. How long do you need?"

I shrugged. "I know what it looks like and I roughly remember where it is in the vault. I'm not leaving the vault until I have it."

"Alright, we'll meet up again later. Be safe."

"You too."



Jered kissed me quickly on the lips. I whined as he left me at the vault, wishing our kiss could have lasted just a little bit longer.

It didn't take me long to find the diadem. It was right where I'd seen it last, surrounded by the same gaudy relics as before. I shook my head.

Aries probably didn't even remember half the stuff he had in here. He'd never know what I took or what was missing.

Even if he did find out, I doubted he'd know why I took the diadem at all. It wasn't like it was known to be some powerful artifact.

I tucked the diadem in my backpack with the Cryptex, making sure to wrap it up protectively. I needed to grab a few more things so that if Aries wanted to see what I took, I could show him those things and keep the Diadem safely in my backpack, hidden.

As much as I didn't like him, Aries did have a vast collection.

I ran my hands over some old ceramic pots with rare paintings on them and some scrolls from different temples.

Unfortunately, his collection was wasted on him.

He had no idea how valuable half this stuff was and he obviously wasn't holding onto it in order to preserve it or keep it safe. He probably just had these things out of pure greed.

I bet that if I asked him point blank about the diadem, he wouldn't even know he had it!

Well, I didn't plan on doing that.

Smiling to myself, I grabbed a few scrolls and tucked them into my backpack. I wanted to get a few of the more extravagant looking items, too, to throw him off if he did ask what I took.

There was a small ceramic vase with a unique glaze on it that I put in my bag and a few nice necklaces.

"That should be enough to throw him off," I muttered to myself, closing my backpack. "Now... We just need to figure out how to get these things to Mile..."

"You've got that right. Alright, Eliza, you are more than welcome to play in the vault, to your heart's content."

"I appreciate that. But you know... if I find anything I want to bring with me to study in more depth, do you have a problem with that?"

Again, I gave Aries the most innocent look I could muster. So far, he didn't appear suspicious of me and I was being as delicate as possible presenting him with these tidbits.

Aries sighed and shrugged.

"Well, seeing as you are going to be my Queen soon, I won't deny you a few pleasures." Aries waved dismissively at me. "Come on, I'll let you in."

Jared and I followed Aries to the vault. He opened the door. I tried to go in but Jared grabbed my hand. He pulled me back and kissed me on the lips.

I leaned against him, melting into his kiss.

"Geez, the two of you aren't going to be apart that long." Aries scoffed.

Jared smirked at him. "I did say this was our honeymoon."

Aries rolled his eyes. "Just... meet me in my study." He stalked off, shaking his head at us.

"How far are we really going to go with this?" I whispered.

"Once we have the diadem, we won't need to tag along anymore and we can make our escape. I'll keep Aries busy as long as possible. How long do you need?"

I shrugged. "I know what it looks like and I roughly remember where it is in the vault. I'm not leaving the vault until I have it."

"Alright, we'll meet up again later. Be safe."

"You too."

Jared kissed me quickly on the lips. I whined as he left me at the vault, wishing our kiss could have lasted just a little bit longer.

It didn't take me long to find the diadem. It was right where I'd seen it last, surrounded by the same gaudy relics as before. I shook my head.

Aries probably didn't even remember half the stuff he had in here. He'd never know what I took or what was missing.

Even if he did find out, I doubted he'd know why I took the diadem at all. It wasn't like it was known to be some powerful artifact.

I tucked the diadem in my backpack with the Cryptex, making sure to wrap it up protectively. I needed to grab a few more things so that if Aries wanted to see what I took, I could show him those things and keep the Diadem safely in my backpack, hidden.

As much as I didn't like him, Aries did have a vast collection.

I ran my hands over some old ceramic pots with rare paintings on them and some scrolls from different temples.

Unfortunately, his collection was wasted on him.

He had no idea how valuable half this stuff was and he obviously wasn't holding onto it in order to preserve it or keep it safe. He probably just had these things out of pure greed.

I bet that if I asked him point blank about the diadem, he wouldn't even know he had it!

Well, I didn't plan on doing that.

Smiling to myself, I grabbed a few scrolls and tucked them into my backpack. I wanted to get a few of the more extravagant looking items, too, to throw him off if he did ask what I took.

There was a small ceramic vase with a unique glaze on it that I put in my bag and a few nice necklaces.

"That should be enough to throw him off," I muttered to myself, closing my backpack. "Now... We just need to figure out how to get these things to Mila..."

### [Chapter 887](#)

For our supposed honeymoon, Aries also wanted to throw our celebration ball as soon as possible, but it still took him several days to plan it.

On the night of the ball, Aries sent some servants to me with a tailored dress. It was shimmering champagne-colored satin. A floor length, spaghetti strap ballgown with a low back and swooping neckline.

As soon as I was dressed, Jared came to the door to get me. He was dressed in a nice suit and looked just as handsome as at our wedding. I raked my eyes over his muscular physique, hidden behind the smooth lines of the suit.

But not too hidden.

He grinned, his own eyes trailing over me.

I snagged my lower lip between my teeth and felt my cheeks warm.

"Shall we?" Jared held his arm out to me.

"Oh, wait, I need one more thing." I ducked back into the room and grabbed the diadem.

Mila had sent word that she'd come to us on the night of the celebration and I wanted everything prepared.

I looked in the mirror and set the diadem on my head. It tucked right into my curls and looked glamorous on my head, almost like it belonged there.

"Okay, now I'm ready." I looped my arm through Jared's.

He creased his brow. "Are you sure you want to wear that. What if Aries recognized it?"

I shrugged. "After tonight, I don't think it will matter."

"You know that once we make contact with Mila, we'll be enacting my escape plan." He lowered his voice to a whisper and glanced around.

Aries left us a lone a lot. Either he really thought Jared was helping him or he didn't think there was any way we could escape.

It made me a little nervous about Jared's escape plan. What if there was something Aries had done to make it impossible for us to really get away?

Jared and I made our entrance into the ball in our honor. As soon as we came through the doors, the music stopped and everyone stared at us.

I smiled, my lips straining, and waved to everyone.

"This is weird," I muttered, keeping my smile in place.

"Do we know any of these shifters?" Jared asked in a whisper, also speaking through his teeth as he smiled and waved.

"Ahh, welcome, our guests of honor. The newlyweds Jared and Eliza." Aries announced. He clapped.

Everyone in the room clapped.

Then the music started again and I sighed a big sigh of relief.

"May I have this dance, my beautiful wife?" Jared lifted my hand and kissed the back of it.

My stomach exploded in butterflies. I'd never get used to hearing him call me his wife. It just sounded so right!

"Why of course, dear husband." I giggled and followed Jared onto the dance floor.

He held me close in his arms, one hand on the small of my back, the other between my shoulder blades. His fingers were warm and pleasantly rough against my bare back.

I looked into Jared's eyes and felt myself get sucked in. The whole world faded away. Aries, his party, the curse boiling in my blood, none of it existed as I swayed in Jared's arms, lost in his embrace.

My heart felt like it was flying and I let him sweep me across the dancefloor.

When the song ended, another shifter came up to me and Jared. I'd never seen him before in my life, but he smiled brightly and glanced at Jared.

"Do you mind if I dance with the beautiful bride?" he asked.

Jared looked at me carefully. Suddenly, he pulled me against him again.

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his neck. Jared kissed me passionately, deeply, on the lips. I melted into him, holding him close.

The kiss ended too soon as Jared pulled away. He whispered in my ear.

"Stay here and wait for Mila. I'm going to get everything set up. Wait for my signal."

"What will your signal be?" I whispered back.

Jared hooked his finger under my chin. "You'll know it when you see it."

Well, that was vague. I nodded as he turned back to the man that interrupted us.

"One dance," Jared said. He held up his pointer finger for emphasis.

The young male gulped and nodded. "Just one."

He held his hand out to me and I took it. The moment I was twirling through the crowd again, I lost sight of Jared.

I had to trust him with this escape plan, and he was right, it was better if I stayed here and kept the party going.

After my one dance with that male shifter, he passed me off to another. I wasn't sure why they were all so eager to dance with me. For some reason, it felt like some panderer that Aries had in place, like he wanted to test my relationship with Jared or something.

The third male I danced with was a little over-eager.

"You're a great dancer," he purred, his blue eyes gleaming. He smirked and ran his hand up and down my sides.

I pushed at his chest slightly. "Hey, I'm married. I'm dancing with you out of courtesy, but don't push your luck."

He winked at me and slipped his arms around my neck, pulling me a little closer.

"I can't help myself, darling. You're just so beautiful."

I rolled my eyes. "Why don't you try that line on someone who isn't married?"

He grinned and chuckled and spun me away from him.

I caught sight of a cloaked figure at the edge of the dance floor.

Mila! It had to be.

When my dance partner pulled me back, I put a hand up.

"That's enough for me. I need to grab a drink."

"Fine, fine. But when you're ready to dance again, I'll be waiting." He winked and bowed as he backed away.

Shaking my head, I went to the drink table first. I didn't want it to look like I was meeting up with Mila. I wanted to be more casual.

Slowly, I meandered toward her, greeting everyone that I bumped into.

I sipped my sparkling beverage, no alcohol, and kept slowly heading toward Mila.

When I did reach her, I greeted her like I had everyone else.

"Thank you for coming to my party."

Mila lifted her head, revealing her eyes and face from under her hood. I saw the resemblance between her and Ciana, the same blonde hair and blue eyes. There was no doubt in my mind that this was Mila.

"I was surprised to find you here."

"It was necessary. Unfortunately, it was the only way we could get our hands on the diadem."

Mila's eyes traveled to my head. "Is that it?"

"Yes." I nodded.

Mila nodded too. "Good. It looks like we have almost everything we need."

"Almost?" I creased my brow.

"Where is the pendant?"

Automatically, my hand flew to my neck and all I touched was skin.

The necklace was gone!

I gasped and glanced around like I'd find it just lying on the floor at my feet.

I'd put it on my neck when I put the dress on! It had been there when I put the diadem on too, I'd seen it in the mirror.

Where had the necklace gone?

Panic took me over. My heart hammered; blood rushed in my ears.

How could I have lost Jared's mother's necklace!? This wasn't happening, this couldn't be happening.

I shifted my eyes to the dance floor and caught sight of the shifter that had been very handsy with me. He was dancing with someone else and I narrowed my eyes.

Had he been handsy just to steal my necklace!?

I watched him closely as he danced with that other woman. He was just as handsy with her as he was with me. I saw him skillfully slip off her bracelet and necklace and they disappeared into his pocket as he spun her away from him, just like he had done to me!

"You little thief..."

"What is it?" Mila asked.

"That guy stole my necklace," I hissed.

Mila arched an eyebrow. "We will need it."

"I'll get it back, discreetly."

Mila nodded and backed into the shadows.

I finished my sparkling cider and cut across the dance floor, directly toward the thief. Without asking, I cut in between him and the woman he was dancing with... his next victim. She was wearing a lot of fine jewelry too, and I wasn't about to let him rob someone else.

"My, my, you just can't get enough of me, can you?" He wiggled his eyebrows at me. "Unfortunately, there are a lot of fine ladies here tonight that I need to dance with."

This guy seriously thought he was some Casanova!

I grabbed his hand and pulled him onto the dance floor, refusing to let him get away.

"You have until the count of three to return my necklace," I hissed when he tried to pull away again.

His eyes widened for a moment and he grinned slickly. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"One." I glared at him.

He laughed and shook his head, trying to pull away again.

"Two..." I tightened my hands on his arms and his laughter stopped instantly.

Sometimes, the shadow inside of me reared up and made me stronger! I saw pain flicker in his eyes as my fingers tightened even more.

He must have sensed the change that came over me. It wasn't a change I liked, letting the darkness rise up, but if it got the necklace back..."

"Three."

"Okay!" He pulled back and shoved his hand in his pocket. Swiftly, he produced the necklace and handed it over.

I snatched it away and quickly clasped it around my neck. Taking a deep breath, I clutched the pendant and pushed the shadow back down.

"Now, one more thing... I expect you to return everything else you stole to the other women you robbed."

"Yes, yes, of course." He nodded to me.

"And no stealing anything else," I insisted as he moved away from me.

What a creep!

I found Mila against the wall again. Other people moved around her like she was invisible. I wondered if she was using some kind of magic to conceal herself.

"Did you get it?"

"Yes." I touched the pendant around my neck again, just to be sure.

A caught a flicker out of the corner of my eye. Double-taking, I looked back at the window where I'd seen the flicker.

There was a light from outside flashing in the window. It was subtle, but it was just the kind of signal that Jared would give me.

"Mila, it is time to go."

[Chapter 888](#)

\*Jared\*

I met Eliza and Mila in the servants' access hall. It was the corridor that led from the kitchen to the ballroom and where the servants brought fresh platters of food and drinks.

"Mila, this is Jared, my husband," Eliza introduced quickly.

The witch's eyes shone behind her cloak hood. She studied me with a sharp scrutiny. I had a feeling that Ciana had told her all about my family lineage. But if I was being honest, a witch as legendary as Mila would probably be able to look at me and know more about me and my family than I knew!

"Archer is waiting for us on the mansion perimeter. We just need to get to him and he'll cover our retreat," I explained.

I led Mila and Eliza down the corridor. We refrained from talking to stay as quiet as possible and stuck close to one of the walls. If any servant came down the hall, it wouldn't have mattered where we were standing, they'd see us.

Silently, I prayed to the Moon Goddess that we wouldn't run into any.

I chose the servants' corridor because it was much less traveled than the other halls in the mansion, even during a party. Guards and warriors didn't usually patrol servant hallways.

At the end of the hallway, there were two doors. One went into the kitchen and one went outside.

"Come on, you two go ahead. Archer is just at the tree line. I'll make sure we aren't followed."

"Jared..." Eliza grabbed my hand. "I don't want to split up."

She looked at me with bright, pleading eyes and my heart nearly broke.

"I'll be right behind you. I promise." I pulled Eliza to me and kissed her quickly on the lips.

She whimpered lightly as I pulled away.

"Go, stick with Mila. Find Archer. He'll help you."

"You'll be right behind me?" she squeezed my hand.

"Eliza, we should go now. I see a break in the outside patrols." Mila poked her head out the open door.

"Yes!" I nudged Eliza toward the door.

Mila grabbed her arm and pulled her outside. I let them get a bit of a head start and poked my head outside. The guards were still out of sight.

I took a deep breath and followed Mila and Eliza. Every few steps, I glanced around to make sure no one was following or watching us.

It was a crisp, clean getaway.

"Jared, over here," Archer called through the darkness.

I veered to the left and met up with Archer, Eliza, and Mila.



"I think we got off free and clear. We should keep moving." I nodded toward the forest path Archer had staked out.

"Come on, the others are just on the other side of the woods."

Archer led the way down the path.

Eliza moved closer to me. I put my arm around her shoulders and held her close.

"See, we weren't separated for that long."

She nodded, her eyes darkening.

"What's wrong?" I arched an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's nothing..."

"What is it? What are you thinking?"

Eliza glanced over her shoulder at the shrinking mansion behind us.

"That just seemed... too easy..."

"That wasn't easy," I chuckled, shaking my head. "I had to study the perimeter guards' movements and how often servants went down the access corridor. There was a lot of surveillance involved and careful timing.

"Okay... I guess that sounds a little more complicated than what I imagined."

I quickly kissed her cheek. "I told you that I'd handle everything. I didn't want you to have to worry. But we did it. We got away with the diadem and met up with Mila."

"You're right." Eliza smiled and nodded. "I should be looking at the positives, here."

My ears perked up when I heard familiar voices up ahead. We found the rest of my men!

"Jared, good to see you again."

"Welcome back."

I shook their hands as they greeted me.

"We're not quite out of the woods yet..." I glanced at the trees and smirked. "Figuratively speaking."

The men chuckled at my bad joke. I could appreciate their loyalty.

"We need to get far away from here but I don't want to go back to the village yet. I want to lead Aries away from there so he doesn't go back and try to hurt anyone there."

"HALT!"

I froze as an unfamiliar voice echoed through the trees.

"Who goes there!?"

"Who is that?" Eliza muttered.

A man stepped into the small clearing we were gathered in. As soon as I saw him, my heart sank.

He was wearing armor of the Royal Guard and had the insignia of an elite, royal soldier on his breastplate.

Behind him, I heard the shuffling of several other royal guards gathering together, closing in around us.

"And what do we have here?" the leader of the guards asked.

"I don't know, Smithy. But to me, it looks like we have a bunch of treasonous criminals conspiring against the crown."

"What!?" Eliza gasped.

"By order of the Alpha King, with my authority in the royal guard, you're all being arrested for treason."

"No!"

"Eliza..." I warned. I glanced at Archer and reached out to him with the mindlink.

'Take Eliza and Mila. Get them back to the village before they are arrested, too.'

Archer nodded. I watched him sneak up behind Mila and Eliza.

While the guards were focused on my men, grumbling in confusion and disagreement, Archer grabbed them, putting his hands over their mouths.

Eliza's scream muffled under his hand and her eyes sought mine.

"It's okay," I mouthed to her. "I love you."

She nodded and relaxed as Archer dragged her and Mila into the shadows. At least, they were safe.

I stepped up to talk to the royal guard.

"What proof do you have against us? We have committed no crime and are planning no treason."

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound echoed through the trees and sent a chill through my bones.

Aries appeared from behind the tree, a cruel smirk on his lips.

"That's Jared, the leader of this merry group. Don't believe a word he says. He thinks he has a right to the throne because of some bastardized blood claim."

"Aries!" I snarled.

"Take them into custody!" the soldier named Smithy shouted to his men, pointing at us.

The royal guards swooped in with handcuffs and started to detain my men.

"Don't fight!" I warned. "This is a misunderstanding; we'll have it cleared up in no time."

I didn't want this to be worse if my men fought back. It could lead to harsher sentences and give us less leverage to talk our way out. Whatever was going on... No, I knew what was going on. Aries had planned this whole thing to betray me and get me arrested.

Smithy came up behind me.

"Trying to take the moral high road? You might think that'll help you but trust me, it won't!" He kicked me in the back of the knee.

"Ugh!"

My legs gave out and I slammed onto the ground, my knees cracking when they struck the dirt. Smithy chuckled and bound my wrists in cuffs behind my back. I stayed on my knees. Even with my hands bound, if I stood up, the guards might see that as antagonistic.

I had to be as passive and harmless as possible, even though I loathed the idea.

The shadow inside of me stirred suddenly, growing stronger and more vibrant. I took a deep, centering breath.

If I wasn't careful, it would take control again, like back in the caves. I had to stay in control...

Aries walked toward me and leaned down until we were at eye level.

"You might be calm on the outside, but I can tell you're furious on the inside. It's okay, let it out. It'll feel so good." He chuckled tauntingly.

I shook my head and clenched my teeth. My jaw tensed and I kept my eyes angled down. If I met Aries' eyes, I might just snap and tear his face off.

"Too bad..." Aries sighed heavily. "There is nothing more inspiring than fighting for a martyr."

I lifted my head and glared at him, tightening my bound hands into fists. I clenched so hard, my fingernails bit into my palm. Warm beads of blood oozed out, coating my fingertips.

Aries never wanted me to fight, against these guards or against the king. He wanted me to die and become his martyr!

"Thank you, Aries, for the warning. We've got to get these miscreants to the blockade. Once we get them there, we'll get the truth out of them. For now, the crown and the Alpha King remain safe. He will reward you richly."

Smithy nodded to Aries and clapped him on the shoulder.

Aries smirked. "Anything, for the sanctity of the crown."

Slowly, he slid his eyes sideways at me, his smirk widening in an evil, Cheshire grin.

What a slippery weasel! I tensed against the cuffs. They were normal cuffs. If I pushed hard enough, I could snap the metal and throttle Aries!

No...

Sighing, I bowed my head again.

Fighting would only cause more problems. The only way to get through this was to play the game and prove our innocence. If we fought and escaped, we'd forever be branded fugitives, outlaws, and enemies of the crown. We'd never get the chance to clear our name.

The village would be exiled, become rogue territory, and we'd never be able to go home.

Smithy rounded up the guards and they put me and my men in a single file line, tying us all together. Smithy put me at the front.

"I want to keep an eye on you..."

"Why aren't we going to the palace?" I asked, thinking about what he said to Aries.

If we went to the palace, I might be able to talk to Eliza's cousin, or even Xander, tell them who I was. It was a long shot, but it could be enough to get them to listen to me.

The royal guards pushed us along and we started moving. The only good thing about any of this was that we were finally leaving Aries' territory behind.

"I have orders to bring you to the blockade instead. You'll wait there for your trial. You don't need to know the reasons beyond that," Smithy spat. "Now, move faster!"

He nudged me in the back.

I nearly tripped over my feet, growling.

Smithy held up his hand with a night stick, ready to strike. "Watch your tone, mutt! You might want to save your strength. Things in the blockade move slowly. You'll need your strength to survive months waiting for your trial."

He barked a laugh and kept walking.

Months? It would be months until my trial?

But I didn't have months!

The curse... I would die... Eliza would die... our baby...

My shadow exploded inside of me, raging and rearing up like never before. An all consuming darkness ran through my veins like black oil, my vision went black.

## [Chapter 889](#)

\*Eliza\*

I didn't struggle against Archer, as much as I wanted to.

Why were we running away and leaving Jared to get arrested!? He hadn't done anything wrong!

The moment we were deep enough in the forest, Archer released Mila and me.

"What was that for!?" I pushed his shoulder.

"Just following orders," Archer tapped the side of his head.

"What happened back there... I don't understand..." I shook my head. We'd been so close to freedom! How had it gotten so messed up?

My stomach dropped and covered my eyes.

"No. No..." I whispered. I'd thought our escape was too easy! Had Aries allowed us to escape simply to turn us over to the royal guard?

It was all starting to make sense! Had Aries ever wanted our help at all or had this been his plan all along? Had he known we'd tried to escape and this was the setup? How was he always two steps ahead of us?

Jared... I hope you're okay.

We'd fallen for Aries' tricks. I'd been so sure that we could outsmart him and that once we had the diadem, nothing could stop us.

I shook my head and looked at my feet. Jared and I had seriously underestimated Aries. That was not a mistake I was going to make again!

"It seems that Aries made a preemptive move against Jared," Mila offered.

"Look, we can't stop here," Archer interrupted. "Jared told me to get the two of you back to the village. I'm not going to deny his last order to me."

"Okay..." I nodded. It wasn't what I wanted to do but Archer was right. We had to respect Jared's wishes and get back to the village. There, we could regroup and figure out what to do next.

Archer headed into the woods and I followed.

"Wait," Mila argued, her commanding voice pulling us both to stop.

"What is it?" I glanced at her nervously.

"We must go after Jared now and save him," she insisted.

"Just the three of us?" Archer shook his head. "No way. We need more backup. We need a plan."

Mila crossed her arms and gave us both a hard look. "If they reach that blockade, there will be no saving him."

"What do you mean?" My heart thumped and my palms got cold and clammy.

My mind raced in a million directions. What was the deal with the blockade? Was it some kind of prison? Was it a torture chamber?

I didn't want to think that my cousin and her husband tortured prisoners but... I doubted they were aware of everything their guards did to get answers and meet out justice.

"The blockade is practically impenetrable. Once they get there Jared's fate will be sealed. He will die!" Mila's words sent a shiver down my spine.

Jared couldn't die. Not when we were so close to having everything we worked for. It wasn't fair!  
Breaking the curse was finally in our grasp. This couldn't be the end!

Mila was right. We had to rescue Jared and we couldn't let him get stuck in the slow-moving wheels of the justice system. It would be the death of him. The death of all three of us!

Absently, I touched my stomach, thinking of the little life growing inside of me. Jared had to live or our child wouldn't. I knew he'd never accept that and neither would I. He would do whatever he had to in order to stay alive, for the two of us.

I chewed the inside of my cheek and looked at Archer. "We should listen to her."

Archer shifted his weight from one foot to the other. I could see the conflict in his eyes. He grimaced and rubbed his hands together.

"Eliza... Jared wants you safe at the village..."

"I know, but me being safe is meaningless if he's dead!" I stamped my foot.

Archer rubbed his temples.

"Besides, with the curse, we're running out of time. If he gets stuck in there, even if they don't execute him right away, well... if we can't get him out..." I looped my arms around myself. I couldn't bring myself to say the words. \*Elizo\*

I didn't struggle against Archer, as much as I wanted to.

Why were we running away and leaving Jared to get arrested!? He hadn't done anything wrong!

The moment we were deep enough in the forest, Archer released Milo and me.

"What was that for!?" I pushed his shoulder.

"Just following orders," Archer topped the side of his head.

"What happened back there... I don't understand..." I shook my head. We'd been so close to freedom! How had it gotten so messed up?

My stomach dropped and covered my eyes.

"No. No..." I whispered. I'd thought our escape was too easy! Had Aries allowed us to escape simply to turn us over to the royal guard?

It was all starting to make sense! Had Aries ever wanted our help at all or had this been his plan all along? Had he known we'd tried to escape and this was the setup? How was he always two steps ahead of us?

Jared... I hope you're okay.

We'd fallen for Aries' tricks. I'd been so sure that we could outsmart him and that once we had the diadem, nothing could stop us.

I shook my head and looked at my feet. Jored and I had seriously underestimated Aries. That was not a mistake I was going to make again!

"It seems that Aries made a preemptive move against Jored," Milo offered.

"Look, we can't stop here," Archer interrupted. "Jored told me to get the two of you back to the village. I'm not going to deny his last order to me."

"Okay..." I nodded. It wasn't what I wanted to do but Archer was right. We had to respect Jored's wishes and get back to the village. There, we could regroup and figure out what to do next.

Archer headed into the woods and I followed.

"Wait," Milo argued, her commanding voice pulling us both to stop.

"What is it?" I glanced at her nervously.

"We must go after Jored now and save him," she insisted.

"Just the three of us?" Archer shook his head. "No way. We need more backup. We need a plan."

Milo crossed her arms and gave us both a hard look. "If they reach that blockade, there will be no saving him."

"What do you mean?" My heart thumped and my palms got cold and clammy.

My mind raced in a million directions. What was the deal with the blockade? Was it some kind of prison? Was it a torture chamber?

I didn't want to think that my cousin and her husband tortured prisoners but... I doubted they were aware of everything their guards did to get answers and meet out justice.

"The blockade is practically impenetrable. Once they get there Jored's fate will be sealed. He will die!" Milo's words sent a shiver down my spine.

Jored couldn't die. Not when we were so close to having everything we worked for. It wasn't fair! Breaking the curse was finally in our grasp. This couldn't be the end!

Milo was right. We had to rescue Jored and we couldn't let him get stuck in the slow-moving wheels of the justice system. It would be the death of him. The death of all three of us!

Absently, I touched my stomach, thinking of the little life growing inside of me. Jored had to live or our child wouldn't. I knew he'd never accept that and neither would I. He would do whatever he had to in order to stay alive, for the two of us.

I chewed the inside of my cheek and looked at Archer. "We should listen to her."

Archer shifted his weight from one foot to the other. I could see the conflict in his eyes. He grimaced and rubbed his hands together.

"Elizo... Jored wants you safe at the village..."

"I know, but me being safe is meaningless if he's dead!" I stomped my foot.

Archer rubbed his temples.

"Besides, with the curse, we're running out of time. If he gets stuck in there, even if they don't execute him right owoy, well... if we can't get him out..." I looped my arms around myself. I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

The truth was, if Jared got trapped at the Blockade and we couldn't break the curse, it wouldn't matter if he was executed. The curse would kill him. It would kill me and our baby, too... for the safety of our child, I couldn't risk it!

"I know, Eliza, you're right," Archer sighed heavily. "We'll get Jared."

"Thank you." I threw my arms around Archer's neck and squeezed.

"Ack!" Archer stumbled back and caught himself.

My cheeks burned as I pulled away. "Sorry. I just..." I didn't know what had come over me. Was it more pregnancy hormones?

"Eliza, I'm not going with you. I need to prepare to break the curse. There is a lot I must do beforehand," Mila said, touching my arm.

"I understand. Is there anything you need from me?"

Mila nodded. "The pendant and the diadem. I can use them to prepare for breaking the curse."

I tugged the diadem from my hair and handed it over. Mila quickly tucked it somewhere inside her cloak.

Gently, I massaged my scalp where the diadem had been tucked into my hair. It had pinched the roots slightly.

"The pendant, too." Mila nodded to my neck.

Swallowing hard, I touched the pendant. Parting with it felt wrong. Now that Jared had been arrested, I felt almost like I was betraying him by giving away his mother's necklace.

Sighing, I unclasped the chain and handed it over to Mila. I hesitated again as she held her hand out.

"I will take good care of it, Eliza," she assured.

"Thank you," I croaked.

I dropped the necklace in her hand. Mila tucked it away in her cloak.

The moment it was out of sight, a strange anxiety gripped my chest. I hated not seeing it, not having it around my neck.

Even though I was fully clothed, I felt naked and exposed. Glancing down, I ran my hands over my dress, just making sure that it still covered me. It was silly, I knew that.

"If we're going to track the royal guards, we've got to leave now. We can't let them get too far ahead," Archer warned.

"Just one more thing..." Mila trailed off.



"Yes?" I turned my full attention to her.

"I can get everything prepared, but Eliza, you and Jared must come to me before the new moon."

"Okay, I'll try."

"No, don't try! If we don't do this before the new moon... it's all over."

Mila's warning felt like a bucket of ice being poured down my spine. I shuddered.

"O-okay."

"Come on, Eliza, we really have to get moving." Archer motioned for me to follow.

"Mila, where should we meet you?"

"When you rescue Jared, find me in your dreams. I will be ready for you and will lead you to me."

"Alright. Thank you, Mila." I reached out and took her hand. Part of me wanted to hug her but I'd only just met her. I squeezed her hand and smiled.

"Go now. Get Jared so that we can finally break this curse!"

Mila pulled away from me. She hurried into the shadows and vanished almost immediately.

"Are you ready to go now?" Archer urged.

"Yes, let's go."

"Wait, on second thought, you should change first. Running around in a ballgown isn't the most... inconspicuous thing to do," Archer said, teasing me a little.

"I didn't bring a spare change of clothes... I wasn't expecting Jared to get arrested."

"Don't worry, Jared took care of everything."

Archer ducked behind a tree. When he came back, he held out my backpack. The same one I'd hidden some things from Aries's vault and the Cryptex.

"There are some spare clothes in there and a pair of shoes. Hurry and change."

Archer turned his back on me. I went behind the nearest tree and changed quickly. It was almost a shame to leave behind such a nice dress and nice matching shoes. Then I thought about how Aries had given them to me and because of him, Jared was in the custody of royal guards.

Wrinkling my nose, I tossed the satin dress on the ground and stomped on it.

I slipped the sneakers on, grateful that Jared had thought ahead. Archer was right, I definitely needed the right shoes to go running off through the woods.

"Okay, I'm ready." I put my backpack on and came out from behind the tree.

"Good, we can still catch them! With all their prisoners they're probably moving kind of slow."

I crouched low, mimicking Archer. We stayed in the underbrush, moving swiftly and silently.

I wanted to ask Archer what we'd do when we caught up to the guards, how we'd get Jared free. I wanted to ask him if he had a plan or if we were just winging it.

But I knew that talking was a bad idea right now. We needed to be quiet and stealthy.

I reached for the pendant around my neck, thinking of how it was the one thing that linked me to Jared while he was arrested.

My hand grasped at air.

Oh, right... I'd given Mila the necklace!

Suddenly, I smiled and touched my stomach. The necklace wasn't the only thing that linked me to Jared. We still had our child.

Archer and I made it back to the clearing where the royal guards had surrounded us.

"I'm going to look around for clues. Do you know anything about tracking?" Archer asked.

"I'm an anthropologist, I can find clues," I assured, nodding.

Archer and I spread out and started looking for clues and signs of which direction the royal guards had taken Jared and his men.

Most of the grass and small plants had been trampled down, making it difficult to find a clear path.

The bright moon overhead cast silver light on the clearing. My heart lifted slightly and I felt like the Moon Goddess was guiding me.

Something on the ground glinted.

My heart leapt into my chest. I pushed some of the leaves and grass away.

"Archer, over here."

It was Jared's wedding band. He must have left it as a clue, knowing we'd come after him. I hated seeing it on the ground, not on his finger.

Archer came over and studied the surrounding area. "This way, they went this way." He pointed.

I grabbed the ring and tucked it into my pocket. Soon, very soon, it would be back in its rightful place, on Jared's finger.

Archer and I crouched down again and headed in the direction the royal guards had gone.

Once out of the clearing, it was a lot easier to follow their trail. They probably weren't trying to cover their tracks because it would be insane for anyone to attack any entire entourage of royal guards, even if they were escorting prisoners.

Archer and I alone weren't a threat.

Again, I wanted to ask what Archer's plan was.

I opened my mouth to speak but something warm and heavy clamped over it.

A hand!

I tried to scream but my whole body lurched. Someone had their arms around me and was dragging me backward, into the shadows, away from Archer.

I kicked out with my legs, trying to make a sound, but we were already too far away. Archer didn't know I was gone!

"Settle down. You'll only hurt yourself." A crackling voice hissed in my ear.

I felt the blood drain from my face. She turned me to face her and a violent shiver ran over me.

This dangerous and volatile witch didn't need to introduce herself.

It was Hestia...

### [Chapter 890](#)

My head was killing me as I woke up. I didn't know where I was. I furrowed my brows, eyes shut tight as I shivered against the cold in the air.

I squinted my eyes open and was met with nothing but darkness. I blinked my eyes again and again, trying to adjust my eyes but the darkness remained.

Had I imagined getting grabbed? Had I imagined Hestia?

"Hello?" My voice was a pitiful croak that echoed all around me.

But then the darkness began to give away and my eyes started to adjust to the dim light. I began to recognize that I was in a cave, lying on the ground. I tried to sit up.

"Ugh...." My moans and movements echoed eerily.

I fell back down, my cheek smooshing against the damp, dirty floor. My arms were tied behind my back and I couldn't sit up. I strained against the ropes, testing the strength of the knot.

Well, I hadn't imagined getting kidnapped.

"Ahh, you're awake," Hestia's voice echoed through the darkness.

"Hestia! What do you want?"

"Heh, heh. You figured out who I am? Perhaps I underestimated you." She moved from the shadows, coming into the mouth of the cave so I could see her silhouette in the moonlight outside as she laughed a dry cackle.

Goosebumps pinched my flesh as an unsettling feeling hit me in the pit of my stomach.

"Please, let me go. You can't keep me here," I said, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. "Jared will come looking for me."

Hestia just laughed. "No, I don't think so. Jared has no idea where you are. No one knows you're here, not yet. And even if they did, what exactly do you believe they could do to me?"

She was right. She had spirited me away from Archer and flew through the forest to wherever this cave was in the dark of night. He couldn't possibly have seen her and certainly wouldn't know where to find me.

If I was going to get free and back to Jared, I had to think of a way out of this on my own. Hestia wasn't playing games here. I couldn't see her face clearly, but her voice was loose and unhinged. I had no doubt that she'd do something crazy.

"If you don't let me go, Jared will find you and he will destroy you."

Hestia threw her head back, laughing louder.

"I think you are mistaken. You see, as long as I control you, I control Jared. So, I do hope that he comes looking for you because when he sees that I have you under my control, he'll do whatever I tell him to."

My heart froze. She had been after me and she had kidnapped me because she wanted something from Jared?

I could feel a shiver run down my spine at the thought of what she could be after. But I had to keep her talking, keep her distracted while I tried to work my way out of the ropes.

"And what is that?" I asked, my voice shaking from the cold and the fear I could no longer hide.

"That, my dear, is none of your concern. All you need to know is that I will do whatever it takes to get it, even if that means hurting you or...."

I swallowed into a dry throat knowing that her unspoken threat was toward our baby.

Hestia came over to me. Her bony frame loomed over me in the darkness as she leaned down. I could see her leering face in the darkness.

My heart sank even further. There was no way I was getting out of this, and I was all but certain Jared wouldn't be able to come for me. He was being taken to the blockade, on his way to die.

Hestia would hold me prisoner until the curse killed us both... and she'd be waiting for someone that would never come.

"Why do you need Jared?" I asked again, and I pushed my shoulder hard into the ground, giving myself enough leverage to get into a sitting position. Gasping and panting for breath, I leaned against the cave wall behind me, staring straight into Hestia's soulless eyes. My head was killing me as I woke up. I didn't know where I was. I furrowed my brows, eyes shut tight as I shivered against the cold in the air.

I squinted my eyes open and was met with nothing but darkness. I blinked my eyes again and again, trying to adjust my eyes but the darkness remained.

Hod I imagined getting grobbed? Hod I imagined Hestio?

"Hello?" My voice was a pitiful croak that echoed all around me.

But then the darkness began to give away and my eyes started to adjust to the dim light. I began to recognize that I was in a cove, lying on the ground. I tried to sit up.

"Ugh...." My moans and movements echoed eerily.

I fell back down, my cheek smushing against the damp, dirty floor. My arms were tied behind my back and I couldn't sit up. I strained against the ropes, testing the strength of the knot.

Well, I hadn't imagined getting kidnapped.

"Ahh, you're awake," Hestio's voice echoed through the darkness.

"Hestio! What do you want?"

"Heh, heh. You figured out who I am? Perhaps I underestimated you." She moved from the shadows, coming into the mouth of the cove so I could see her silhouette in the moonlight outside as she laughed a dry cackle.

Goosebumps pinched my flesh as an unsettling feeling hit me in the pit of my stomach.

"Please, let me go. You can't keep me here," I said, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. "Jared will come looking for me."

Hestio just laughed. "No, I don't think so. Jared has no idea where you are. No one knows you're here, not yet. And even if they did, what exactly do you believe they could do to me?"

She was right. She had spirited me away from Archer and flew through the forest to wherever this cove was in the dark of night. He couldn't possibly have seen her and certainly wouldn't know where to find me.

If I was going to get free and back to Jared, I had to think of a way out of this on my own. Hestio wasn't playing games here. I couldn't see her face clearly, but her voice was loose and unhinged. I had no doubt that she'd do something crazy.

"If you don't let me go, Jared will find you and he will destroy you."

Hestio threw her head back, laughing louder.

"I think you are mistaken. You see, as long as I control you, I control Jared. So, I do hope that he comes looking for you because when he sees that I have you under my control, he'll do whatever I tell him to."

My heart froze. She had been after me and she had kidnapped me because she wanted something from Jared?

I could feel a shiver run down my spine at the thought of what she could be after. But I had to keep her talking, keep her distracted while I tried to work my way out of the ropes.

"And what is that?" I asked, my voice shaking from the cold and the fear I could no longer hide.

"That, my dear, is none of your concern. All you need to know is that I will do whatever it takes to get it, even if that means hurting you or...."

I swallowed into a dry throat knowing that her unspoken threat was toward our baby.

Hestio came over to me. Her bony frame loomed over me in the darkness as she leaned down. I could see her leering face in the darkness.

My heart sank even further. There was no way I was getting out of this, and I was all but certain Jared wouldn't be able to come for me. He was being taken to the blockade, on his way to die.

Hestia would hold me prisoner until the curse killed us both... and she'd be waiting for someone that would never come.

"Why do you need Jared?" I asked again, and I pushed my shoulder hard into the ground, giving myself enough leverage to get into a sitting position. Gasping and panting for breath, I leaned against the cave wall behind me, staring straight into Hestia's soulless eyes.

From this angle, they looked like bottomless, black holes in a bone-thin, expressionless face.

I shuttered in revulsion and looked away. She was too unsettling in the darkness of the cave. The way the shadows fell on her, she looked like some kind of ghoul.

Hestia smirked smugly. "Well, it isn't really Jared I'm after. I just know that he can help me get what I want, him and that wonderful curse of his.

The curse? She was after the curse....

But why?

Before I could ask another question, she gripped my arm harshly and brought me to my feet.

"It's time to go," she said.

"Where?"

She cackled again, her sour breath wafting over me and making my stomach lurch.

"To the Dark Forest, of course!"

\*\*\*

\*Jared\*

In the all-consuming darkness that surrounded me, I felt my shadow and my wolf subside.

I shuddered against the dread of waking up to discover what my body had been compelled to do outside of my control. I had no idea what had happened after I'd blacked out. I wasn't even sure where I was now.

I allowed my mind to remain detached as my body waded through the darkness. I was numb and I was alone.

Suddenly, I saw a spark of light and a flowing movement in the distance.

A glowing figure appeared from the darkness, shimmering as it got closer and closer, bringing a soft warmth and sense of peace. When she was within arm's reach, I saw her bright, smiling face and innocent features.

She was dressed in a simple, white dress.

"Are you alright?" She tilted her head to the side as she studied me, her eyes large and searching. Was this an angel? Was I dead?

"I'm... where am I?" I looked around the dark void.

"Where you are is where you stand."

I blinked several times, the warmth and peace inside of me giving away to confusion and frustration.

"What the hell does that mean?"

She giggled and covered her mouth. My frustration gave way to impatience. If I wasn't dead yet, then I certainly didn't have time for this. I had to get back to Eliza.

"Who are you?" I asked, creasing my brow.

If I thought this would intimidate the soft-spoken creature, I was wrong. Her smile brightened, and the warmth she emitted increased around me.

"I am a maiden of the Moon Goddess. And the wind, it told us you were coming."

"Us?"

"Come with me and I will show you." She held a hand out to me.

"I..."

Pausing, I looked around the emptiness again. I wasn't sure if I expected to see anything different or new, but nothing had changed. Other than the glow from this maiden, I was still surrounded by darkness.

There was no sky, no land, no ground beneath my feet. There was nothing....

"I need to find my mate," I said, thinking about Eliza. The last time she'd seen me, I was being carted away by palace soldiers. Hopefully, Archer got her back to the village.

But I had to get her before it was too late. I knew she must be worried sick.

"Oh, you will be with her again. But not yet. Please, please come with me. I must show you...."

"Show me what?"

She grabbed my hands and tugged. I stood firmly in place.

"Come on, I'll show you. You can trust me, I promise."

She hopped up and down like a little child, giggling and pouting, begging me to go. Her curly hair bounced around her face.

She reminded me a little of Eliza, only a younger, tween-aged Eliza of twelve or thirteen, happy and loving life.

"I can bring you to the other maidens. Hestia... she killed our guides and we are here alone. But you don't have to be."

"Right..."

She kept tugging on my arm. I took a step forward and she tugged even harder.

"Can you get me back to my mate?"

"Yes. But first, come with me!"

Relenting, I followed her and we moved through the darkness. I had no idea how she could tell where we were going. Everything looked and felt the same. There was no wind, no smells in the air.

Maybe I really was dead.

I wracked my brain trying to remember exactly what had happened to me.

Aries had betrayed me....

The Royal Guard had showed up to arrest me.

Then... nothing. The next thing I knew, I was here and the maiden was coming toward me.

Out of the darkness I saw more figures appearing. They were young maidens, too, dressed in plain white dresses, dancing around and giggling.

They looked so innocent and sweet. All I could think was that they were acolytes to the Moon Goddess.

But why would acolytes of the Moon Goddess be in such a dark, desolate place? Why would they only come to me in this darkness after the curse shadow had taken me over?

This dark place wasn't where the Moon Goddess resided.

When they saw me, the other maidens ran over to me. They started to clean my dirty skin and they removed my ripped suit, putting fresh clothes on me.

"And after this, you'll take me to Eliza?" I asked.

"We can't take you to her. But we will tell you how to save her."

"Yes, please, tell me."

I stood with my arms out to the sides as they dressed me and brushed off my new clothes.

"First, I must ask, are you willing to do anything to save her?"

"Yes, of course!" I answered quickly.

The maiden who first found me nodded. "Good. Then you will do the most difficult task, for the sake of your mate."

"Just tell me what I need to do."

"First, before the curse claims the both of you, you must reject Eliza as your mate. It will hurt her far less to reject her than for her to suffer through what she would if you didn't."



"What!?" My eyes bulged out of my head. I pushed the nearest maidens away. "I... I can't reject my mate."

"It is hard to accept, yes, but it is necessary. And then, you must take your own life, pouring your blood on the Cryptex."

I gasped and shook my head. "Are you kidding? How will that solve anything?"

"It will break the curse and it will save Eliza and the life within her."

My heart hammered in my chest. That couldn't be the only way to break the curse and save Eliza and the baby. But if it was, why was I even hesitating? I had always accepted my fate. I knew the curse would claim me. I never meant for it to claim Eliza, and certainly not our child.

"Just remember, the order is important. Reject her, get your blood on the Cryptex, take your life before the curse claims you. Otherwise, it won't break the curse."

I glared at the maidens. They'd gone back to dancing and floating around. What kind of women were these? How could they dance around and laugh while I was being told I had to reject my mate and kill myself?

Oh, well, duh... the realization hit me like a brick wall.

Was I dreaming?