

## Kings Breeder 891

### [Chapter 891](#)

"This is a dream," I said out loud, feeling slightly relieved.

The maiden I first met shrugged. "That doesn't mean it isn't real."

Her sing-song voice echoed in my ears as I jerked awake and jumped to my feet. Whipping this way and that, I looked for the maidens.

They were gone.

The air smelled damp and musty, and a soft breeze howled through the mouth of the cave I was in.

It was still dark, but I wasn't lost in the darkness anymore. I was awake and I was in the real world again.

Sighing, I leaned against the nearest wall and bowed my head in my hands.

'That was a horrible dream.'

And yet, the maiden's final words rang in my head. 'That doesn't mean it isn't real.'

Was what she told me true? Did she really give me the information to break the curse and spare Eliza and the baby?

"Alpha Jared!" I heard my name echo into the cave.

I recognized the voice of one of my men who was arrested with me.

I ran out of the cave and froze. The Royal Guards were scattered across the ground, dead.

Had I done that....

"Alpha!" one of my men called me. "He's here!"

They all looked frightened and relieved. I could only imagine what they had witnessed here. And still they stayed to find me. I was grateful, but there was no time for explanations.

"We needed to catch up with Eliza," I said. "Archer was supposed to take her back to the village, and that is where we need to go!"

Without gathering supplies, we all shifted and took off toward the village. There was still time.

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It took several days for us to return to the village. I showed up weak, exhausted, and filthy.

"Jared, where have you been?" Miriam asked, greeting me at the door of my home.

"Eliza, where is she?"

"Come inside. Let me get you cleaned up, some fresh clothes, and a hot meal." She held a hand out to me.

I grabbed her wrist just before she touched me. "Where is Eliza?"

"Jared!"

I whipped around to see Gemma, her face twisted in anxiety and pain.

Ernest hurried to her side and placed an arm around her as she demanded, "Where is Eliza? What happened to our daughter?"

My heart thundered and sank.

"What do you mean? I told Archer to..."

Archer stepped up behind Miriam, looking pained and distraught.

"Where is my mate!" I demanded.

"Jared, we were on our way to get you and she just... she vanished," Archer tried to explain, but the words didn't make sense. "Jared, she's gone."

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\*Eliza\*

I don't know how long Hestia had kept me in her hovel, locked in a cage somewhere deep in the Dark Forest. She fed me at intervals and made sure I stayed warm and hydrated.

Eventually, she gave me some idea about what she wanted from Jared.

"I need to end the bridge between the Light Realm and the Dark Realm."

"Why?" I asked.

"To put an end to the Light Realm once and for all and the influence of the White Queens."

"You can't destroy an entire realm or the White Queens. They are descended from and blessed by the Moon Goddess."

Hestia shrugged casually. "And yet... I am a true servant of the Dark King Lycaon."

"You can't destroy the Light Realm! It will throw both realms out of balance. Even the Dark Realm will suffer."

I shook my head, attempting to appeal to some shred of decency left in her. Hestia grinned, her teeth glinting in the moonlight. She leaned closer, looking right into my eyes.

The harsh, skeletal appearance of her face, teeth, and empty eyes paralyzed me. Ice trickled down my spine.

"The Light Realm will fall. All the White Queens will be destroyed, starting with the one on the throne."

"No!"

"Oh, yes. Lycaon is the master of this realm, and only one of his line can do what needs to be done."

"Jared won't help you!"

"All I need to do is promise Jared that I will end the curse that plagues you both. I know he will do anything to protect you, even if that means destroying the connection between the two realms."

"What? You can't make Jared do anything like that. He won't!" I shook my head again, but I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince Hestia or myself.

"Of course, he will. It's drastic, but in the end, it will be what saves you and breaks the curse. That is what Jared wants most."

"No."

My voice was barely a whisper. Hestia wasn't wrong. I knew that Jared would do anything to protect me and our baby.

"My, my, look at the time." Hestia looked at her wrist. She wasn't even wearing a watch.

"Jared isn't coming here," I assured her. "He was arrested by the Royal Guards."

"Of course, I already knew that he was arrested. However, that beautiful curse set him free, and now he is back in his village completely distraught over his missing Luna."

How did she know that? Tears stung my eyes at the thought of how worried Jared had to be for me.

"Soon enough he will hear my demands, loud and clear. If he wants you to live, he will do exactly what I say. As for you... well, your usefulness has run its course." Smirking, she unlocked my cage.

I hesitated as my heart galloped in my chest like racing horses. I stepped back as she motioned toward the door.

"You're free to go."

"I'm free?" Was this a trick?

"Yes. Hurry... if you want the chance to... say goodbye, just in case, I suggest that you return to him quickly."

Hestia's voice was a bodiless enigma as she faded from the cave.

I took a deep breath. I didn't trust Hestia, not for a second. I grabbed my backpack, which was lying on the cave floor beside me, and I ran from the cave.

She'd already proven that she could sneak up on me and capture me, so I doubted she was going to chase after me if this was some kind of trick.

But I wasn't going to make it easy for her.

If Jared really was back at the village, I was going straight to him. Hestia wouldn't have a reason to lie about Jared's whereabouts, not if her plan was to use me to control him.

At least, I could believe that.

She'd had me for several days, so I didn't know if I'd reach the village by our birthday, even if I ran all the way there and survived on my own in the Dark Forest. I needed to run.

But I also needed to be careful of the baby. I couldn't strain my body too much.

I'd have to balance speed with self-care and make sure I got to Jared as quickly as possible.

Getting through the Dark Forest was a challenge, but I pushed through the thorny vines and thick underbrush, staying as quiet as possible to avoid any danger that lurked in the shadows.

I couldn't afford to get caught or attacked by anything else the Dark Realm had to throw at me. The thick foliage blocked most of the light, and the ground was treacherous, filled with roots and rocks. I stumbled several times, catching myself before falling. I was panting and sweating; my stomach soon began to churn with hunger and exhaustion.

I had no idea if I was going in the right direction, but I trusted my instincts and followed the path that felt right. It was a gut feeling, a tug in my chest that led me toward safety, or so I hoped.

Hours passed, and the forest grew darker. I could hear strange noises in the distance, animal calls that made my hair stand on end. I wondered if Hestia was watching me, if she had unleashed her minions to track me down.

But I had to keep moving, had to escape the Dark Forest, and had to get to Jared.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I saw a light in the distance. It was faint, but it was there, flickering like a beacon of hope. I stumbled from the treeline and saw lights from a small town in the distance.

When I stopped at the town to find out how the day and how far I was from Jared. It was two days before our birthday and would be at least another days' journey. I got a room at an inn and some warm food.

While lying awake in bed and worried about everything, I stared at the ceiling and thought about the things Hestia had said.

She'd told me that if Jared agreed to her terms, we would both live. Had she found a way to communicate with him while she was still with me in the cave?

But then... she'd also said it was my last chance to say goodbye.

That was too ominous. If we were both going to live, then why would we need to say goodbye to each other?

I sucked in a sharp breath, my lungs feeling like a weight pressed against my chest. My heart raced and blood rushed in my ears. Absently, I reached for the locket around my neck.

"Ugh!"

The necklace was still with Mila. I felt so lost and alone—without Jared, without the necklace, all alone and puzzling over Hestia's words.

I couldn't make sense of any of it.

Throwing my arm over my eyes, I tried to focus on getting sleep.

Was this our end? Was all hope lost?

Shortly after, I slipped into sleep. A dream blossomed around me, taking shape as a clearing in the woods. It was early in the morning, and mist hung over the clearing and clung to the trees. Sun reached through the mist, making it glow.

Someone was standing in the clearing, her long, blond hair cascading around her.

"Mila?"

Slowly, she turned to face me, a serious look in her eyes, her lips a firm, thin line.

"You found your way to me. That is good."

"I'm not sure it is... I'm on my way home to Jared, but I'll never make it before our birthday."

"Home? Jared is back in the village?"

"Yes. At least, if Hestia was telling the truth."

"Hestia!?"

Mila's eyes widened and she pursed her lips.

"She let me go, and she said that Jared can break the curse if he agrees to her terms. We will both be safe...."

"I am closer to the village than you. I will go to Jared and tell him I spoke with you. Take care of yourself on the journey back."

"Thank you, Mila. Thank you!"

I opened my eyes, staring up at the ceiling of the inn. Sun streamed in through the nearby window. I rolled on my side and saw just how high in the sky the sun was.

"Dammit!" I overslept. Jumping up, I grabbed my things and raced out the door. I'd slept almost half the day away and I had to keep going.

I couldn't waste any more time.

Back on the road, I traveled all day, not stopping for anything except a few snacks and short breaks.

My feet ached, my ankles were swollen, and I was totally winded. I wasn't sure what was a result of my pregnancy or what was from regular fatigue.

I was too far from any town or settlement to find shelter for the night. It wasn't like I hadn't done a lot of camping recently. I was able to rig myself a shelter and make a campfire far enough from the road that no one would see me.

I watched the moon rise, wondering if this would be the last one I would see. Tomorrow was our birthday. Pulling my sleeves up, I looked at the tattoo marks from the curse. They hadn't spread anymore, but they were getting darker and thicker.

The curse was getting stronger.

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep again. Thoughts of Jared and the curse plagued my mind as we were officially on borrowed time.

Would I make it back to him?

### [Chapter 892](#)

In the middle of the night, I woke up and bolted upright.

"What...?"

The strangest feeling came over me. My mind quivered and my body trembled uncontrollably. I rubbed my arms and legs, trying to warm myself up. It was no use.

I went back to the coals of the fire and held my hands out.

A sharp shiver ran from my head to my toes.

I fell on my hands and knees, shaking and quivering. My whole body tingled and then... as quickly as it had started, it stopped.

I lifted my head, and the entire forest looked different, felt different, smelled different.

There was another presence in my mind.

I looked down and saw furry paws on the ground. A fluffy tail swished behind me.

I'd shifted....

Finally, I'd gotten my wolf.

She shared my joy, our tail wagging like a happy puppy. I pranced around the fire, rolled in the dew-covered grass, and shook my silky, sleek, chocolate-brown coat. It was the most freeing, exhilarating feeling I'd ever felt.

I'd waited so long to meet her, and here she was.

We trotted around the campsite, enjoying each other's company and spending some time getting to know each other, feeling each other's presence and getting used to each other.

After a while, I remembered that I urgently needed to get back to Jared.

With my wolf, I was stronger, faster, and had more stamina. I grabbed my pack in my jaws and we raced off into the night, straight toward the village.

The closer we got, the more I expected to feel the curse. Even in my wolf form, I knew the curse would take hold. I only got my wolf because it was my birthday, and the curse hadn't been broken.

It took half the time to get back to the village with my wolf.

Right outside of the village, I paused and shifted back to human and got dressed. The entire way there, we'd never tired, never faltered. I hadn't even felt the curse shadow stirring inside of me.

I wondered if being in wolf form helped protect me from the curse's effects.

Slinging my backpack on, I paused and looked at my arms.

"Huh..."

I pulled my sleeves up and ran my hands up and down the curse marks. They weren't nearly as thick or dark as they'd been before I shifted.

If anything, they were fading rapidly.

Did that mean the curse was broken? How could it be? Mila needed me and Jared to break it. Even if she got to him first, it wouldn't be enough.

Suddenly, a horrible thought struck me.

What if Jared had given into Hestia, whatever her terms were? Was that what broke the curse?

"Please, Goddess, please. Don't let Jared fall to Hestia's demands. Let him stay strong."

I clutched my hands over my heart and bowed my head. Hopefully, she'd hear my prayer and she wouldn't let anything bad happen to Jared.

I still needed him....

I hurried through the village, heading straight to the packhouse.

I could hear the commotion of the pack. We hadn't marked each other yet, so I wasn't able to reach out to him with the mind-link.

As I began to run, even louder eruptions of my name were called out, and everyone from the house came out to see if it were true.

I pushed my way through the crowd coming to greet me and see if I was alright. They let me pass and I entered the door just as my mother hurried into the foyer.

"Eliza! You're back!" She hurried to hug me. "Your father went out to continue the search."

"Where is Jared?" I asked desperately as I pulled apart.

She seemed confused.

"Eliza!?" Archer ran up to me and grabbed my shoulders. "You're here! I'm so sorry I lost you."

His words rushed out of him in a panic.

"It's fine. Where is Jared?" I asked again. "Is Mila here?"

"Eliza, you look... like you've traveled a long way." Miriam looked beyond worried as she approached me in the foyer.

Why would nobody answer my question? Was he out looking for me as well?

"I have traveled a long way. But I can tell you all the details later. Right now, I need to see Jared."

Miriam touched my cheek, and her eyes watered.

"He has been in his room for several hours, Eliza, refusing to come out... the curse...."

I pulled away from her and darted up the stairs. I ran into his door, but it was locked from the inside.

"Jared! It's me. I'm here!"

I banged on the door, waiting for a response. I glanced at my arms and saw that the tattoos were nearly gone.

"Help me! Someone please, I have to get to him before...."

Archer came up behind me and rammed his shoulder onto the door three times before the lock broke and I was able to get inside.

I wanted to find Jared well and healthy, I wanted to believe that Mila had gotten to him in time.

I stopped dead and felt the blood drain from my face.

Jared was lying on the floor, blood pooled around him.

My heart fluttered and sank and my wolf bayed forlornly. For the first time, I felt the powerful magnitude of the mate bond claiming me. An overwhelming wave of love and joy flooded through me and my wolf, along with all of the pain and heartbreak at seeing Jared bleeding out on the floor.

"Jared! What did you do?"

I hurried to him, hands trembling as I pulled him into my arms. Tears spilled from my eyes onto him as I desperately tried to think of a way to save him. His breath was so shallow and he was so weak.

Sobs shook my body as I realized... he was dying.

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\*Jared\*

I sat in the window in my room, looking out at the rising sun.

Any other morning, I might have thought that the sunrise looked beautiful, the way that the sky was a reddish-orange and how birds were already singing in the garden, the very garden I had stood in a few weeks ago, vowing to love and protect Eliza for the rest of my life.

Today, our birthday, if I didn't act, I'd break that vow. I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to Eliza and our baby.



Happily, I would give my life if it meant Eliza and our baby lived on, even if that meant taking my own life.

All of our searching had failed. We hadn't been able to find Eliza. Archer and I went back to the place she'd been abducted from over and over again to try to find new clues.

There weren't any.

To make matters worse, I'd annihilated an entire Royal Guard platoon when I fell into the darkness. Any day now, more Royal Guards could show up and take me back into custody.

If I was going to act to save Eliza and our child, it had to be soon. I was running out of time in more ways than one.

Sighing, I glanced at my arm and flexed my bicep, the curse mark moving along with my bulging muscle.

It was time to act.

Even though Archer had given Eliza her backpack, he'd had the foresight to pull the Cryptex out of it. He'd informed me that Mila had the locket and the Diadem. I hadn't heard anything from Mila since my arrest.

Without Eliza here, I doubted there was anything she could do.

Archer had kept the Cryptex safe for me and returned it the moment I'd freshened up and eaten a good meal.

It made it possible for me to do what I needed to do....

Hopping off the windowsill, I grabbed a knife that was sitting on the bedside table. I retrieved the Cryptex from under my pillow. It had been the safest place to hide it while I was staying here in the packhouse.

Quickly, I locked my bedroom door. It wouldn't do any good to have someone like Miriam come in to check on me while I was doing what the maidens told me to do.

They were very clear. I had to die in order for Eliza and our child to live, so I couldn't be interrupted.

I sat on the floor, placing the Cryptex between my spread legs. I held my wrist out over the artifact and pressed the blade to my wrist.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I sucked in a sharp breath and whipped around. A ghostly hag stood in front of me. I quickly lunged at it with the knife, but it went straight through the aberration.

"What kind of evil is this?"

She cackled softly as her specter moved to the other side of the bed.

"Who are you and why are you here?"

"I am Hestia," she announced.

My heart hammered against my breast as I faced her.

I snarled at Hestia.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, seeing as you're about to do something incredibly stupid, I'm here to save your life." Hestia grinned. It spread across her face slowly, twisting her ghastly features into a cruel smirk.

"I'm doing what needs to be done in order to save my mate."

"Ha! You're doing what some figment in a dream told you. How do you know you can trust it?"

"I have to try something. And I trust a dream about as much as I trust you. Why should I listen to you?"

Hestia pursed her lips.

"That's what I thought. Now, leave and let me do this!" I turned back to the Cryptex, taking my seat and tightened my grip on the knife.

"What if I told you that you could break the curse without sacrificing yourself?"

I loosened my hold on the knife.

"We tried that. A witch was supposed to help us but it... fell through. This is the only way now. And I'm running out of time."

I glanced at the window again. The sun had fully risen. It was officially midday on our birthday. The curse could consume me and Eliza, at any moment.

All I had to do was bleed on the Cryptex and die before the curse took Eliza and the baby. Knowing that they would be safe was all that mattered.

"Would you put that knife down and listen to me?" Hestia put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

"No!"

"Fine. Be stubborn. But as I said, I am here to offer you a way out of this, with your life intact and Eliza's."

"You're offering to break the curse?"

"I could, easily. You know that."

"But nothing you want comes without a price."

"At least, my offer doesn't cost your life."

Sighing, I eased up on the blade slightly, letting my arm rest at my side.

"What is your offer?"

"Simple. I will break the curse if you do something for me. All you need to do is sever the ties between the Light Realm and Dark Realm. I'll take care of the rest." She looked up at the ceiling, smiling and shaking her head.

"What?"

"I need to destroy the Light Realm and all the White Queens. You just need to push things along..."

"You want me to help you destroy the Light Realm and Eliza's cousin? That's your offer to save my own life?"

I stared at Hestia, dumbfounded. Did she really think that I'd choose myself over the entire Light Realm and Eliza's cousin? If I helped Hestia, Eliza would never forgive me, whether we were mates or not. And that would be worse than death.

"No thanks."

I sliced my blade across my wrist, spilling my blood on the Cryptex. I gritted my teeth against the pain, breathing through the stinging as my crimson life force poured from inside of me.

### [Chapter 893](#)

\*Jared\*

I had done it. I was taken over by both relief and sadness. I thought of Eliza and I let the tears fill my eyes and spill down my cheeks. What I wouldn't have given to see her one more time and thank her for all that she had done to try to save me.

"Moon Goddess, please be with her and keep her strong for our child."

"Tisk. Tisk. Tisk..." Hestia clicked her tongue and shook her head as she crossed her hands over her chest. "I think you may have forgotten a step."

I looked up at her, confused.

"Weren't you supposed to reject your mate first? That was a very important first step," she reminded me.

"Wh-what...?" I clamped my hand over the gushing blood. I was becoming lightheaded but I tried to think. I tried to remember....

'The order is important. Reject her, get your blood on the Cryptex, take your life before the curse claims you...'

That was right. The maiden told me to reject Eliza. She had reminded me how important the order of events had to be.

I'd screwed up. I'd acted too hastily. "How could I have forgotten something so important?" I murmured.

"It's understandable. The details in dreams can be hard to hold onto. It's too bad though. All you've done is the same thing your father did." Hestia headed toward the window again. "You've bled on the Cryptex. But without rejecting your mate before you die, all you've done is push the curse to your own child, condemning them to live your same tormented existence."

"N-no...." I gasped as weakness consumed me.

So much blood had already poured from my wrist, and my arms fell dead at my sides. Numbness began to take me over and the edges of my vision blurred.

"You think you're saving Eliza? No. Your child will be cursed and your mate will be left to carry the burden alone!"

I imagined our child, sweet and innocent, having to carry on the burden of this curse into the future.

It broke my heart into a million pieces. But I couldn't stop what had already begun. Every second that ticked by and I remained alive was a second that could usher in the dark curse to claim all of us.

Hestia's words shook me to the bone. I'd lost too much blood to move or even cry out. There was nothing I could do.

How had I been so stupid!? I'd been so focused on saving Eliza that I'd forgotten the most important part.

"The Diadem...." I murmured. "It can save our child."

Hestia laughed. "That was a spell designed for you and your mate. It won't work when you are dead."

Groaning, my muscles gave out completely and I slumped over, face-first onto the floor. My mind grew fuzzy and I knew I was slipping away quickly.

"But, I can save you," Hestia urged. "Be my servant, and I will set all of you free."

I closed my eyes and let my sweet Eliza's face fill my imagination. I would die but she would live. She would be strong, and I knew my death would give Eliza time to properly plan for our child to break the curse, the same way my own mother had.

"Jared, there isn't much time. I can—"

"No!" I said with all the strength I could muster.

"Fine, go ahead and die. I can just wait for your cursed child to come of age."

"Wait...." I coughed and sputtered out blood.

"It's too late now." Hestia hissed and then vanished.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain etching up my arms and deep throbbing in my chest, and a wave of darkness washed over me. I felt my wolf snap and snarl almost ferally.

Oh no. Was this the curse? Had I been too late? Was it coming to claim me, to claim us?

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Crack!

My bedroom door opened and I smelled Eliza with what little sense I had left.

"Eliza...." I gasped.

With each searing breath, the pain increased as the curse seemed to creep into every part of me. But I fought hard to muster the words.

"Jared!?" Eliza threw herself on the floor and pulled my head into her lap so I could see her face and feel the warmth of her breath on my neck as she sobbed.

She was so pale, eyes already brimming with tears as she wrapped her arms around me and held me close.

Her sniffles broke through my foggy, distant thoughts and I remembered what I had to do.

"Eliza...."

Even though she was distraught, there was something so overwhelmingly beautiful about her. Her face was so tender, and she was glowing under her skin.

Her wolf must have woken up....

She was radiant with strength and power.

My heart fluttered in my chest at seeing her. I had been the luckiest man alive. I'd never seen anything so gorgeous and amazing.

My wolf, who had snapped and was near violence inside of me, instantly calmed. He felt his own peace and love for Eliza's wolf override whatever the curse had planned.

It was the first time that we were looking upon our mate and feeling the mate bond.

Now that she'd gotten her wolf, the mate bond was fully activated, and it was strong. There was no denying it now. I would have to reject her in order for Eliza and the baby to survive.

"Eliza... I, Jared... r-reject you... as m-my mate...."

"What?" she gasped as a sickening look came over her face, her tears frozen on her lids. "What are you saying? Jared!"

I coughed and sputtered as I felt the rendering of our mate bond deep inside. Blood filled my throat, and it became hard to even take a breath.

She sobbed louder while holding onto me. I saw the heartbreak and confusion in her eyes. I could feel our mate bond ripping, tearing us our wolves apart from each other.

"Please...." I stammered, blood gurgling in my throat as I tried to explain.

"No! Jared, No!"

She leaned over me. Her hair covered my face and chest, wafting her delicious scent all around me.

"No! You're not rejecting me!" she demanded through teeth clenched with pain. "You're not leaving me. You're going to survive and be a father to our baby!"

"Eliza, I—"

"Shut up!"

I heard something ripping and then fabric pressed to the wound on my arm. She was trying to stop the bleeding and save my life.

"No." I tried to pull my arm away.

"I'm saving you, Jared. I'm not letting you go!"

I gripped her wrist. I was fading, and I needed her to accept it, but then we were both seized by the final shattering of our mate bond.

I could see her face turn ice white and that she was wracked with pain, and I hated not having the strength to hold her and knowing she would soon be alone.

"Why did you do this!?" she cried, staying strong through the pain and holding onto me as all went black and I took my last breath.

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\*Eliza\*

My body was wracked with unimaginable pain as I fought through Jared's rejection, holding onto him and trying my best to keep him alive.

"Jared!" I screamed as his body went slack in my arms. "No!"

I looked at the blood seeping from his wrist and saw the flow had subsided. I pressed my ear to his chest to listen for sounds of life, breathing, a heartbeat... anything.

But there was nothing. I knew that he was gone.

I began to sob as I felt Archer behind me trying to pull me away from Jared's body. My wolf surged inside of me and I used what strength I had left to cling to him.

"Eliza." My mother's shaky voice called from behind me before she wrapped her arms around my trembling body. She held me still and I remained calm as Archer cautiously stepped forward, his gaze wary and uncertain.

He knelt down and carefully gathered Jared's body in his arms. I watched silently, my eyes wide with shock and disbelief as Archer placed Jared on the bed, gently laying him down.

"Eliza," Archer said softly, his eyes filled with sorrow. "He's gone...."

I glared at him, anger and desperation coursing through me. I did not want not to accept that Jared was gone. Even as the pain of his rejection threatened to crumble me to the ground. I could not accept that this was the end after all that we had been through.

"There must be something we can do...." I whispered. "Please... someone. Help me."

But I knew that there was nothing that anyone could do. I knelt down beside the bed, my heart collapsing in on itself over and over as I looked into Jared's lifeless face.

"Goodbye, my love," I whispered, before leaning over to kiss his still warm cheek.

"Eliza! Jared!"

I gasped and looked toward the door again. My vision was still blurry, but I saw a blonde woman with a cloak sweep into the room.

Mila.

"Mila! You made it," I cried. "But it's too late!"

She took a moment to examine Jared's body.

"No, it's not too late. But we need to act fast," Mila said as she dropped to her knees beside me and produced the Diadem.

She wrapped the locket around it and then picked up the Cryptex, still soaked in Jared's blood. "Oh, Jared... you really shouldn't have done this..."

"Can we save him, can we break the curse?" I pleaded.

"Yes."

"What do you need from me?" I asked immediately.

My eyes flitted from Jared's lifeless face to Mila. I could feel the panic in my chest thicken but was reassured because I could also see the strength and determination in Mila's eyes. A surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins, pushing away the pain of the mate bond rejection so I could help Mila save Jared's life.

"I need your blood." Mila pulled a knife out and pointed it toward me.

I held my hand out without even hesitating. Mila cut my finger and collected my blood on the Cryptex.

Her voice murmured softly, her words in a language I didn't understand. Maybe I was too out of it.

Mila stabbed the tip of the Cryptex into the Diadem. The Diadem flashed a blinding light.

"Argh!" I squinted my eyes shut.

In an instant, my entire body felt lighter and Jared's body convulsed. I looked at his arms to see the curse tattoo marks fading.

The curse was completely broken... Mila had done it!

Our child was safe, I was safe.

But what about Jared? His body had jerked, what did that mean?

"Jared?"

I heard him sigh.

I gripped his hand and I thought I felt a faint squeeze in return, although it could have been my imagination.

In the next moment, his body went slack again.

"Jared!?" I shook his shoulders. "Mila, Mila, help him!"

"You're not going to die today, Jared," Mila promised and she began rapid chest compressions while chanting her magical words.

#### [Chapter 894](#)

\*Eliza\*

I opened my eyes and it felt like I couldn't breathe. Sitting up, I pounded on my chest, heaving and hyperventilating. My stomach twisted and tears stung my eyes. In my chest, my heart trembled and I felt like it would shatter into a million pieces.

This was what it felt like to be rejected....

"Eliza...." My mother's voice came from the side of the bed. I looked over to see her offering me a cup of water to drink.

I gulped it down and looked to the window to see that the sun was setting.

"What day is it?" I croaked.

"It's still your birthday... apparently curse day," she said tersely.

My eyes drifted to her, and I could see the flood of a thousand questions wash over her face.

"Why didn't you tell us what was really going on?" she asked.

"There was nothing you could have done," I answered hoarsely.

"Eliza, you never know what your family can do for you until you ask. Has this boy and running around alone in the Dark Realm really made you forget how important family is?"

She reached out to touch my cheek. "Honey, I am your mother. It is my job to help you when you need it."

"I...."

I thought about everything Jared and I had been through together.

"It just felt like we were on our own," I tried to explain.

"No..." My mother countered. "He was on his own and then roped you into this. You are not and never will be alone so long as there is breath in my body. You can always come to me and your father no matter how hopeless a situation may seem."

I thought about how to answer. I rubbed at my chest and the aching pain of the rejection.

"If you hadn't kept things from us, we may have been able to spare you the pain that you're in. On top of everything, he rejected you while he was dying and you are pregnant!"

Hearing the words out loud my head hurt, and I went breathless and my chest began to ache even more.



I rubbed my chest, easing my breathing until my lungs inflated properly. My heart continued to ache, threatening to crack like an egg.

"We stopped the cures," I pointed out weakly. I blinked my tears back and sniffled, willing them not to fall.

The true damage had been done. After everything, Jared and I were no longer mates. I didn't think my heart could ever be put back together again.

My mother put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "What's done is done. It is still your birthday."

I felt my wolf in my head. She was so pleased to feel my presence and to be connected with me, but I could also feel her pain at being rejected. I wondered about Jared. It was his birthday too, and he hadn't expected to see another day after it.

"How is he?" I asked.

I heard my mother let out a long-suffering sigh. "He's resting. Mila suggested a few days of bed rest."

"She left?"

"Yes, she had more work to do elsewhere, but she promised she will see you again soon. We owe her a great debt. But, now back to your birthday." My mother gave me a kind smile. "Go ahead and wash up. We can at least have a little meal and fresh air in the garden together."

I nodded and gave her a smile as she helped me out of the bed and to the bathroom.

I'd finally connected with my wolf, and the experience was soured because now we were in pain. At least I had someone to share it with, someone who understood.

I took a quick shower. When I looked in the mirror, wrapped in a towel, I took a moment to look at my arms.

All the curse marks and tattoo remnants were completely gone. The curse really was broken.

I couldn't feel the sinister shadow stirring in me any longer. I didn't feel the heavy weight of the curse clinging to me.

I also noticed that the locket was around my neck again. Instinctively, I touched it. I was glad that it hadn't been destroyed when the curse was broken.

Sighing, I unclasped the necklace and put it on the vanity in my bathroom. I brushed my fingers over the familiar locket.

Right now, I couldn't stand to wear it. It was too much of a reminder of what I'd lost.

As much as I wanted to check on Jared, I knew I couldn't. I had no idea what he was thinking or feeling, I had no idea why he'd rejected me in the first place. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

It was my birthday. My parents were here, so I planned to enjoy the rest of it. I could worry about my heartache later.

I threw on some clothes and headed into the gardens, where my parents waited alone for me. A small table with three chairs was already set up, reminding me that Jared would not be joining us.

"Eliza!" my father said excitedly.

He wrapped me in a fierce embrace. I could tell that he had just come from a shower and imagined he'd done so after coming in from looking for me.

He pulled back and looked me over from head to toe with none of the same harsh questions or judgments my mother had.

"I knew you would pull through."

He beamed and gave me a smile, and we all took a seat.

Miriam must have seen me emerge from my room, because she came out soon after me with fresh made sandwiches and a warm cupcake that had only just come out of the oven. The frosting was a little droopy because it was so warm.

"Happy birthday, Eliza," she said as she placed the food in front of us. "I know that things are... difficult right now. But you must know that you always have a place here in the village and in the pack."

My heart swelled a little, and I felt my wolf cooing in my head.

"I appreciate that, a lot. Thank you."

"Enjoy your meal. I wish I had the time to make you a real cake for a big celebration."

"No, this is perfect," my mother chimed in politely. "We don't need more than this."

"Thank you," my father added.

Miriam kissed me on the cheek and gave a polite nod to my parents before leaving us alone again.

We all dug in. I could feel my mother watching me closely as we ate the sandwich. I didn't know what either of them must have been thinking. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was perfect. I felt like I hadn't had a good meal in weeks.

The cupcake was absolutely delectable, sinfully good. My mouth watered with every bite. It made my birthday just a little brighter.

"So, we want to ask about your plans now," my mother said as our stomachs settled.

"What do you mean?"

"When do you plan to return home to the Light Realm?" she clarified.

"Oh... I hadn't planned...." I trailed off.

"Eliza, it's not just you any more. Think about your baby."

I looked from her to my father.

"We will support whatever you decide to do," Mom said.

"Well, I won't make any decisions until I can talk to Jared and see why he...."

"There must be an explanation," my father said.

"Even if he had his reasons, the mate bond gone now," said Mom.

"I don't want to talk about this now," I said.

"That is understandable."

"I would like to have some time to think on my own."

"Of course," my father said, helping my mother to her feet before she could object. "You know where to find us if you need us."

I hugged them both and watched their retreat into the pack house. In my heart, it was the place that I now thought of as home. Did Jared really want to send me away?

I felt my wolf stirring, pulling my attention from Jared and back to her.

I got the feeling that she wanted to stretch her legs. I'd only shifted once before and it was to hurry back to the village. I hadn't had the time to enjoy being in wolf form, and it seemed like the perfect time to enjoy it before facing Jared to have what was bound to be a very difficult conversation.

Without the mate bond, what were we to each other now?

I headed out of the garden and into the forests on the outskirts of the village. I wanted to be alone with my wolf and really let her stretch her legs.

I undressed behind a bush and shifted. The feeling still sent a pleasant shiver through me, but it happened so fast.

I kneaded the soft earth with my paws and lifted my nose into the forest air. It was earthy and piney, so fresh and fragrant. My tail twitched back and forth and my large ears moved around.

My wolf and I pranced around the forest. We dug under a log, rubbed against some trees, rolled in the grass and leaves, and ran round, jumping on large rocks and pouncing on any leaves and bushes that moved.

The pain and confusion never left our minds or hearts, but we both enjoyed our time in the woods. We played out in the woods until the sun completely set, the stars and moon filtering silver light through the treetops.

Suddenly, I stiffened.

I wasn't alone.

I whipped around and snarled.

Another wolf padded into the clearing I was in—large paws, big, brown eyes, and silky black fur. His scent permeated the air, washing over me like rolling waves.

My heart ached and my wolf whined.

What was Jared doing here? Was he following me?

My wolf pawed the ground and I snarled.

Jared's wolf snorted, his breath a puffing cloud in the darkness. He lowered his head submissively, showing me that he meant us no harm.

I shook my head and padded back toward the pack house. I paused long enough to shift and get dressed and then went straight back to my room.

I stopped dead in the doorway.

Jared's wolf stood in my room, filling the space with his enormous bulk.

"What are you doing here?"

His wolf whined and nosed the bed, pushing the comforter down.

I arched an eyebrow. "Are you tucking me in?"

Jared's wolf panted and nosed the bed again.

I wasn't sure what to make of any of this. Needing a second, I slipped into the bathroom and got ready for bed. I put on my pajamas and came back out.

This time, Jared's wolf was on my bed, curled up like a pet dog. He lifted his head when he saw me, panting, and he nosed the pillow next to me.

Part of me wanted to scream at his wolf and tell Jared to either leave or come out and face me like a man. But a bigger part of me didn't want to fight. I wanted and needed to rest.

And I couldn't deny that I wanted to feel close to Jared. Even after he'd rejected me, it was a longing that I shared with my wolf.

He was there, in my bed, in wolf form only.

Chewing my lower lip, I walked around the bed and slid under the covers. I turned my back to Jared and flipped the light out.

I could feel the warmth of his wolf's breath on my neck, the softness of his fur against my arms and back. I wanted to turn toward him and snuggle against him. I wanted to stroke his fur and pet his ears. He was so close and all I had to do was roll over....

But I didn't. I couldn't. I truly wondered if I ever would again.

### [Chapter 895](#)

The next morning, I woke feeling cold and lonely. I rolled over on the bed. Jared's wolf was gone. I wasn't that surprised. We hadn't talked at all since he'd rejected me. I hadn't even seen his face. He was hiding behind his wolf.

I would have never thought Jared would be afraid to face me.

The packhouse was very empty and quiet when I pulled myself out of bed and went down to the kitchen for breakfast.

I didn't wake up in as much pain as I had the morning before, but I could still feel the awful sting and heartbreak of the rejection. I wondered if Jared's presence last night had helped ease the pain.

Even my wolf felt a little more settled and less scattered.

I spent the day in the garden, tending to the flowers and just finding anything to do that would keep my hands busy. I didn't talk to anyone or interact with anyone. I wasn't sure if that was helping me grieve or if it hurt more.

"Eliza, where is Eliza?"

"Oh, Goddess!" I groaned when my mother's voice echoed through the packhouse.

Before she could cause too much of a scene, I raced to meet her.

"Mom, I'm right here."

She smiled slightly at me and put a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't mean to sleep the day away. I went into your room to check on you and you were... you were gone."

I felt my brow furrow and then I understood she must have been just as frantic to find me when I disappeared from the Light Realm.

"I was just out in the garden."

"Yes. I see." She sighed and ran her fingers through my unruly, curly hair.

I hadn't done much in the way of hair care for the past few days.

"Mom, it's okay. I'm fine now."

"You still don't look fine. When was the last time you washed your hair?" She tugged my curls.

"Mom..." I batted her hand away. "It will just take a few more days for me to bounce back. But the curse is gone and my energy is returning."

"It isn't the curse that is dragging you down. Honey, I warned you about Jared. I warned you not to get into anything with him too quickly."

Scoffing, I took a step back.

"Is that why you're still here? You want to watch everything blow up in my face and tell me, 'I told you so?' You have no idea everything we've been through or why...."

I sighed and looked down. I had no idea why either, and I couldn't defend Jared's actions. But I did not need my mother waltzing in, adding insult to injury.

"I would if you would tell me. Eliza, I am your mother. You have a family that loves you and is worried sick about you. Did Jared explain himself? What did he have to say?"

"Mom, just go."

She flinched as if I'd hit her and took a step back. "I'm going to. Your father and I are getting ready to return home."

"I'm glad. I know you guys prefer the Light Realm to the Dark Realm."

"It is true. However, in light of what has happened, I think it would be best if you returned home with us." My mother held her hand out to me.

I shook my head. "No. I'm not going back!"

"Eliza, be reasonable. There is nothing here for you now."

"There's my life! This is my life still. I'm the one making the decisions and I'm choosing to stay here!"

My mother sighed and bowed her head. "Please, Honey, you belong in the Light Realm. Why do you want to stay after he rejected you?"

Anger welled inside of me and I couldn't even look at her anymore.

Crossing my arms, I stomped upstairs to my room. Snarling, I slammed the door shut. When I turned around, Jared's wolf was on the bed again, waiting for me.

\*\*\*

\*Jared\*

With a heavy sigh, I opened my eyes. Once again, I was staring at the ceiling in Eliza's room. When I'd laid down here with her, I'd still been in wolf form.

Sometime in the night, I shifted back. Fortunately, Eliza was still sleeping and I didn't need to explain anything... yet.

That time would come... when I had a way to fix what I'd broken.

It was early. The sun had barely started to rise and the sky outside her bedroom window was a deep gray color.

I rolled on my side and watched Eliza sleeping.

She hugged her pillow to her cheek. Her bouncing, unruly curls splashed across her face and over the pillow. Eliza looked peaceful as she slept, but I knew she wasn't. I knew that underneath her soft features, she was in a lot of pain.

I'd done that to her....

When I thought back to that night, my blood pouring out, I hadn't been in my right mind.

Yet, if I'd had to do it all over again, hurting Eliza by rejecting her in order to save her life and the life of our baby... I'd do it again. Because if I hadn't, there was no guarantee that she'd be lying here next to me right now.

Mila had shown up in the nick of time. But if she hadn't, my sacrifice would have been the only way to save her.

Absently I reached out to her. I stopped, my hand inches from her face. As much as I wanted to touch her and feel her soft warmth against me, I knew I couldn't. It would be a violation after what had happened.

She tolerated the presence of my wolf, which was a good thing. I didn't think he'd take no for an answer. He had been adamant in watching over her and protecting her while she was in pain.

Sighing, I rolled onto my back and reached under the bed. There was a stack of books and scrolls I'd been keeping there for study. These early mornings while Eliza slept and I was beside her were the only times my mind felt at ease enough to get any reading done.

Not to mention, it was the only time my wolf was calm enough to let me think straight.

Whenever we were away from her, he was agitated and restless, thinking about how she and her wolf were alone and in pain while carrying our child.

I pulled out one of the books and flipped to the section on mate bonds.

Tucking my arm behind my head, I propped myself up and I started reading. There was a lot of lore around mate bonds—their origins, the deep connection between us and our wolves.

There were all kinds of stories about rejections and mates finding each other again after being separated for years and years.

I was reading everything I could on the subject to determine how to fix a broken mate bond.

So far, my research had been fruitless. Almost everything I read said that the rejection was final. I wouldn't believe that. Already, Eliza and I had overcome impossible odds.

We'd survived a curse and we'd managed to break it.

Now, I was back in a situation where everything I read was saying that repairing the bond was impossible. But Eliza and I had already done the impossible, which meant we could do it again.

She murmured in her sleep and shifted on the bed.

I glanced at her, watching as she rolled away, turning her back to me. She sighed and then relaxed again.

She'd been sleeping restlessly ever since I'd rejected her. Somehow, she'd handled the entire thing with such grace and eloquence. She hadn't been moping around or sobbing. She hadn't been clinging to me or asking everyone why this had happened to her.

I wouldn't blame her if she had been acting like that.

But she wasn't. She was keeping it together. She was shifting, attending to the garden. It pained me that I couldn't be a part of that with her.

about mate bonds. It didn't tell me anything new and it didn't tell me anything I wanted to know.

I thought about contacting Mila and asking for her advice. She'd pretty much vanished again.

Eliza was the one with all the connections.

I'd even considered going to my brother and his wife to see if they had any abilities as the Dark King and White Queen that could fix our mate bond.

The room started getting lighter as the sun crested over the horizon. I put my books away and got out of bed. It was time for breakfast, and it would be better if I wasn't here when Eliza woke up.

She was tolerating my wolf, but she'd made it clear that she wasn't happy about it. I had a feeling the only reason she had was because we couldn't communicate while I was in wolf form.

I ate a quick breakfast and then immediately left the village to rendezvous with Archer and some of my men.

Whenever I could, I made myself scarce. I didn't want to see the anger and fury in Eliza's eyes. Maybe, there would be a time when she wouldn't be so hurt by the broken bond, but I doubted she would ever forgive me.

I'd done it to save her, but that didn't make it any better. It didn't make it right.

"What's the status update?" I asked when I caught up with Archer at his camp.

The tracking group had several tents set up. Archer was at a table with maps spread out and pages of notes scattered around it.

"We've been focused on gathering intel from Aries's men, infiltration, and trying to get a bead on their plans."

"Have you successfully infiltrated?"

Archer nodded. "Here, check this out. These are some messages we intercepted between Aries and his most trusted warriors."

I scanned the pages, reading snippets about "moving forward" and delivering "the package." It was written vaguely, supposed to be some kind of code. But I knew enough about Aries to understand it.

"So, Aries is going ahead with his rebellion. He's going to move against the Crown."

"That was my thinking as well," Archer agreed. "We don't have a whole lot of time, Jared. He must still think that you've been detained by the Royal Guards."

"Well, we should keep it that way. Do you have any updates on where they are gathering or when they plan to make their move?"

"Here are all the messages we've intercepted. You might want to look them over and see if you can find something I missed. You do know Aries better than I do."

"Thanks, I'll take a look." I grabbed the pages and headed to a folding chair Archer had set up outside his tent.

For a moment, I let myself be impressed by Archer's intel gathering. He'd gotten a lot of messages from Aries's men. I worried that it was a trap.

Aries was cunning. He'd have safeguards about intercepting messages.



And yet, he might have let his guard down if he still thought I was in custody. Who else would be going after him with me out of the way? Who else would know what he was planning with me out of the way?

Sighing, I went back to Archer.

"I'm not seeing anything else useful in these pages, just a lot of jabber about the plan, but nothing about times or dates. He's let his guard down, but he's not an idiot."

"That's what I was afraid of." Archer shook his head in disappointment.

"Although, the lack of obvious detail makes me think these messages are authentic. If they were meant to be a trap, Aries would include a lot more information."

"Well, that's one good thing, I suppose."

"I want you to send another scouting party out, intercepting messages as frequently as possible. They'll change their tone and approach the closer they get to their plan. We'll be able to figure out their movements by the nature of the messages."

"I'll get right on it."

#### [Chapter 896](#)

Archer left me at the table with his maps. I glanced at the map and all the lines Archer had drawn on it. They were carefully labeled. He wasn't just tracking Aries; he was tracking every known associate of Aries, too.

Smiling, I traced one of the lines with my fingers. There was a reason I valued Archer's work, and it was because he was so thorough and dedicated.

My wolf bristled, agitation taking over. In my head, he whined and shifted around restlessly. When we didn't have anything else to focus on, that's how he was, all the time.

I gripped the edge of the table and closed my eyes, taking deep, calming breaths.

It wasn't enough.

My wolf's anxiety trembled through me, my fingers shaking and my hands tightening around the table edge until my knuckles turned white.

I needed something else to think about.

Sifting through the pages on the desk, I found some descriptive notes on Aries and the things he'd done, including crashing my wedding, forcing me to join him, and getting me arrested, along with an entire list of things he'd done before that.

I shook my head and crumpled the page in my hand.

Aries—he was nothing but a villain. I was going to destroy him.

"Aries, I'm coming for you. I promise, before the Moon Goddess, that I will kill you. You'll never make it to the capital. You'll never enact your plan."

"Uhh... Jared, who are you talking to?" Archer reappeared behind me.

Smirking, I shook my head. "I was just promising myself, and the Moon Goddess, that I wouldn't let Aries succeed."

"That is a good promise to make. We're going to pack up camp and head to our next rendezvous point. Are you coming along? We should catch up with Aries soon."

"Yes, I'll come along."

Tracking down Aries was the perfect distraction my wolf and I needed to keep our minds off Eliza and everything she was going through... everything I'd put her through.

I helped Archer and his men pack up the camp. They were traveling at night when they could move around undetected and hidden by shadows.

Just as the sun set, they were ready to get moving. I planned to go with them but....

"Argh!"

I doubled over as my wolf fought for control. He was too agitated for me to soothe, his mind in total chaos.

"Jared?" Archer ran to me.

"Go... just go. I'll catch up."

Archer nodded and he gathered his men and they left me there.

I gritted my teeth and tried to hold on.

"Stop it!" I demanded.

My wolf was beyond reason. My entire body trembled and I fell forward, shifting in an instant. Before I could protest, my wolf raced back toward the village.

The only thought on his mind was Eliza.

The next morning, I sat straight up, hopped off Eliza's bed, and gathered my things quickly. It was much later than I anticipated. My wolf hadn't let me shift back as soon as he usually did and I slept in.

I made sure to be quiet as I collected everything. If Eliza woke up and saw me, I knew she'd be upset. I couldn't face her yet.

She still had too much power over me and whatever she felt, whatever she wanted to say, it would devastate me.

Not to mention, I knew that this was my fault. If she would never forgive me, I couldn't bear it. Seeing me would only agitate her more, and I didn't want to hurt her. I'd done that enough...

Slowly, I backed out of Eliza's room and closed the door again, careful not to make a sound.

Sighing heavily, I turned down the hall.

"Watch out!"

"Oh no!" I grabbed the woman I nearly collided with, saving her and the tray of food she was carrying.

It was Eliza's mother. She glared sharply at me and grabbed the breakfast tray, righting herself.

"I'm terribly sorry, Gemma. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Obviously. What are you doing, sneaking out of my daughter's room so early?"

I glanced at the closed door and chewed the inside of my cheek. "Well, my wolf is feeling very protective of her with what she is going through."

Gemma poked me in the chest. "You mean what you're putting her through!?"

I bowed my head. "Yes...."

"Why are you torturing her? After rejecting her like that, you should just leave her be. Let her come home with me where she belongs."

Gemma tried to brush by me, but I stood in her way.

"I'm not keeping her here. She is free to return home with you and your husband if she wishes. I'm guessing she has turned down your offer, since she is still here."

Gemma narrowed her eyes. "How dare you!? You've broken my daughter's heart! I warned her from the start...." She clamped her mouth shut suddenly.

"Warned her? Warned her of what?"

Gemma shook her head.

"Warned her of what!?"

She fixed me with a hard look. "I warned her that you were no good for her, that she was rushing into things with you and that she would get hurt... rather, that you would hurt her."

"You told her that?" I stepped back.

I knew that Eliza's parents didn't approve of me, but I hadn't known how much. She had been very upset after talking to them but she hadn't given me the details.

She was probably trying to spare my feelings or give me the chance to prove myself to them without upsetting me.

Eliza really was an amazing woman. I knew I'd be lucky if she ever spoke to me again.

"Of course, I told her that! And you proved me right."

"You don't understand...."

"I don't want to hear your excuses. There is no justification for what you did."

"No, there isn't. But I still care about Eliza, and I'm not going to stop fighting for her. The curse is broken and she's alive. Isn't that what you should be focusing on?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

She sniffed and turned her chin up. "I'm a mother. I'd be a bad one if I wasn't looking out for her heart as much as her physical health."

"So, I suppose all the progress we made with each other was for nothing, now."

Gemma shrugged. "What progress?"

My jaw dropped. "You're telling me that you lied to Eliza when you finally gave us your blessing? How does that translate into you looking out for her?"

"I knew from the moment I saw you that you weren't good enough for her. And just look how far you've dragged her down. If she'd listened to me, she wouldn't be hurting so badly now. She'd be safe at home with her family, people who love her and treat her right."

Gemma brushed by me and reached for Eliza's door.

"She's not a prisoner, Gemma. She stays because she has hope and because this is the life she wants."

Gemma glanced over her shoulder at me.

"Don't presume you know anything about my daughter!"

"I understand your feelings toward me. Just know that I am doing everything I can to fix this."

"Right...."

She disappeared into Eliza's room, muttering under her breath. I caught a few curses and insults directed at me.

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck. I couldn't blame Gemma for her desire to protect her daughter. She had every right to hate me for causing Eliza so much pain.

But I didn't expect her to understand the lengths I'd had to go to.

The only thing I could do know was find a way to reverse the rejection. Then, Eliza wouldn't be in pain. It might be enough to get her to forgive me, or to start to forgive me.

I headed to my study and started going over new books I'd had shipped in that specialized in the mate bond. I'd sent messages to several major libraries and archives to have them send whatever materials they had on the subject.

It was a lot to go through, but I wasn't going to give up.

I sat down and grabbed the first book in the pile.

Repairing the mate bond wasn't just to get Eliza to forgive me. I doubted she ever would, even if I could make this right. It wouldn't change the fact that I'd rejected her in the first place.

I wanted her not to be in pain anymore. When I was cursed, she had stopped at nothing to help me resolve it. She'd believed in a way to fix it even when I didn't. I'd given up and she kept pushing me, unwilling to give up.

Now, it was my turn to return the favor.

I studied the new books for several hours until my eyes stung with dryness and I thought I would pass out.

I rubbed my eyes and stood up, stretching.

All that reading and I still hadn't found anything. Well, I hadn't found anything useful or helpful. All these books were starting to sound the same.

I couldn't help but feel like I was missing something obvious. There had to be more knowledge and lore about the mate bond, not just the basic educational stuff.

Groaning, I ran my hands through my hair and bowed my head.

That was a problem for another day. It would take a lot more than reaching out to archives and libraries to dig deeper into the mythology.

My body, mind, and wolf were too restless to focus on that. As important as it was, the fate of our mate bond was completely out of control.

My wolf was too agitated. I needed to focus on something that was in my control right now. It would be the only way to keep my mind off Eliza and the heartbreaking pain she was in.

There was only one thing that I could really focus on and control right now... killing Aries.

Archer had given me the coordinates for his rendezvous before my wolf took off the night before. I left immediately to catch Archer before they moved again.

When I arrived at Archer's camp, Brandt had also joined them.

"Where were you?"

Brandt grinned. "I was infiltrating a small operation connected to Aries. They are preparing for their final march to the capital."

"Then we need to act fast. We need to come up with a plan."

"I hate to say it, but we don't have the manpower to intercept his force and fight them off. Starting a battle like that close to the capital would draw too much attention and with your current status..."

Archer grimaced and held a hand out to me.

"What status?" Brandt asked, looking between us.

"Jared was arrested by the Royal Guard. He got away but...."

"I'm still a wanted man at the moment. If we engaged in open battle with Aries just outside the capital, they may think that I'm the usurper and Aries is the good Samaritan trying to save the Crown."

"I see the problem." Brandt nodded.

"I think it would be better to stop Aries before he gets close to the capital."

"Agreed." Archer nodded.

"But that still leaves us with the problem of stopping him. We all know that we don't have the strength to defeat his force. That's why we've been infiltrating," Brandt pointed out.

I nodded and stroked my chin. I walked around Archer and looked at his maps. He had updated the locations of where Aries and his men were. The different groups were moving closer together.

Once they all converged, Aries would be ready to make his attack.

Aries was only as strong as his men. They were a formidable force, but without an army, I knew Aries wouldn't be able to launch his attack.

He wouldn't be able to challenge the Alpha King.

### [Chapter 897](#)

"We need to weaken Aries. Normally, I'd suggest attacking and taking out as many of his men as possible," I said, tapping the map.

"But that's not possible in this situation. We'd never destroy enough of them with our numbers." Brandt sighed and walked around the table in a slow circle.

"You're right. But we don't have to destroy them. We could simply... turn them against Aries," I suggested.

Archer raised an eyebrow. "Now, there's an idea. What are you thinking?"

I grinned. "Aries is a traitor and a coward. If we can show his supporters the type of criminal he is, I doubt they will be willing to follow him."

"I like that idea." Brandt wagged a finger at me. "It would literally stop him in his tracks."

I nodded. "Once his supporters abandon him, he'll be alone. We can move in for the kill. He will be much, much easier to kill once he's on his own. And he won't be able to cry for help from the Royal Guards this time."

"I think a few well-placed rumors should get the ball rolling," Archer said.

"If nothing else, they should increase the Crown's interest in him enough to do some checking up on him. That might slow him down enough," Brandt said.

"Yes, it should. But we need more than a few rumors to fully weaken Aries's influence on his supporters."

Archer, Brandt, and I sat around the table discussing plans and options all day.

It really helped keep my mind focused, and I was relieved to feel like I was still effective and able to do something right.

As soon as the sun set again, my wolf took over and raced back to the village for Eliza. At this point, I wasn't even fighting against him. It was a battle I knew I would lose.

\*\*\*

\*Eliza\*

Jared's wolf was gone when I woke up.

My mom brought me breakfast for the third morning in a row. She sat next to me at a table in my room, watching me eat.

"This is really awkward, Mom."

She poured me another glass of orange juice.

"You need to keep your strength up for the baby. I know you're in a lot of pain, and if you're not going to put your baby's needs first, I will."

I rolled my eyes, but she was right. I bit into my toast.

As annoying as she was, she had a good point. Ever since the rejection, I had barely had an appetite. Those first few days, I couldn't remember eating at all, unless Miriam brought me food.

At that point, if my mom wasn't bringing me food, I probably wouldn't be eating.

"Speaking of your baby's best interests, when are you going to come home to the Light Realm? Your father and I can help with the baby."

"Mom!" I slammed my spoon down. "Don't start!"

"Honey, please, hear me out. Jared rejected you. That pain you feel, it won't go away. Staying here with him is insulting to yourself. It is degrading."

"Can you stop? You've said all of this already. And the pain is... I'm feeling a little stronger every day."

"Eliza, I'm only thinking of what is best for you and your child."

I rolled my eyes. "No, you're thinking about what you want for yourself and my child. Jared is my mate. I know he only did what he did to protect me and the baby."

I looked down and covered my stomach with my hands.

My mom scoffed. "Did he tell you that?"

"No...."

Jared hadn't needed to tell me anything. His wolf was showing up every night to look after me, and I knew he wouldn't have done that if he really wanted to end things with me.

I knew that he'd only do something that extreme to save me and the baby.

Eventually, he'd talk to me again and I'd give him a piece of my mind. But I could understand the extreme lengths he had to go to save me and the baby.

"Then you don't know for sure, do you? You are just hopeful. You're just telling yourself what you want to believe."

"Mom, Jared is my mate, my husband, and the father of my child."

"He's not your mate anymore. He rejected you!"

"Look, I know you don't understand it, but the curse was going to kill all three of us. If we didn't break it correctly, it could have passed to our baby, just like it passed to him. I believe that he only rejected me to make sure it wouldn't pass to our baby."

"Again—"

"I'm not having this conversation every morning, Mom! Listen to me and listen well, because this is the last time I will say this...."

My mom opened her mouth and I held my hand up.

"This is my home and my pack. They accepted me as Luna. Jared's rejection doesn't change that. I have responsibilities here. I want to be here. You and Father are welcome to stay as guests."

"Eliza!"

"I'm strong enough now to go back to my life. That's just what I'm going to do. But it is still my life, and I am still going to live it the way I want."

My mother sighed heavily and shook her head.

"Mom, if you really have my best interest and my child's best interest at heart, then you'll let me do this. If there ever comes a time when I want or need to return home, I know you'll be there for me."

My mom smiled a little and reached for my hand. "Of course, I will."

I doubted this would be the last time that she'd try to convince me to leave Jared and the Dark Realm, but it felt like she was finally starting to listen to me and maybe even take me seriously.

After breakfast, I took a walk around the village. I needed to show my mother that I was actually strong enough to return to my life.

She wouldn't be convinced if I continued to stay locked up in my room.

Before we'd gone to visit Aries and everything had gone horribly wrong, I'd been planning to help Jared fix up the village and modernize it.

Jared wasn't around these days, which meant the responsibility fell to me. I was still the Luna.

I walked through every street in the village, taking more notes on where there were areas that needed work and what renovations I'd need to schedule.

Most of the residential houses and the shops were working well. They were well maintained and had good electricity.

As it turned out, the pack house needed the most work. I'd already taken notes on what the pack house needed.

I returned to the pack house and found Scarlett and Giselle.

"She appears," Scarlett said, winking at me.



Giselle rolled her eyes and ran over to hug me. "We've been worried about you."

"I'm fine... we're fine." I touched my stomach.

"That is so good to hear! How's everything... else?" Giselle grabbed my hands.

"Actually, I wanted both of your help with something." I changed the subject quickly.

As much as I loved Giselle and Scarlett, I didn't want to talk about the rejection. It was too confusing in my own mind. I had no way of trying to explain it to them.

"Eliza, may I have a moment?" My mother's voice entered the living room with my father. I hadn't seen much of him, but I knew he had been trying to give me space to make my own decision.

"I'll be right back."

I joined my parents by the front door and saw their luggage.

"What's going on?"

"It's time for us to get back to own life," my father said with a bright smile before giving me a hug.

I looked at my mother and she smiled and touched my cheek. "I wish you would come with us. But, you're right, darling. This is your life, and you need to get back on your feet."

"Thank you, Mom. That means a lot."

"But please don't feel like you have to take on curses or anything else on your own anymore. You know that we will always be there for you and our grandchild, no matter what."

"Yes, I know. I'll send regular messages," I promised.

My mom smiled again and hugged me close. "I love you, my daughter."

"I love you too, Mom."

I watched them leave the pack house. Relief swept over me. Not only were they accepting of my decision, but tomorrow, I could eat breakfast in peace.

My mom turned one last time to look at me and I waved to her.

I went back to Scarlett and Giselle.

"So, what do you need our help with?" Scarlett asked.

I grabbed a pillow and sat on one of the couches. Scarlett and Giselle found seats close by.

"I told Jared before... all this... that I would help him get the village repaired and up to date. There are some things that I can't do on my own, but I can handle renovations. I'd like to get started with pack house renovations and bring this place into the modern world."

"Eliza, no one is expecting you to...."

"To what? Be Luna?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at Giselle. "I took on the responsibility, and whatever is happening with Jared and me doesn't change that. I'm not going to turn away from my promises."

Giselle smiled and touched my knee. "That's what makes you such a great Luna."

"Thanks. I figured the three of us could start by cleaning this place up. It'll help determine where the most dangerous areas are that need immediate attention."

"Yay, cleaning day!" Scarlett rolled her eyes.

"If you don't want to help...."

She shook her head. "I do want to help. But have you seen the size of some of the dust bunnies in these corners? They could own their own property!"

"Yeah, we'll need some protective gear," Giselle agreed.

The three of us went through the pack house floor by floor, cleaning and taking notes.

I started on the top floor where the most interior damage was. It looked like no one had lived up there for a long time and it had just been left to fall into decay.

I shook my head as I looked at the peeling paint on the walls and the insect-eaten rug.

"I wonder what else is up here, other than dust bunnies," Giselle said. She poked one of the doors and it creaked open.

"What do you mean?" I ran the duster along a window frame. The glass was so dusty I couldn't even see outside.

"I mean, there are things in these rooms. What if they are old relics or something?"

"You want to dig through some old people's stuff?" Scarlett asked.

"Why not? I doubt they are coming back for it. We might find some cool things. Besides, we've been cleaning for like hours...."

I couldn't deny that curiosity was gnawing at me. Giselle was right. There could be some hidden treasures or cool old clothes.

"Alright, we'll take a quick break to check it out. But I don't want this to distract us too long. We still have a lot of work to do."

Giselle threw her duster down and pushed the door open. There were several things scattered around.

"What is all this stuff?" Scarlett asked. She went straight to the closet—no surprise there—and started sifting through musty, moth-eaten clothing. "Oh, my Goddess, some of these fashions! This stuff is old."

I went to a dusty dresser and found some old writings. The paper was brittle and the writing was a little faded, but I could see what was written.

"This stuff belonged to Luther and Anna," I said, picking up one of the papers.

"Really!? Wow. That's pretty cool," Scarlett said.

"I think Luther wrote these pages. He talks a lot about... Dark King Sebastian. Some of it is a little crazy, some ranting about revenge and how much he hates the Alpha King."

"I'm not that surprised. From my grade school history lessons, Alpha King Sebastian was a complete terror. He did horrible things to his own children and decimated other packs." Giselle sighed and shook her head.

I nodded. "I know," I murmured.

I read through the rest of the pages. They seemed to get crazier and crazier. Luther had descended into madness, consumed by his hatred and need for revenge.

By the end of it, he even started talking to Anna like she was still alive.

Part of me felt sorry for him. His entire pack had been destroyed when he was a child, even his sister. It was no wonder he'd gone mad.

"Let's pack this stuff up and put it into storage. We'll need these rooms to be clear once we start working on renovations," I said.

"Sure."

We finished packing up Luther and Anna's things and what was left in the other rooms. It was a long project but by evening, it was done.

The first thing on my list for the next morning was to start calling contractors and getting the renovations going.

## [Chapter 898](#)

\*Jared\*

If we were going to weaken Aries and get his supporters to turn against him, I knew I needed all the help I could get.

One morning, I went to meet up with Archer with several messages written and addressed to my closest allies across the realm.

"Can you dispatch these messages?" I asked, handing the stack of envelopes over.

Archer sifted through the letters, looking at the names on each envelope. He arched an eyebrow.

"I'm reaching out to all our allies, asking who is willing to stand against Aries and revealing all his deceptions," I explained.

"You don't want to deliver them yourself? I'm sure that would be more meaningful."

I grunted and tossed my hair out of my face.

"I would love to, but I'm sure you've noticed my wolf hasn't been the most cooperative these past nights."

Archer smirked. "I did notice...."

"Well, as you can imagine, I can't exactly be out in the field delivering messages and have him take over."

"Alright, I will make sure these letters make it to their destinations."

"Thank you, Archer." I clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm going to hang around the packhouse today. Send word if you hit a snag and reach out to me with any responses you get."

"Of course. I'll check in once they are delivered."

Archer bowed his head to me and returned to his camp. He was one of the few I could trust to deliver those messages.

I headed back to the village and my wolf was instantly soothed. I swear, he was getting more uncontrollable.

I needed to find a way to talk to Eliza and let her know what was going on. If things kept going like this, she really would hate me soon.

If she didn't already...

When I got back home, I went straight to my office. If I was going to be hanging around the house, I needed to put my time to good use.

Archer would keep me in the loop.

I didn't need to pace and worry. What I did need to do was figure out how to restore my mate bond to Eliza.

Just that morning, a whole new round of documentation on the mate bond had been delivered. This batch came from Moon Goddess temples and other places where the lore would be richer.

It didn't even matter how crazy or far-fetched an idea sounded. I would try anything at this point.

I grabbed one of the books and flopped down on my couch, tucking my arm behind my head.

As I read, my ears twitched, hearing Eliza, Giselle, and Scarlett chattering. I couldn't make out their words exactly, but I knew the three of them had been working on packhouse renovations.

I was glad Eliza had something to keep her busy and friends to keep her company.

My heart sank slightly and I lay the book across my chest. It still pained me to think that she was hurting so much, which was why I needed to find a solution in these books.

Growling, I picked the book up again and started reading with more vigor.

I skipped to the end where there was a chapter on restoring bonds. It wasn't specific to mate bonds, but it was the closest I'd gotten to what I was actually looking for.

The chapter was broken into subsections, each one covering a different bond.

I read about all the rituals used for restoring bonds.

Most of them involved flowers or plants of some kind and a ritual performed to the Moon Goddess.

"Huh... that's something...."

I set the book aside and went back to my stack of books and scrolls. One of the ancient texts I'd read had mentioned a flower.

I sifted through the documents until I found the one I was looking for. It was titled, "The First Mate Bond."

It was all legend, of course, but couldn't there be truth in the legends?

This was a legend for one sect of Moon Goddess priestesses that told of the first shifter pair that was mate bonded. It told of how a powerful Alpha King prayed to the Moon Goddess to find someone who was his equal and could rule as Luna beside him.

One day, he was out walking and saw the most beautiful female ever. He knew in his heart that she was his equal. To thank the Moon Goddess and honor the woman, he gave her a rare flower.

The Moon Goddess blessed their union on the flower, creating the first mate bond.

I'd read half a dozen mythologies about the first mate bond before. This was the only one that mentioned a flower, just like all the restoration rituals.

The name of the flower nearly popped out of the page at the bottom.

Lunalily.

There was a small sketch of the flower. I'd never seen anything so beautiful and unique before.

I grabbed a botany book off my shelf and flipped through it until I found what I was looking for. So, Lunalilies existed. That was a good sign.

I frowned when I saw where they grew. My eyes moved to the map hanging on the wall.

Lunalilies only grew in one place, one valley, and it was on the outskirts of the kingdom.

The sun was setting, but for the first time in days, I was hopeful. There was a flower connected to the mate bond, I knew where it grew, and there was a potential ritual to help restore the bond.

My heart felt so much lighter, and I wanted to catch Eliza and have a real word with her before my wolf took over. I hurried to her room, but it was empty.

Frowning, I looked around. There was no sign she'd been there in a while. I could see the sun sinking fast.

Dammit, I didn't have time to run around looking for her. I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen and sat down at her table, scribbling a quick letter. It was all I could do if she didn't show up in the next couple of minutes.

\*\*\*

\*Eliza\*

Shortly after the contractors left for the day, I said goodnight to Giselle and Scarlett. They wanted me to hang out longer and relax with them, but I wasn't in the mood.

As nice as it was to have a distraction from the constant pain in my chest, I still got so exhausted by the end of the day from carrying that emotional burden around, and I needed to be by myself.

I got to my room and paused in the doorway.

Jared sat at the table. He was writing something and didn't notice me for a moment.

My heart raced in my chest. I rubbed my hands on my thighs as I tried to think of something to say.

What could I say? I could ask him why he was avoiding me. I could ask him why he rejected me. But would any of those answers satisfy me?

Suddenly, Jared saw me. He stood up and put his pen down. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to mine. He cleared his throat into his fist and opened his mouth.

Before a sound came out, the air around him quivered and Jared shifted into his wolf form.

I put my hands on my hips and scoffed. "Really? One look at me and you hide?"

Jared's wolf whined and turned around, then hopped on his front paws.

Sighing, I went to the table and picked up the paper he was writing on. It was a letter.

I glanced at Jared's wolf and he nodded, nosing the letter in my hands.

"Alright, I'll read it. But we're not okay, got it?"

His wolf whimpered and went to the bed. He sat down and patiently waited for me.

"My Dearest Eliza,

I know that I have hurt you deeply with my rejection, and for that, I am truly sorry. But I need you to understand that I did it to protect our child, to make sure that they wouldn't be cursed from birth as I was. I love you more than anything in this world. You are my mate, my wife, and my Luna. I cannot bear the thought of losing you again, though I know you'll never forgive me.

I've been wanting to tell you this face to face, but my wolf wants to be with you and protect you from me... so, he takes control every night to watch over you.

It isn't much, but I have been researching a way to restore our mate bond, and I believe I have found a solution. Please know that I will do anything to take your pain away and then I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, even if you never feel the same about me.

I love you always,

Jared"

Tears pricked my eyes and I blinked them back. I could tell it was rushed, based on the sloppiness of Jared's handwriting, but he had definitely made his point. It was everything I'd been wanting to hear from him.

The letter fully conveyed his depth of love and feelings for me. And as I suspected, his sacrifice had not been to hurt me. It had been to protect our child.

Knowing the truth softened me to him.

I folded the letter up and tucked it into the bedside table.

Dropping to my knees, I wrapped my arms around his wolf neck.

"Thank you for sharing that with me."

I grabbed a fresh piece of paper and wrote Jared a loving reply, filled with hope. It was the hope that I felt in my chest now, that we could still be together.

While the pain from the rejection was still there, underneath, I understood the sacrifice. If our places had been exchanged, I would have done the same thing for our baby.

I told Jared in my reply that I welcomed his wolf's protection and comfort. I left it on the table for him to find in the morning.

I turned back to his wolf and quickly stripped out of my clothes. I shifted too. My wolf was just as eager to be in his wolf's presence.

For the past few nights, she had retreated deeper inside of me, confused about why Jared was never there but his wolf was.

She sensed the change in me, understood why it had been that way, and her happiness took me over.

We went right up to Jared's wolf and nuzzled him under the chin.

He replied happily.

My wolf and I hopped up onto the bed and yipped playfully at Jared's wolf. He jumped up and spun in several circles before lying down on the bed. My wolf did the same, cuddling close to Jared.

His wolf lay his head across my wolf's back, and soon the two of them were wrapped around each other.

A peacefulness settled over me, followed by intense drowsiness. I fell asleep quickly, feeling warm and protected against his wolf.

But I wondered how many more nights could I endure without being in Jared's arms.

## [Chapter 899](#)

\*Jared\*

When I woke up, I realized immediately that I was still in wolf form. My wolf exuded feelings of contentment and happiness.

Eliza's wolf was curled around us, two furry bodies locked together in a fierce embrace.

The sun had already risen, but I felt no urgency to get up and run off today.

Eliza had understood what I said, she'd read the words, and she had thanked me. I didn't worry that she'd yell at me or tell me she hated me or any of the other horrible thoughts that had gone through my mind.

She'd accepted my actions.

I still didn't think she'd forgiven me, but at least I knew I could stay beside her.

Yawning, my wolf's tongue curled in his long jaws. He stretched a little but was careful not to disturb Eliza's wolf.

Lazily, he lay his head down on her again. I felt the softness of her fur against mine. It felt so right, so complete to be there with her.

There was a part of me that wanted us to stay in wolf form forever, snuggling like that.

But we still had a lot to work out...

I took control and shifted back to my human form. Propping myself up on the pillows, I watched Eliza's wolf.

Her fur was so soft and silky. It shimmered in the sunlight, making her look glossy and sleek. I would have loved to run my fingers through her fur, but I wasn't sure we had reached that stage of closeness again.

Eliza's wolf blinked her big, brown eyes, her long eyelashes sweeping over the orbs delicately. She yawned, pink tongue curling, legs stretched out long in front of her.

She flopped down on the bed again and shifted.

Eliza's cheeks flushed instantly and she grabbed a blanket, tucking it around herself. She slowly moved her eyes to mine, her face beet red.

"What?" she asked, her voice muffled by the blanket.

I shook my head, hiding my smile. She looked so cute when she blushed like that. It made it hard for me not to pounce on her and pepper her face with kisses.

My heart swelled with love for her, but I knew I couldn't rush this.

"Oh, nothing. You're just pretty when you sleep."

Eliza lowered the blankets and showed me her smile.

"Oh... I'll give you some privacy to get up and get dressed." I grabbed my sweatpants and threw them on.

I remembered that Eliza had written a letter to me last night. I grabbed the paper and read it quickly. Her words were so kind and considerate.



My heart melted, and I had to force myself not to look back at her and race into her arms. I pressed the letter to my heart and took a deep breath to stay strong and centered. I folded the letter into my pocket and left.

I was in my study when someone knocked and let themselves in. I perked up when Eliza approached my desk.

"Are you working?" she nodded to the books on the desk.

"Researching the mate bond."

"Oh... well, I thought that since it is such a nice day, maybe we could go for a walk?"

I bit the inside of my lip and looked at all the books I had opened. It would be nice to take a break from all the heavy reading, but I wasn't sure if I should spend time with Eliza.

I wanted to. My wolf wanted to. He pawed in my mind and urged me to accept.

What if it was too soon? What if I hurt her more now?

"I thought maybe we could spend the day together and talk, catch up. It has been a while since we just talked."

There was a soft pleading in Eliza's voice and eyes.

I smiled, closed my book, and nodded.

"You're right. It is a nice day out. I don't want to be cooped up in here. Let's go for a walk."

Eliza and I headed out into the pack house garden. I thought it might be awkward at first, but Eliza launched right into a conversation.

"I've been getting contractors together to work on the renovations for the pack house." She turned and pointed to some of the places on the exterior that needed work.

I followed her finger and saw she was indicating the plaster corners that were crumbling and the places that needed paint.

"There's a lot of work to do on the outside and inside. Some of it is just cosmetic, but there are also floors on the top level that need to be replaced, some broken window panes, things like that."

"And you're putting it all together?" I asked, impressed.

"I'm trying. I hope that's okay." Eliza looked at her feet.

I wanted to reach out and lift her chin but I paused, my hand halfway extended. I dropped my hand at my side.

For now, I would keep my distance, unless she initiated contact.

"Of course. This is your home too."

"Right now, I'm focused on the outside. Once the plaster is repaired, I'll have a painter come and touch up the paint."

"Eliza, why don't you have them repaint the entire exterior? That way, it will be solid all the way around. The new paint won't be brighter than the old faded paint."

She glanced at me quickly. "That's not too much?"

"Not at all. I want the pack house to be welcoming and functional, and I want it to look nice enough to be suitable for us."

"Alright, thank you for the suggestion."

We walked out of the garden into the forest. Birds sang happily and I caught the slight smile that spread across Eliza's lips.

It was so good to see her smile again....

She went to a small tree and wrapped her hand around the trunk. Leaning out, she used her weight to spin slowly around the tree, holding herself up with the trunk.

My arms ached with the desire to hold her in my arms and dance with her like I had at our wedding.

My wolf also wanted that, panting in my mind.

But I restrained myself. I knew it wasn't the right time to make any moves. I had hurt Eliza deeply, and it was going to take time to earn her trust and love again.

She stopped spinning and leaned against the tree, her chest heaving slightly. I approached her slowly, my heart racing with anticipation.

"Are you okay?" I asked, my voice soft as I placed a hand on her back.

She turned to me, her eyes meeting mine. "Yeah, I just needed to let loose a little."

I smiled, relieved that she was okay. "Do you want to keep walking or head back?"

"Let's keep walking, if that's okay with you," she said, her eyes shining as she looked at me expectantly.

We walked for what felt like hours, talking and laughing the way a normal couple getting to know each other would. It was like old times but better, before everything had gone wrong. There was no curse hanging over our heads.

It was just me and her and it was perfect. After everything, she was still kind and warm and soft toward me. Even more, I wanted to give her everything I could. I would restore our mate bond if it was the last thing I ever did.

As we walked, I couldn't stop noticing how beautiful Eliza was. Her hair was tousled by the wind as we finally came to a path that would lead us back to the pack house.

I was reminded that I would have to leave her side again and soon. A strange thought occurred to me. What if she decided she didn't want the mate bond back? What if when I returned from killing Aries, she wasn't here because she decided to listen to her mother and return to the Light Realm?

"I didn't want to worry you, Eliza, but Aries is on the move again. He's planning his end game, and I'm calling for help to stop him."

Eliza sighed. "I knew we hadn't seen the last of him."

"We have a lot of allies out there, people who want to help stop him; people who owe me favors."

"I hope you're right, Jared. The last time we got tangled up with him... he had you arrested...."

She trailed off, and I heard the pain in her voice.

Aries arresting me was the triggering event that led to me rejecting her.

"It won't come to that this time. I have the element of surprise on my side," I assured.

"I'm glad to hear that."

We walked a little further and the pack house came into view. I needed to say what was on my mind before I lost my nerve.

"Eliza...."

She turned to look at me, eyes wide expectantly.

I sighed and gathered my courage. "Look, I know we are getting ready to be parents and... I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want me to be part of our child's life."

Eliza's eyes grew wide as saucers, nearly popping out of her head.

"What!?" She wrapped her arms around her stomach protectively. "Why would you even think that!?"

"I just mean, because of our broken bond, you don't have to stay with me and act like my wife or anything, if you don't want to. I wouldn't blame you or hold it against you."

"Jared, the vows I took when we got married were a different bond than the mate bond. I'm not throwing all that away because we hit a snag."

I couldn't hold my smile back. I held a hand out to her, tentatively.

"You're sure?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

Eliza took my hand and stepped closer to me. "I'm sure. We don't need the mate bond to be together. I loved you long before I ever felt the mate bond."

"I know what you mean. But I still want to restore it for you, for our family." I put my hand on her stomach.

"Jared...."

"I never knew my father, and my mother died when I was young. It is important for me for us to be a proper family, and that includes an intact mate bond."

Eliza bit her lower lip. "That's not necessary. We can still be together, be good parents, without it."

"Maybe so, but I think I've found a way to restore it. And I'm not going to give up yet." I squeezed her hand.

"You found a way?" Eliza gasped.

"Yes. There's a flower in a valley and a ritual to the Moon Goddess. It is very promising."

"Promising... is getting the flower dangerous?"

I scratched just above my eyebrow, thinking carefully about how to answer that question.

"It isn't any more dangerous than anything we've already done."

"Jared! That's not really comforting. After everything we've been through, do you really want to risk more?"

She pulled away from me and put her hands on her belly.

"I'd much rather have our child grow up with two parents, not mate bonded, than one parent, while the other perished trying to restore that mate bond."

I put my hands on Eliza's shoulders and waited for her to lift her eyes to mine. Under her shirt, I could feel how warm her skin was. Her body felt soft and pliable. If I pulled her to me in a kiss, I didn't think she'd resist.

But was that the right thing to do?

"Trust me, Eliza. I won't let anything happen to me. Being with you and our child means everything, and I will survive anything to make that a reality. I'll be careful when I go to get the flower."

Eliza nodded slowly, holding my gaze with hers.

I brushed my thumbs along her jawline.

We were so close, and it still felt like we were so far apart....

"I want nothing more than to be fully bonded to you again. I know it will be better for both of us and our child."

Eliza nodded. "I won't deny that I want the mate bond restored, but only if it isn't going to be too dangerous."

I smiled. "Trust me. I will take care of it."

"When do you plan to go?"

"Once all this nonsense with Aries is handled, I will go get the flower. By then, it will be a lot safer for me to travel around, anyway."

[Chapter 900](#)

\*Eliza\*

Jared left to take care of Aries. We'd spent some time together, and he told me that his wolf was finally settled down enough to let him leave and do what he had to do.

I missed him, even though our bond wasn't the same.

To keep my mind busy, and my wolf occupied instead of moping over Jared's absence, I focused all my energy on the renovations.

Standing in the garden, I oversaw the work being done to repair the plaster exterior of the pack house.

"How's it looking?" I asked the head contractor.

"We'll be done with the south side this afternoon. Tomorrow, we'll get started on the east side."

"Great. When do you think the whole thing will be done? I've got to schedule painters."

The head contractor looked at his clipboard. "We'll be done by the end of the week."

"Thank you."

I headed inside to let him get back to work. Scarlett and Giselle were painting one of the rooms on the top floor. Another group of contractors had fixed the window panes, jacked up the floor, and leveled it. Now, it just needed a fresh coat of paint.

Giselle had picked a nice royal blue color.

Both of them were tucked into one corner making the final brush strokes on the room.

"Wow, you guys finished here quickly."

Scarlett rolled her eyes at me. "We've been doing this for three days."

"Oh... really?"

Had it been three days already?

"Can we please take a break?" Giselle asked, setting her brush down.

"Sure. I'll find the next project for you guys to do when you get back."

Scarlett scoffed.

As they came out of the room, they each grabbed one of my arms and half-pulled me to the stairs.

"When I said 'we,' I meant all three of us. You need a break too, you know," Giselle said.

"But... no. I have a lot to do still." I dug my feet into the floor, trying to stop them.

"Shush, no arguing. We're taking a break," Scarlett insisted.

They dragged me all the way to the kitchen and started getting a picnic basket ready.

"You've been working nonstop, Eliza. It isn't good for you." Giselle touched my shoulder comfortingly.

"It helps me keep my mind off... things." I sighed and bowed my head.

"You mean like Jared going off and confronting Aries?" Scarlett asked.

"Yeah, just like that. Thanks." I shook my head.

We headed to a park near the center of the village. It was a family place with a big open field, duck pond, and a playground.

Scarlett spread out a picnic blanket and Giselle began to unpack the basket of snacks. I grabbed myself a sandwich and took a big bite, munching slowly.

My eyes wandered around the park. There were a lot of families there, kids with their parents playing on the playground, getting pushed on the swings, and feeding bread to the ducks.

I touched my own stomach, thinking about how soon Jared and I would be making memories like that ourselves.

Sighing, all the tension left my body and my shoulders sagged. Suddenly, the sandwich tasted like the best sandwich I'd ever had, and I took another vigorous bite.

"You look like you're starting to relax," Giselle said, poking my knee.

I nodded. "It is such a nice day—perfect temperature, just the right amount of sunlight. Thank you for forcing me to come out."

Giselle stuck her tongue out between her teeth. "What can I say? If you don't relax, then we can't relax."

I giggled and grabbed a juice box from the picnic basket.

"Enough of the boring stuff," Scarlett jumped in. "Don't you want to hear my gossip?"

"Oh, do share." Giselle winked at me.

"Well, it is about Gabe, as I'm sure you could guess. He's adjusting back to the pack but... it is a process."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" I asked, sucking my straw until it gurgled and only pulled up air.

Scarlett shrugged. "No, I don't think so. It'll just take time. But he's getting there."

"Well, he has you. As long as you support him, he stands a chance." I nodded and finished off my sandwich.

"Thank you, Eliza. That means a lot."

"And you'll let us know if you need anything, or if Gabe needs anything," Giselle added.

"Of course! But I doubt you'll even be around if I need help."

Giselle gave a feigned look of shock, pressing her hand to her chest.

"Wait, what? Giselle, are you leaving?" My heart hammered heavily. I hadn't realized how much I'd come to adore my friends until faced with the possibility that Giselle was leaving.

"I'm not leaving!" Giselle argued. "I'm simply entertaining the idea of visiting the capital."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean... with Aries and all, the capital might not be safe."

Giselle frowned. "Well, I didn't say I was going to leave tomorrow. It was just an idea. There's a lot happening in the capital. I'd like to visit a place that moves at a faster pace for a bit."

Giselle and Scarlett kept talking about visiting the capital.

I listened, but my mind wandered back to Jared. I hoped he was safe and not taking any unnecessary risks. More than anything, I wanted him to come home safely.

He was so determined to fix the mate bond.

I really admired his determination and persistence. But after everything, I just wanted him here with me. He was always running off on some daring mission.

Before, I was happy to go with him.

I looped my arms around my stomach. We couldn't afford to take such risks anymore. We were going to be parents....

My eyes wandered through the park again. There were laughing children all over the place. The families were so happy together.

The park was also full of animals—ducks, squirrels, songbirds, and buzzing insects. Wildflowers grew throughout the fields, and there was a garden with walking paths on the far end of the park.

"I'm going to go walk through the garden," I announced, standing up.

"Do you want us to come along?" Giselle asked, smiling up at me.

"No. I'm just going to clear my head. I'll be back soon."

"Sure."

As I walked across the park, I couldn't help but smile at some of the kids and their mothers. One mom chased her toddler through the grass, playing a game of tag that she was letting him win.

Another mother crouched at the edge of the pond, pointing to the ducks and telling her daughter what kinds of ducks they were.

I rubbed my stomach, still flat and unnoticeable. What kind of mother would I be? I hoped to be patient and understanding, loving and supportive.

Even if my child wanted a different life than what I imagined for them, I wanted to think that I'd support them.

I made it to the garden and slipped into one of the walkways.

The garden was absolutely beautiful. There were hedges with roses and other flowers growing out of them, and stone benches and fountains scattered throughout.

It was so peaceful and beautiful.

While I ran my fingers along the delicate, fragrant flower petals, I thought of Jared again. He was out there, risking his life, and I was here... waiting for news.

I knew I had no business being out there with him in my condition. It sucked because we'd gone on all our other crazy missions together. I didn't like being separated from him and not knowing what was going on.

One of the hedges beside me rustled.

I froze in place and looked through the tight branches of the hedge. I couldn't see anything....

Shrugging, I kept walking. A few more steps down the cobblestone path, another hedge rustled.

"What the...."

I paused and squinted between the branches. Still, there was nothing there. I frowned, putting my hands on my hips.

What was going on?

Sighing, I turned around.

Jumping, my heart leapt into my throat and I nearly fell backward.

Aries stood in the path with a smug smirk on his face.

"What are you doing here?" I gasped when my heart wasn't trying to jump out my mouth again.

Aries shrugged casually. "I saw you with your friends. How kind of you to come out here, all alone."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

My heart rate increased again. I glanced from side to side and realized that Aries was right. I was alone in the garden, separated from my friends, and no one else was around. I was completely vulnerable....

How could I have been so stupid? I let my guard down for a second....

Without thinking, I turned on my heel and ran toward the entrance of the garden.

A strong arm came around my waist and pulled me to a dead stop. My body lurched, and it felt like I'd run into the side of a table with my stomach.

"Ugh...."

My head spun a little and I felt nauseated from the force.

Aries pulled me against him and I felt the cool prick of a knife against my throat.

"I wouldn't try that again if I were you," he hissed.

"What do you want from me!?" I snarled. "Shouldn't you be off staging a lame coup to seize power?"

Aries chuckled in my ear. The sound sent an unsettling shiver down my spine.

"Oh, I would love to be out seizing the throne and making it my own. I want to unseat the king and your cousin. I want them to crawl at my feet and beg for their lives."

"Then what do you need me for!?"



"Well, you see, Jared is meddling again. It has made things a bit more... complicated. That's where you come in."

I scoffed. "You know that won't work. You've already tried it. Hell, Hestia tried it too, and it didn't work."

"Oh, but before, I wasn't playing the hand I have now. You see, Hestia and I have made up. We are once again playing on the same side. That certainly tips the scales, doesn't it?"

I clamped my mouth shut.

If Aries was telling the truth, he'd just become a more dangerous enemy.

"You're lying. You're trying to get me to play your game. I won't do it."

My mind raced. Whether Aries was lying or not, I had to get away from him. Giselle and Scarlett weren't far. The park was filled with families.

How far had I walked? I wondered whether someone would hear if I cried out. I tried to listen for them but couldn't hear anything.

Aries couldn't stop all of them. He was here alone, as far as I could tell.

"Wouldn't that be something? Now... with Hestia, the balance of power has shifted, and I like the odds I'm playing now."

Icy fear gripped me. He wasn't lying....

I had to make a move and hope for the best.

Without thinking, I elbowed Aries in the stomach and took off running again. He grunted in pain and stumbled back. I could hear his footsteps chasing after me.

My adrenaline kicked in, and my legs pumped as I sprinted through the garden and back toward the park. I could hear people in the distance, and I pushed myself harder.

As I was ready to scream, I felt Aries' vice like grip on my wrist yanking me back and the cold metal of his knife against the back of my neck.

"Nice try, my dear, but it looks like I've got you again," he whispered menacingly in my ear.

My heart was pounding in my chest. I was trapped, helpless, and had no idea what to do. My mind raced as Aries held me captive once again.

"You won't win, Aries," I said, trying to sound confident. "Jared and the others will find me."

Aries laughed, the sound sending chills down my spine. "Oh, my dear, you underestimate me. I want Jared to find you. In fact, I will tell him exactly where to find you."

Panic set in as I realized that might be true. Aries was cunning and always had a plan. But I couldn't give up. I had to keep fighting.

I opened my mouth to scream and draw attention.

Before a sound escaped, Aries hit the side of my head with the butt of his knife.

Everything went black.