

Kings Breeder 861

[Chapter 861](#)

I could barely catch my breath as I realized the entire city was still here and clearly full of people and life.

There was something off about the way the lights had turned on.

I could see into the streets of the city but I couldn't see any actual people.

Sure, lights were coming on all over the place, but where were the people? Initially, I thought the lights meant there were people still here in Myrel.

But where were they? Why weren't they coming out of the buildings to see what was going on? Ashudder ran through me when an eerie thought occurred to me.

Were there people at all? Maybe these lights were just responding to my presence like motion-sensored lights that came on when someone walked in front of them.

Had we discovered a dead city that still reacted when someone showed up? For some reason, that creped me out in a whole different way.

I kept staring up at the lights as they came on, and that was exactly how Abe found me, dragging Jared along behind him.

Jared was a little pale, but he wasn't screaming in pain anymore.

His power had been contained, though it seemed like he was weak.

I couldn't tell if he was conscious...

his eyes were closed and his breathing was heavy and labored.

I knelt down next to him and put my hand on his forehead.

He didn't have a fever but his skin felt a little cold and clammy.

What had happened to him in the cave? Why had he lost control like that? What had caused him all that pain? "Eliza, we have a problem,"

Abe said.

He stood over me and Jared, his shadow swallowing us as more lights came on behind him.

Slowly, I stood up and pointed to the city above us.

Abe turned around and tilted his head back, looking at the city above us.

I heard him gasp and a strange look crossed his face.

"Okay, we've got two problems..."

Jared shuddered and opened his eyes.

Panting, he jumped to his feet.

"Hey.It's alright, we got you," I said, touching his shoulder.

Jared's eyes whipped around wildly.

Those big, beautiful, captivating orbs were so restless and unsettled.

I rubbed his arm comfortingly and finally, his eyes settled on me.

"Eliza.What...what happened?" He creased his brow.

"Don't you remember what happened in the cave?" I arched my eyebrow.

Jared had really scared me.I hadn't gotten around to doing what the vision of Draven had told me to do to help him.But he seemed recovered now...except for not being able to remember.He shook his head.

"No."

He pointed to all the lights, tilting his head back.

"What's going on up there?"

How could he not remember? He'd been in so much pain, screaming bloody murder.Maybe it was better that he didn't remember.I followed Jared's finger and saw he was pointing to the terrace above our heads where there were shadowy figures moving around.

Were they ghosts? Were they just shadows? At this angle and in this light, it was hard to tell.

"As I was saying, we've got a few problems," Abe jumped in again.

I opened my mouth to reply.

Crunch.

Crunch.

All three of us whipped around in the direction of the sound.

From the shadows, a woman appeared.

She walked slowly and gracefully, like she was floating across the cavern floor.

Barefoot, her toes peaked out under the hem of her white, flowy, cotton dress.

The dress wasn't elaborate, but against her tanned skin and dark hair, it glowed ethereally, making her seem like an otherworldly creature.

At this point, I was willing to believe anything was possible.

"Follow me," she said, beckoning us with her hand.

Her voice was distant and soft, like an echo resonating off the walls, barely above a whisper and yet firm enough to hear over the cascading waterfall nearby.I swallowed and stepped toward her, my feet acting on their own.

"Eliza, what are you doing?" Jared asked, grabbing my arm.

"She told us to follow her," I pointed after the woman.

"We don't know who she is or what she wants. We can't just follow her," he argued.

"I don't know...I just feel like I'm supposed to follow her...."

"Come on, Eliza, we're already in way over our heads here," Abe added, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jared.

Great.

Now they were both ganging up on me.

"Trust me, please," I begged, widening my eyes imploringly.

Jared's jaw tensed and he cast his eyes aside.

I knew how he got when he was trying to be protective, but I couldn't let that interfere with every lead we got.

This was important.

I was doing this to help him.

"Come, come, my children..."

Ashiver ran down my spine as the woman spoke again, that same otherworldly voice prickling the hairs on the back of my neck.

There was something familiar about her.

I couldn't shake the sense that I'd seen her before, but I knew I'd remember meeting someone like that.

Her voice alone was enough to chill me to the bone. I'd definitely remember that...Before Abe and Jared could protest more, I turned around and followed " the woman. The ledge we were on led to a path that angled up to the city. The strange woman was already on the path. I followed at a distance.

She didn't seem dangerous but I wasn't going to take any chances, not until I knew more about her and why she was so familiar.

Jared and Abel walked close behind me.

I could practically feel the tension coming off of them.

They were both on high alert.

We got to one of the roads into the city.

All the buildings were ancient W] and carved with incredibly intricate stone columns and sculptures.

It must have taken hundreds of years to carve all those delicate details.

Every building we passed, lights flicked on.

I didn't see anyone turning on the lights.

Most of the windows were covered and I couldn't see anyone I moving around inside.

i Was there anyone else there other than this mysterious woman? Had I really seen shadows on the terrace, or was that a figment of my ; imagination? We approached a large, well-lit building with a fountain out front : splashing sparkling water droplets in lovely spiral patterns.

Suddenly, the air filled with music.

An orchestra was playing inside the building we approached, and I could hear the song perfectly.

Gasping, I glanced at Jared.

The song was the same song from the locket...

I'd recognize that music anywhere.

The woman led us up a large, wide stone staircase into the building.

We found ourselves in a ballroom with cathedral ceilings.

It was huge, the largest room I'd ever been in.

Made of white marble with a matching floor, it was a very elegant room.

The orchestra music thrummed and echoed off the marble walls.

There was something else in the room too.

Misty shadows moved around me.

They swirled and flew around in intricate patterns.

I caught sight of pointed legs and outstretched arms as the mist took form and then became mist again.

After a moment, I realized they were dancing.

I turned to Jared and Abe.

"They're ghosts..."

"Ghosts?"

Jared asked, arching an eyebrow.

"You see them, don't you?" I asked, panic making my stomach gurgle. I remembered how Abe hadn't been able to see my vision of Draven in the cave.

Was I hallucinating again or having some kind of waking dream? "We see them,"

Abe assured.

"They're dancing. It is very beautiful and...little sad."

I sighed, hanging my head.

Jared came up behind me and put a comforting hand on my back.

I didn't know why it made me sad to see dancing ghosts.

I didn't know who they were or what had happened to them.

Still, my heart clenched slightly.

There was something tragically beautiful about ghosts dancing to an orchestra playing an old lullaby.

Finally, the woman who led us here turned to me.

In the bright light of the ballroom, I could finally see her features better.

Gasping, I took a half step back.

She had the same eye color as me, and there were other similarities between us.

Our body shape, skin tone, and hair were oddly similar.

I rubbed my palms together.

She looked even more familiar in the brighter light, and not just because we had similarities in our physical appearance.

Tilting my head, I studied her.

She didn't seem to notice or care as I looked her over.

Where had I seen her before? My dream...

I'd seen her in my dream.

She was Draven's mate....

"I know you,"

I blurted out.

"We've never met."

"I...it's hard to explain."

I bit my lower lip.

Did I really want to tell this woman I'd seen her in a dream? She didn't strike me as the type to be surprised by anything, but I didn't want her to write me off immediately.

"I have the Cryptex."

Narrowing her eyes, the woman stepped forward.

She walked a half circle around me, examining me closely.

I felt like an ant under a magnifying glass as she studied me.

The only question now was whether she was just a curious child or whether she'd burn me with the reflection of the sun through the glass.

"What are you doing?"

Jared asked gruffly, a small growl rising in his throat.

The woman's eyes shifted.

She looked right past me at Jared.

Her eyes narrowed even more and she stepped back into a corner with shadows.

"Come with me," she said again, beckoning us into the shadows.

I immediately stepped forward.

Jared and Abe followed.

The woman came out of the shadows again and held up both her hands.

"Not you two."

She gave Jared and Abe a hard look.

"Only her."

She nodded at me.

"No. Eliza isn't going with you alone!"

Jared insisted.

"I've got this, Jared. We need to know," I said, holding a hand up to him.

Jared crossed his arms.

"I don't like it, Eliza. We don't know where she's going to take you. The three of us are in this together. We shouldn't split up."

"It will be fine," I assured him.

It wasn't like Jared didn't have his reasons to be concerned after everything we'd already dealt with and what the Cryptex had done recently, not to mention what had just happened in the cave.

Yeah, he had good reason to worry.

The way he worried was kind of... adorable, especially since I knew I'd win.

He could huff and puff all he wanted, but we both knew that when I wanted to do something, I'd do it.

"I can do this," I promised.

"Eliza..." I ignored Jared's continued protests and followed the woman into the shadows.

The music stopped and I glanced back. All the dancing ghosts were gone.

[Chapter 865](#)

Jared rested his head on my breast. He breathed heavily, our legs still entwined.

Gently, I stroked my fingers through his hair, watching the sun make its last descent below the horizon.

Just before we lost the light, my eyes caught something strange off in the distance.

"Jared."

I nudged him and he lifted his head.

Sitting up, I threw the bathing suit cover back on and went to the rail of the boat.

There was a long, thin, black line stretching across the horizon.

"Do you see that?" I pointed.

Jared joined me at the rail. He had his swim trunks on again. His eyes darkened as he looked where I pointed. Something ominous passed over his face.

"It is just a sea storm. It's still a few days out. We'll have plenty of time to find shelter before it gets here."

I nodded slowly and gripped the rail of the boat. Dread stuck in my veins like glue, making my blood feel like sludge.

That wasn't just the darkness of a sea storm.

I could feel my own curse shadow shifting, squirming restlessly.

That darkness out there had something to do with the curse that inhabited both of us, a curse that bound us together just as surely as it meant to tear us apart.

I glanced at Jared.

He still watched the storm, too.

It was easy to tell what he was thinking because I was thinking the same thing.

We couldn't outrun the darkness forever. No matter how much we both wished we could.

Sighing, I pushed those thoughts as deep down as I could, right into my toes. I grabbed Jared's hand and led him to the cabin below deck.

"We should rest. There's a whole village out there for us to explore tomorrow."

The storm would catch up to us eventually, no matter what we did. So why worry?

Jared and I could spend the next few days hunkering down, planning for the worst, obsessing over a storm we couldn't stop... or we could focus on each other and enjoy our time together.

There were several small coastal villages on the Saboreef coast. They all had marinas, so it was easy to dock and go into town for lunch. And it was a good thing too, because I couldn't live off of that propane-fried fish.

"Check this out," Jared said on our first stop. He pointed to a small gathering in the village square.

There was a woman wearing a skirt made of palm fronds. She had a fresh flower necklace around her neck and no top. The flowers barely covered her breasts.

She was dancing, and she was so balanced and skilled that the flowers never wavered and kept her covered the whole time.

"Wow... she's really good," I said.

"All these little villages have their own cultures and histories."

I grinned at Jared. "You know you just recited the archeologist's magic words for endless entertainment, right?"

"Of course!"

We stopped at a small café for lunch. The tables were all outside with little grass umbrellas to shade us from the warm sun. Stray dogs ran through the village with young kids running after them and playing.

It was so quaint and simple.

For lunch, I had fresh oysters over salad and a delicious tropical fruit juice that was squeezed right at the table when I ordered it.

The next day, we went to another small coastal town. There was a museum there that documented some of the ancient temples in the area.

I spent hours squinting at the pictures of old temples and the carvings on them.

"I wonder if we can visit any of these," I murmured as Jared stayed close beside me.

For all I knew, he was bored out of his mind as I nerded out over pictures of ancient temples and hieroglyphs, but he didn't show it.

"I think they used to have tours of some of the more intact temples, but I didn't see anything about the tours at the front desk. That's usually where they advertise that stuff," he said.

I bowed my head. "Too bad. I would love to see some of these hieroglyphs up close."

That second day, we stopped at a local restaurant that had tables right out in the sand. When the tide came in, the cool water gurgled around my feet.

I ordered pan-seared shrimp with a spicy seasoning served with grilled vegetables and some rice.

"Where are we going tomorrow?" I asked Jared as we got back on the boat to sleep.

We'd always sleep where we were anchored and then sail to the next village early in the morning. We'd be there in time for lunch and have the rest of the day to explore.

"Well, I heard of this place a little further up the coast. Supposedly, it's the hidden gem of Saboreef and not a lot of tourists know about it."

"That sounds promising."

Instead of sticking close to the coast the next day, Jared sailed us further out to sea. We sailed around a rocky point with large coastal rocks that cast dangerous, looming shadows over us as waves crashed ravenously around the rocks.

On the other side of the point, the harsh sea calmed and there was a little island. As we got closer, I could see that it was densely covered in a tropical jungle forest. There weren't any other boats around.

Jared got as close as possible and dropped the anchor. We got in the little dinghy boat and he rowed us to shore.

Tropical birds sang out to each other and the loud hoot calls of monkeys echoed through the trees.

Jared grabbed our daypacks from the dinghy and we headed into the jungle.

"How do you know where we're going?" I asked, pushing a large, damp leaf out of my face.

"The island isn't that big. It takes two hours to get from one side to the other. And we can still see the ocean, so it's not like we're going to get lost," he assured.

We hiked deeper into the dense jungle. The sounds of animals and insects got louder and closer the further we went.

"Eliza, come here, come here," Jared whisper-shouted to me, motioning for me to come to his side.

He crouched down. I did the same and I crawled up behind him.

He pointed over a small ridge. "Look at that."

I followed his finger and gasped.

There was a whole troop of monkeys. Some of them hung lazily on tree branches like they were sunbathing. Others were cracking nuts and picking insects up off the ground, eating whatever they found. Little baby monkeys screamed at each other, running around and playing.

Every now and then, one of the mother monkeys would get fed up with the noise and let out a loud bellow, and the babies fell silent.

I covered my mouth and laughed. "Wow. What a great sight."

A little further into the jungle, I heard a new sound. After our past few adventures, it was a sound I knew very well.

"We're almost there," Jared said, picking up his pace. He headed directly toward the sound of rushing, gushing water.

We broke into a clearing, where a massive waterfall cascaded down from a high, rocky peak. The sun caught it just right through the trees, and the mist from the waterfall created a perfect rainbow.

There was a large, rough pool at the base of the waterfall. The water was crystal clear. There were a few large rocks around the pool and several plants that hung over the edge, their leaves and petals dipping into the water.

Jared and I ditched our bags and clothes. We dove into the clear water.

"Holy s**t! This is freezing!" I cried. My teeth chattered.

Jared laughed. "Give it a few minutes. It will warm up."

"I thought the ocean was cold...."

Jared swam up to me and pulled me into his arms. Our naked bodies slid together and my teeth stopped chattering.

"Better?" he asked, the warmth of his body surrounding me.

I nodded.

We swam in the cool water, listening to the sounds of the jungle. It had to be one of the most peaceful days I'd had in a long, long time.

I flipped onto my back and floated on the water, looking up at the bright, sunny sky.

It seemed impossible to think that a dark, raging storm was closing in, inching closer every day, when the sun was still so bright and strong.

No matter how much I tried to ignore it and focus on my enjoyment, the threat of darkness continued to tickle the back of my mind.

As peaceful as it was to be in that place with Jared, I couldn't help but think about how it was all temporary. We could have fifty perfect days in a row, but one bad one would ruin the memory of it.

I wanted to remember these past few days for how much I loved spending them with Jared and all the good times we had, but the looming darkness threatened to take it all away.

My stomach churned and I started treading water.

"Eliza, are you okay?" Jared asked, swimming over to me.

"Yeah... I just...."

"What's wrong?"

Sighing, I looked at the sky again. "I'm worried about the storm. I think we should find shelter."

"We've still got at least one more day. Let's enjoy the rest of our day on this island, where we are completely alone. We'll head back first thing in the morning."

Jared pulled me into his arms and spun me around.

I giggled, letting my thoughts of storms and darkness drift away.

Early the next morning, Jared and I returned the houseboat to the tourist town in Saboreef. I was a little sorry to see it go. We'd only spent four days on it, but it had gotten so comfortable and homey.

"There's a place we can go for shelter while we wait out the storm," Jared said.

"We can't leave?" I asked, chewing my bottom lip.

Jared shook his head. "It's too late for that. Travel is suspended until the storm passes."

He took me to a tiny village just outside of the larger tourist town. It was made of tiny little huts.

Jared headed to one of the small homes.

"Wait... we're staying in one of those tiny huts?" I gasped, pointing.

They were so tiny—how could they withstand the force of a strong storm?

"They might be small, but they are shielded, see." Jared pointed to a naturally formed rock wall between the huts and the ocean.

He took my hand and led me to one of the huts. Based on their position behind the wall, they'd be protected from the storm... mostly.

"I know it isn't much, but it will do."

[Chapter 866](#)

The storm was still a few hours out, so while Jared gathered supplies for us to stay hunkered down for a few days, I explored the little village.

All the little huts were made of wood and thatch. They didn't look all that sturdy.

I went to the outside of our hut and knocked on the wall with my fist.

The knock echoed through the hollow room on the other side.

Nodding, I stepped back. It did feel sturdy enough. I noticed other people coming in with supplies, too. Apparently, this was the place to come when hiding out from a big sea storm like the one approaching.

There were other people there too—locals. I could tell they lived there because some of them had little gardens outside their huts or their kids were playing together.

It was a very simple, quiet place to have families, raise kids, and live.

They all seemed happy and just fine without a lot of modern technology. There was even a communal clothesline, where I saw several women pulling down hanging clothes and taking them inside before the storm started.

Even when they rushed to bring the clothes in, the entire hut village seemed peaceful and friendly.

"Come on, Eliza. It's time to get inside and board things up," Jared called.

He stood in the doorway of our little hut and waved me in.

We closed the door and shoved a heavy board in front of it to keep it from blowing open. It was a small, round hut with just one room, so there was only one window. It had shutters on it, and Jared closed and latched them.

He got a fire going in the small fireplace and laid out all our supplies on the kitchen table. We had plenty of dried goods for food and bottled water. He even got us some lanterns and flashlights.

"We should be okay with all of this."

"What if the roof leaks?" I asked.

Jared smirked and pulled some metal bowls out of the only cabinet in the hut. "Got that covered too." He winked at me.

I nodded and looked around the hut. It wasn't a bad place to hide out until the storm passed. In the bottom of my heart, a cold, paralyzing fear crept in.

I put my hand over my heart and tried to take a deep breath. What if the storm never passed?

There was darkness all around us and I could feel it getting closer and closer. What if this storm brought the darkness and it never left? Could we ever escape?

The shadow in me stirred and I shoved it further down.

"I'm going to change into some pajamas and snuggle up by the fire. Care to join me?" Jared asked.

He pulled his shirt off and dropped his pants. My eyes widened and I took a step back. I hadn't expected him to just drop everything on the floor.

Jared stretched his arms up and yawned like a foghorn. In nothing but boxers, I got a full view of him. He flopped down on the couch and patted the cushion beside him.

I put my hands on my hips. "I thought you said you were putting on pajamas."

He grinned. "Oh, you should know by now, these are my pajamas." He snapped the waistband of his boxers.

Rolling my eyes, I stripped down to my underpants and a tank top. I joined Jared on the couch and he pulled a blanket over us. We snuggled up together, the crackling fire keeping us warm.

Outside, I could hear the winds picking up. Gusts whistled past the hut and shook the thatched room.

I shivered.

"What's wrong?"

I sighed and nuzzled against Jared's bare, sculpted chest. "I can't shake this feeling."

"What feeling?"

"That the storm is dangerous."

"I promise, Eliza, we will be fine," Jared assured. He kissed the top of my head.

I nodded against him and snuggled closer. I tried to block out those thoughts and just focus on Jared and our time together.

His chest rose and fell, pushing me with each movement. His heart thrummed against my cheek, and every now and then his arms tensed as he held me a little closer.

Rain started to fall, pelting the hut we were in. Thunder rumbled in the distance but I knew it would only get closer. By the time the rain had picked up to a torrential downpour, the ground shook with thunder, but it still sounded far away.

We weren't even into the worst of the storm yet.

The entire hut suddenly lit up with an eerie blue glow. The flash was gone in an instant.

BOOM!

"Ah!" I bolted upright, shaking.

"Eliza, it's okay, it was just some thunder," Jared said. He sat up and wrapped his arms around me.

"That sounded close, really close," I murmured.

"We're perfectly safe." Jared rubbed my back soothingly.

More lightning flashed and quieter thunderclaps rumbled around. I was still shaken by the really close lightning strike.

The fire started to burn low and instead of putting another log on it, Jared got up and turned on the battery-powered lanterns he'd stockpiled.

When he sat down with me again, he wrapped me in his arms and pulled me close, laying down with me on his chest. He kissed the top of my head and stroked my hair.

I sighed, feeling safe and secure in his arms.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "I'm with you. We're together. Nothing else matters. Everything will work itself out."

"You sound so sure."

He chuckled and kissed the top of my head again. "I am sure."

I relaxed against him, feeling like I was melting a little. It occurred to me that if we didn't survive the storm, it wouldn't be that bad. Like Jared said, we were together, and that was all that mattered.

Everything that had happened between us was enough.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked me, breaking into my thoughts.

"Oh... nothing. I'm glad to be here with you."

"Have you relaxed yet?" he purred in my ear.

"I'm better than I was."

"But not... fully relaxed?"

"Uh... no. The storm is still pretty loud."

"Well, I could help you relax all the way, and take your mind off the storm," Jared suggested.

"Really? How do you plan to do that?"

Jared chuckled. He grabbed my hips and rolled on top of me.

"What're y—"

Jared pressed his lips to mine, kissing me hungrily. He pushed his tongue into my mouth, tasting me fully.

I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck instantly and melting into his kiss.

Jared's hands ran up and down my sides. Every time his hands slid up, my tank top got a little higher. He caressed my sides, brushing his thumbs over my navel.

I squirmed in his grasp, moaning into his mouth.

It didn't take long for the crashing of waves and rumbling thunder to drift to the back of my mind.

Jared slid his hands under my shirt. He broke our kiss, pushing it over my head. He latched his lips onto my throat, kissing and sucking down my sensitive artery.

Arching my back, I ran my hands down Jared's chest, feeling his muscles tense and shudder under my touch.

He cupped my breasts, massaging them in his palms, rubbing my n*****s in circles. I could feel the firm, pulsing bulge of his erection against my hip.

My core tightened and heat pooled between my legs. I rolled my hips, pressing against his c**k.

Jared groaned. He grabbed my hands and pinned them above my head against the arm of the couch. With one hand, he pinned my wrists.

With his other hand, Jared placed his forefinger at the base of my throat. Slowly, he dragged his finger down my sternum, between my breasts, and down the line of my stomach.

My skin shivered and tickling pleasure ran through me.

When he got to my belly button, he paused. Smirking, Jared held my gaze and brushed his thumb around my belly button.

I arched into his touch, gasping. My stomach fluttered and the warmth between my legs intensified. I clenched my thighs.

"P-please," I whispered, moaning lightly and tilting my head back.

Jared's fingers slid further down my stomach to the waist of my panties. He slipped his pointer finger in just a little and ran his finger back and forth along my waistline.

"Please, what?" he asked, tightening his grip on my wrists.

"I... I want..."

I couldn't form any thoughts. My body begged Jared to keep touching me.

He chuckled darkly and slid his hand into my panties. His fingers dipped between my legs, stroking my inner thighs, coating them in my slick arousal.

"Oh, I get it now," Jared teased. He leaned down and nibbled on my earlobe.

Moaning, I twisted in his grasp. His weight pinned me down.

Jared's fingers moved to my soaked p***y. He brushed my swollen lips, stroking deeper to my slick entrance. His fingertip teased my slit, sliding up and down.

My legs trembled and I clenched my hands into fists.

He pushed a finger all the way inside. My tight channel of muscles constricted around his finger. Slowly, he slid his finger in and out, curling it to stroke my inner walls.

"Mmm!" I rolled my hips, desperate to feel more.

"Tsk." Jared pulled his finger out and I whimpered.

He pushed my lips apart and pressed his finger to my swollen, aching clit.

A violent shudder ran through me and I cried out.

Slowly, Jared circled his finger around my pleasure bead. He teased me with light strokes and then pressed harder, rubbing with more vigor.

My legs shook and I lifted my hips to increase the friction of his touch. He started rubbing faster.

I arched my back and closed my eyes, moaning and sobbing as he took me right to the edge of sanity. I clenched my legs around his hand as a pleasurable release crashed through me.

Jared released my arms and sat back, pulling my underwear off the rest of the way. He slid out of his boxers.

I brought my hand around his thick c**k and cupped his length.

He sighed and pressed his hips into me. I closed my fingers around him and loosely stroked his shaft until a glistened bead of precum pooled on his tip.

Biting my lower lip, I slathered the liquid over him with my thumb.

Jared groaned and his eyelids fluttered.

He leaned down, capturing my lips with his.

[Chapter 867](#)

Jared

I thrust into Eliza, holding her tightly in my arms.

She shuddered and trembled around me, her inner walls tightening against my c**k.

Groaning, I pressed my forehead to hers, our breath mixing together.

My heart swelled with all my love for her. It overwhelmed me. My c**k trembled and I tensed, releasing into her.

Breathing heavily, I clung to Eliza.

She melted against me, nuzzling my chest.

I felt so close to her and like all the love I felt for her, the love I'd tried to deny myself, wrapped around us protectively.

It wasn't enough to protect us from the curse, though.

Sighing, I snuggled up with her. Eliza's breathing evened out quickly as she fell asleep.

I cradled her against me, running my fingers through her hair and stroking her arm.

The fire slowly burned out and I could hear the wind and rain letting up. The storm had almost passed.

Or had it?

There was still this curse hanging over our heads.

Tilting my head down, I looked at Eliza's sleeping figure. She looked so peaceful and relaxed.

Smirking, I kissed the top of her head. At least I'd kept my promise to help her relax and forget about the storm outside.

I ran my fingers down Eliza's arm, seeing the emerald-colored veins creeping up from her wrist, where the Cryptex had infected her... or cursed her.

My shadow shifted, ravenous and restless, tired of slumbering for so many years. It was ready to devour me.

And soon, the shadow in Eliza would be ready to devour her, too.

I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let Eliza succumb to the curse.

Sighing, I rested my cheek on her head and held her close. There was no way I'd see her hurt by the curse, or worse....

Even if I had to make my own dark deal, I would see her spared.

If it was the last thing I did....

Yawning, I opened my eyes and stretched.

Eliza was still draped over my chest. She murmured and squirmed as I moved around.

"Hey, sleepy, wake up, the storm has passed," I said. I kissed the top of her head and flexed my chest.

"No," she whined.

"Wake up, wake up." I poked her lightly on the cheek.

She swatted at my hand.

Chuckling, I ran my finger down her nose.

"Hey!" Eliza sat up and glared at me. "It is too early for that."

"We survived the storm." I grinned at her.

From the inside, it didn't look like our hut was damaged at all. We hadn't even needed any of the bowls for leaks.

I threw my clothes on and tossed Eliza hers. They were all heaped on the floor. I hurried outside while she got dressed.

The outside of the hut was still intact. Some of the thatching had blown off, but it wasn't that bad.

A few trees nearby had blown down, and there were giant palm fronds scattered all around. Some debris from the ocean had washed up too.

I surveyed the other huts and saw that our hut had gotten off easy.

Some of the huts were completely flattened. Others were missing their roofs or doors and shutters.

Several of the locals were already gathering together to help remove the larger debris and start repairing the huts. I rushed over to help them out.

"We've got to move all this stuff out of here. It will be easier to start rebuilding once the area is clear," I told them, taking control of the situation.

I spent the rest of the morning helping the villagers move the fallen trees, palm fronds, and other debris out of the village and away from the huts.

While I was directing some of the villagers on where to bring all the garbage, I felt eyes on me.

Glancing up, I saw Eliza standing near our hut, her eyes meeting mine.

Smiling, I headed over to her.

"Are you just going to watch or are you going to lend a hand?" I teased.

She handed me a water bottle.

"Oh, I'm just enjoying a good stare." She stuck her tongue out playfully.

"Thanks." I lifted the water bottle like I was toasting and then guzzled down half of it in one large gulp.

"You're handling the locals really well. I mean, this is their home and you just took charge."

I shrugged. "I don't think they've had a disaster like this for a while. I've handled enough of these to know what to do."

"You're very good in a crisis and quick to help others. I think those are very admirable qualities." She winked at me.

"Thank you. Now, are you going to help or what?"

"Sure, sure."

Eliza accompanied me back to the debris pile and she helped drag things away from the huts.

It took two days to get all the debris and fallen trees out of the way. I could tell a lot of the locals were starting to feel despair over how long it was taking. We'd had to set up some tents as temporary shelters for the people whose homes were too destroyed.

I organized a group of villagers to begin collecting supplies and materials to repair the huts, so once the space was cleared, we got right to building.

Eliza helped by bringing food and water around with other women while the rest of us started patching up the damaged huts.

The ones that were completely destroyed would take a little longer to repair.

On the fourth day of cleanup and repairs, missionaries from Saboreef showed up.

They brought food, water, clothing, blankets, and other supplies. Many of them also started to help out with the rebuilding.

While I helped get the missionaries settled, one of the men stopped me.

He grabbed my hand with his. His wrinkled skin was rough, fingers knobby with age. He was one of the elders.

"You... I know you...."

"I don't think so, Sir. I think you have me confused with someone else." I tried to pull away from him.

"No, I know you. You're Jared Crimson. Yes, I know you!"

"I...."

Creasing my brow, I stepped back from him. I hadn't been back to Saboreef since I was young. I didn't expect anyone to remember me now that I was grown.

"Oh, you've done well for yourself, haven't you? I can tell you've lived a good life. That's all we could have hoped for. It is so good that you made the best of your situation."

"Uh...."

How did this guy know about my life? How did he know about me at all?

I only vaguely remembered him. Taking a step back, I looked at him and imagined him several years younger, but I didn't remember being that close to him in my youth.

"You must tell me everything. I want to know all about your successes," he insisted.

I nodded and looked around at the busy village.

"We will have a chance to talk after we put the village back together. Isn't that what you're here for, too?"

"Yes. You seem to have everything under control, but we are here at your disposal."

"The extra help is appreciated." I nodded respectfully to the elder and got back to work.

Several of the new huts we constructed were stronger and sturdier than the previous huts.

I made sure to get stronger materials for the roofs and the walls, and the villagers seemed really happy with the improvements. We were even able to make the huts a little larger and with more storage space.

It was very hard work, but the load was cut in half with the arrival of the missionaries and it was rewarding.

By the time most of it was done, I felt like we'd accomplished a huge victory.

With the curse and dark deals that had been looming over me, it felt nice to slow down and do something meaningful for once.

"Thank you so much for helping us," the village leader said, joining me, Eliza, and the missionaries as we took a lunch break.

"It's not a problem. We're happy to help," I assured, smiling.

"We're going to throw you a feast tonight to honor your contribution."

"Do you even have the supplies for that?" I asked, arching an eyebrow.

The missionary elder stood up and came toward us. "We can provide the food." He motioned to two women elders behind him. "Miss Eliza, if you follow these women, they'll bring you somewhere to get cleaned up and changed."

"Yes, this is wonderful. We will prepare the feast," the village leader gushed excitedly.

"Jared, I have some fresh clothes and a place you can get cleaned up, as well," the elder offered. He motioned in the opposite direction that the elder women had taken Eliza.

I was a bit concerned about being separated from her, but the missionaries seemed safe enough.

It felt so good to shower and put on some fresh clothes.

When I got back to the village, there was already a bonfire lit in the center of the village and lots of platters of food set out on tables. They sure knew how to throw a feast together quickly. There was even a huge deer roasting over the big fire.

"Oh, there he is!"

Several of the villagers called out and waved to me as I returned. They shook my hand and clapped me on the back as I walked through them. I smiled and nodded along. Their admiration was appreciated.

I caught up with Eliza. She was standing by the fire with a shish kabob.

"Mmm, this is delicious!" She stuck it in my face, and I took a bite.

"Yeah, it is," I agreed as the tender meat melted in my mouth.

"Listen, listen to this," the village leader called out, motioning us all to gather around the fire.

I put my arm around Eliza's shoulders and we moved closer.

"Once upon a time, many, many years ago, the witches coming to Saboreef were being hunted, picked off, and destroyed. Saboreef wasn't safe for them, but not everyone in Saboreef agreed with hunting and killing witches."

I glanced at Eliza. She was wolfing down her food, hanging on every word the village leader said. It must have been the history of their village. Many people in the local villages liked to tell historical tales when they had feasts like this.

"So, the ones who wouldn't stand for the witch-hunting came here and settled down. But that was not the end of the witches in Sabrooef..."

As the village leader continued to tell the story, my mind prickled with familiarity.

My mother's voice came back to me. I had a sudden memory of her holding her locket open, the song playing in my mind. Her lips were moving, but I couldn't make out the words she said. But I could remember some of it.

She'd told me that the song in the locket was about a witch... a witch raised in Saboreef who became a very powerful Luna....

[Chapter 868](#)

Eliza

The elder women led me away from the village into the woods a little way. I glanced back, but Jared was already out of my eyesight.

They brought me to a sacred temple. There were statues of the Moon Goddess in the doorway.

Mesmerized by the temple and the carvings, I totally forgot about Jared being far away.

"What is this place?" I gasped, placing my hand on one of the carvings.

"A holy, sacred place of the Moon Goddess," one of the elders said.

I sighed and shook my head. Well, that was obvious. I was kind of hoping for a little more than that.

Inside the temple, at the center, was a large opening in the floor. Water bubbled up from a natural spring underneath.

"You can bathe here. We have fresh clothes when you're ready."

I nodded but walked around the pool to the shrine at the head of the temple. There was a statue in the shrine that looked like it was meant to be the Moon Goddess. She had features that seemed familiar but that weren't usually associated with the Moon Goddess.

Where had I seen this woman before? It felt like a distant memory or a dream, something I should remember but couldn't quite grasp...

There was a stone placard in front of the statue. It read, "Luna of Blackfire."

"Miss Eliza," an elder called to me.

"I'm coming."

I stripped down and got into the pool. The women came in with me. They washed me and tamed my hair. Once I was dried off, they handed me a gorgeous dress, nicer than anything I'd seen or worn in a long time.

It was satin, dark emerald, and perfect for this kind of tropical night warmth.

"These tattoos," one of the elders said, running her fingers up my arm with the curse marks. Her eyes were distant and glazed over as she studied them.

"What about them?" I asked, creasing my brow.

The elder frowned and ran her thumb over my arm. "Is this a place in the Light Realm, a map?"

"A map?" I gasped.

The elder nodded. "It is familiar to me, like the lines of a map, something from the Light Realm."

All I could do was shrug.

As she started brushing my hair, I turned my arm toward the light and I studied the lines.

I tilted my head as far as I could, without getting my hair pulled out, and saw the lines from a different angle.

The elder was right... it looked like a map of an area in the Light Realm. How had I never seen it before?

This could be the key to everything....

My heart raced and my stomach fluttered excitedly. I wanted to get back to Jared and tell him about this new map. New hope swelled in my chest, threatening to take over.

I still couldn't believe that I hadn't seen the connection before. Maybe it was because I'd been looking at it upside down all this time. If I'd seen the marks in a mirror, then I probably would have made the connection. But being out in the wilderness, I didn't have a lot of mirrors to look into.

"I want to get back to Jared," I said, too eager to wait any longer.

The women weren't ready, though. I had to wait for them to change into dresses that matched mine in elegance and style.

They led me back to the village. There was a bonfire crackling away and the delicious, mouthwatering scent of roasting meat filled the air.

My stomach growled.

It felt like ages since I'd had a good meal. We'd just been eating quick snacks here and there while we worked on repairing the village.

The elder women brought me around the fire and got me a plate full of delicious feast food. I tucked right into the lamb shish kabob. The meat was so tender and juicy, I couldn't stop eating. It hit my stomach so satisfyingly that my toes curled in the grass.

Jared met up with me.

My mouth was full, so I shoved the shish kabob at him. He grinned and took a big bite.

"I swear, this is the best food I've had in days!"

"Agreed." Jared sucked some stray juice off his thumb.

Musicians started playing on the other side of the bonfire. They played slow, soft music at first and the village leader told a story about the history of the village.

I listened intently. Local stories, though most were embellished or exaggerated, did have some roots in actual fact.

He was talking about witches and how Saboreef had been a place witches were hunted and somehow one of the witches survived and became a powerful Luna.

It was an interesting story.

Halfway through, I glanced at Jared and saw his eyes glazed over.

As soon as the village leader stopped talking, the musicians began playing a louder, faster tempo.

Jared snapped out of his daze. He smiled and tightened his arm around my shoulders. There was a new look of fierce determination in his eyes.

"What's going on?"

He didn't answer with words. Jared pulled me against him and kissed me hard on the lips.

"What's gotten into you?" I asked breathily.

"I'm just enjoying this festival." He grinned.

I got the sense there was more to his enjoyment and determination, but we were here to have a good time. I wasn't going to question him.

We got some more food and I clapped along with the music while the villagers danced around the fire. Eventually, the rest of the Saboreef missionaries joined in the celebration.

"Come dance with me," I pleaded with Jared.

I grabbed his hands and pulled him out into the twirling figures as they moved around the fire in a rhythmic circle.

Jared laughed and held my hands tightly. We spun around each other and got caught up in the fray of villagers as they danced and laughed.

My cheeks stung as I smiled. I skipped and hopped, feeling like I was floating over the grass as I danced.

There was no real pattern to the dance. I felt like I could just run and spin around with the rest of them.

I kept my hand tightly in Jared's. Now and then, I looked at him and saw that he was smiling too.

We danced until I thought my legs would collapse.

"I need something to drink," I said, fanning myself with my hand.

Jared pulled me out of the dancing bodies and we headed to a table with drinks on it. He grabbed a beer and handed me one.

"That was fun."

"I've never danced like that," I admitted.

"Me neither. It was very... freeing."

The old male elder and the women that had waited on me joined Jared and me at the drink table.

"Eliza, this is one of the Saboreef elders. He's been around a long time, ever since I was a kid," Jared said, motioning to the old man.

I bowed my head to him. "It is nice to meet you, officially."

The locket on my neck fell away from my body, dangling down and glinting in the firelight.

When I looked up, I noticed the elder's eyes were locked on the pendent. His face was a little pale, eyes wide and transfixed.

It was hard to figure out what he was thinking or feeling because of how wrinkled he was, but if I had to guess, I would have said he was spooked... or really scared. Instinctively, I reached for Jared's hand.

"How long have the two of you known each other?" one of the women elders asked.

Jared and I shared a look. My cheeks flushed and I bit my lower lip.

"A while now. Though, sometimes, it feels like a lot longer."

I gaped at him. "Hey!"

Jared gave a sheepish look. "I didn't mean that in a bad way! We've just gone through so much together that sometimes it feels like you've been in my life a lot longer. And I like feeling like you've been with me longer."

I scoffed and shook my head. Well, he did know how to save himself when he needed to.

"You two are so great together. A vibe like yours... you've got to be mates, aren't you?"

My stomach twisted.

Jared put his arm around my shoulders and I tucked myself up against his body. I floundered for a moment to come up with the right explanation.

"Yes," Jared answered quickly, pulling me into his side.

"Eliza... you're from the Light Realm, aren't you?" the man elder asked. He seemed to have recovered from his shock at seeing the pendant.

"Um... yes, I am," I nodded.

"Are you a witch from the Light Realm?" one of the women asked.

"I am not a witch. I am from the Light Realm and related to the White Queen, but not in the direct line.

The male elder pursed his lips. "Is that so?"

Jared and I nodded.

"Then there is someone you must meet, as soon as possible," he insisted.

[Chapter 869](#)

Rubbing my eyes, I groaned and sat up.

How late had I stayed up last night? How much had I had to drink?

I rolled over and bumped into Jared. Squinting one eye open, I saw him sitting up in bed, shirtless.

My other eye popped open and I stared at Jared's toned, muscular chest. Sun poured through the window and made his skin glow.

"Ahh, you're awake." Jared smirked at me.

I pulled myself up and yawned, stretching my arms out to the sides. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

"What? Really?" I looked out the window.

"Yeah. The Saboreef Elder asked us to meet him today. We shouldn't keep him waiting."

Jared got up and pulled his clothes on.

My eyes followed his hands as the fabric slid over his muscles, concealing his gorgeous body from view. Sighing, I got up and put my own clothes on.

Jared and I followed the elder's directions to a Saboreef temple not that far from the village. The elder stood at the large stone altar, which had several old parchment rolls and tomes laid out on it.

"What's all this?" I asked. I turned the pages in one of the tomes.

It crinkled and felt thin and brittle.

"This is a story that I think the two of you would like to hear." He motioned to me, and my pendant.

Instinctively, I grabbed the locket and ran it back and forth along the chain that dangled around my neck.

"About the locket?" Jared asked, raising an eyebrow.

The elder nodded. He picked up one of the tomes and flipped through several pages.

"Ahh, here we are," he said, tapping the top of the page. "Many, many years ago, a woman came to the temple, this temple. She was a mystery to us and kept herself shielded under a cloak."

I glanced at Jared, catching the deep crease in his brow. I wondered if he recognized that description. It was pretty vague, but something seemed to be bugging him.

Reaching out, I took his hand.

He glanced at me. "My mother," he mouthed.

I nodded and squeezed his hand. I hated seeing his handsome features scrunched up like that, like he was in pain.

"This woman came to us with a very simple request... simple, though unusual. She asked for a piece of jewelry to be crafted from an old, broken artifact...."

The story sounded a little familiar to me. I knew I'd never heard it before, but it sounded almost like the beginning of another story I knew, like a prequel to something else that had happened.

I kept holding the locket between my fingers, hooking the chain around my chin.

The day I'd composed the song... my mind floated back to that day. I hadn't made it up. The words had come to me from a dream. There'd been a woman humming that song. I could envision it and hear it so clearly.

She hadn't just been humming the song, though, she'd been singing... singing words....

Gasping, I tightened my grip on Jared, squeezing his fingers.

"Ow," he muttered.

I turned to him, looking deeply into his beautiful orbs, drowning in the depth of his eyes.

"Jared...."

"What is it, Eliza?" he asked, his eyes deepening with concern.

The elder stopped reading and stared at us both.

"The song... I just remembered. It has words."

"Words?" Jared arched an eyebrow.

"Yes... words, like lyrics," I explained.

"What are they?"

I frowned. "Well, I don't remember." Sighing, I dropped the locket and looked at my feet.

"Read this," the elder said.

He handed me the large tome. It was heavy and dusty, making my nose itch when I breathed it in. On the page the elder had opened there was a poem.

No, it wasn't a poem.

I scanned the words and immediately recognized them.

"This is the song," I whispered, running my hand over the page.

"Draven's curse haunts the darkened realm, the Light Realm is blessed with the key. Follow your heart to your salvation. To break the bonds of Draven's hate, you must be brave and never falter, the Diadem of Nyx is what you must take, when you find it you will alter the destiny of Draven's fate. Draven's curse is strong and dark, its force can bind and wound.

"But the Diadem of Nix can break the spell unbound. Your courage will make it powerful enough to break free from Draven's hold. Find it in the heart of the Light Realm and break the curse of old."

"Eliza, what does it say?"

I looked up at Jared, my eyes wide. I could barely believe what I was reading. But it was all starting to make sense.

"I think this is the answer to everything we've been looking for. Jared, I think this is how we break the curse!"

Jared's eyes widened too and he grabbed the tome from me.

I was grateful not to have to carry that heavy book any more. Quickly, I brushed some of the dust off my arms.

"The dark curse can only be broken by going to the heart of the Realm of Light," I said as Jared read the words.

"What is the Diadem of Nyx?" he asked, his brow furrowing as he looked up from the book.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "But if we transfer the dark curse to the Diadem, then it won't affect us anymore."

Jared shook his head. He closed the book and set it back on the altar. Turning to me, he grabbed my arms, his thumb running over the dark tattoos on my arm.

I looked down at the marks and followed Jared's thumb with my own finger.

"Oh, Jared, I almost forgot. With the celebration and the partying, one of the women showed me something about the marks on my arm."

"What?"

"It is a map of the Realm of Light, of Winter Forest."

Jared smiled and opened the tome again, right to the page where he'd left off. His eyes scanned through the text quickly.

"The Diadem is located in the Temple of the Moon Goddess."

"It looks like we're going to the Realm of Light," I sighed.

Jared

Eliza and I were used to making quick travel plans. We wouldn't need long to prepare for our trip to the Realm of Light.

For the first time in a long time, I felt a swell of hope at thinking we actually had a chance to break the curse, not just for me, but for Eliza, too.

Did we really have a chance at our happily ever after?

'Jared?'

I tensed, feeling Archer through the mind-link.

'What is it?' I replied.

'Aeris and his men are looking for you. They are looking to make good on their promise to overthrow the Alpha King.'

'Where are you? We should discuss this in person.'

'I'll come to you.'

"Jared, what's wrong?" Eliza asked.

Her lovely, bright eyes gazed into mine. I had my hand on the small of her back, not realizing I'd stopped walking while talking to Archer.

"Archer has some news for us. We're going to meet with him briefly before we go to the Light Realm."

Eliza nodded.

I connected with Archer and planned to meet with him on the outskirts of the village we'd helped repair. It had the lowest population of all the nearby villages, and it was surrounded by wilderness. We could stay secluded and talk freely.

By sundown, Archer arrived, meeting us in the designated location.

He looked winded and tired, like he'd been working hard and not sleeping well. His clothes were a little dirty and rumpled. I wondered when the last time he'd showered or changed his clothes.

Sometimes, scouting was a rough business.

"I heard from Abe while I was on my way here," he said, crouching down with us in the large, tropical leaves.

They were great for cover and they were so thick they helped absorb sound.

"How are things going on Abe's end?" I asked.

"They've intercepted Aeris and Hestia. Hestia fled, like a coward, but Aeris has made it clear that he's raising an army against the king," Archer reported.

"He's really going through with that plan?" Eliza asked, her voice hitching.

"He seems determined. But Aeris isn't going alone. He plans to fetch you, Jared, and soon, very soon. He wants you to go to the capital with his forces."

Sighing, I bowed my head. "We don't have time for this! It is just nonsense."

"This is serious, Jared. Aeris is making a play for the throne. That's against your family," Eliza said, touching my shoulder gently.

"Right now, Eliza, we need to form a plan to get out of the Egoren capitol, preferably without being recognized," I insisted. "A trading vessel would make the most sense. We'd attract less attention than if we went on a passenger ship."

"Are you sure that's what you want, Jared?" Eliza asked.

I glanced at her. The amount of concern she showed me was a little overwhelming, but I loved it. I took her hand and brought it to my lips, kissing the back.

"You should go to the capital and side with Xander, show the royal family your support," she insisted.

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. "The royal family really isn't my concern right now."

"How can you say that? They are technically your family too." Eliza's eyes narrowed at me slightly.

I stood up and pulled her to her full height. Taking both her hands, I smiled gently at her. Moving my hand up her arm, I traced the lines of the tattoo map.

"Right now, I think we have more pressing matters. You're my family, Eliza, the only real family I have. That makes breaking this curse my priority."

"Showing the Alpha King your loyalty won't take much time. We can do that, and he probably won't expect you to stay and fight. I mean, I think it is worth pledging your loyalty, so he doesn't think you're against him and try to hunt you down later."

Eliza made a good point, but I had no intention of diverting our attention away from the mission we had, the mission of saving Eliza and myself.

Once I was sure she was curse-free, I could worry about political matters with the Alpha King.

"Eliza, if we really want to break the curse, from this moment on, every second counts. We will need every moment of that time to find what we're looking for and figure out how to transfer the curse," I reminded her.

Eliza licked her lips slowly and glanced down at her feet. It was a coy, innocent gesture that made my stomach plummet.

"I know... our time is precious...."

"And if we don't break the curse, then it won't matter who thinks I'm loyal to them." I laughed lightly.

Eliza tried to smile but I could see how strained it was.

"Why don't you write a letter to the Alpha King and explain my position?" I suggested.

"You don't think he could use your support... you know, militarily?" she arched an eyebrow.

"Eliza, the Alpha King has his own army. It is probably the largest army in this realm. I'm sure he can take care of himself." I put my hands on her shoulders and grinned.

Eliza smiled back and nodded slowly. "Fine, fine."

[Chapter 870](#)

We sent Archer off with a hastily drafted letter to the Alpha King. It wasn't much, but it seemed to make Eliza happy and it meant I wasn't being completely neglectful.

Eliza was right—the royal family was technically my family. But it didn't mean I was going to turn my back on Eliza and the curse that infected her.

Whenever I saw the tattoo on her arm, my own shadow stirred uncomfortably close to the surface. I'd never let that same curse claim her too.

We went back to the temple, where the Saboreef Alpha was still sorting through all his scrolls and tomes.

"I need to know something," I said, walking straight up to him.

He nodded slowly. "What can I help you with?"

"We've heard rumors of a Saboreef witch that became a pack Luna. I need to know her name and where to find her."

"Need?" the elder asked, arching an eyebrow.

I crossed my arms. "Yes, she could help in breaking the curse."

"Well, witches do know curses. I can see why you would seek her help. She was always exceptionally powerful, long before she even knew how to use that power," the elder explained.

"Please, tell us about her." I looped my arm around Eliza's hips.

"Her name is Mila Black, married to Alpha Soren Black. They are Alpha and Luna of the Alvar pack," the elder said. He started sifting through his tomes again.

"Where can we find her?"

"That, I do not know. She could be anywhere these days. But here...." He handed me a tome. "This has some good information about Mila Black."

"Black... that last name sounds really familiar," Eliza said. She took the tome from me.

I watched her eyes rapidly fly back and forth over the page. Her eyes widened suddenly and she gasped.

"Mila Black is Ciana's mother," Eliza said.

"Uh... Ciana?" The name sounded familiar but it wasn't one I'd heard in recent memory.

Eliza shook her head. "Jared, you really should catch up with your brother. He might know... well, Ciana married your Uncle Theo. She's your aunt. Theo was a Dark King."

"Right now, my biggest interest is in finding Mila. We can dissect my family history later," I grumbled.

Eliza chuckled and shook her head at me again. "You're hopeless. According to this, there's a good chance Mila is in Winter Forest."

"Which could lead us to the Diadem of Nyx."

Eliza nodded.

Despite what I'd said about not being interested in my family history, I couldn't help but think about what I'd just learned.

For years, all I'd ever thought about was my mother, my father, and my brother, mostly my brother, because he was the only living relative I knew of.

But Mila... she was somehow related to me too, along with Theo and Ciana. Suddenly, I had an entire family I'd never even considered. And from the sounds of it, a lot of them were still alive.

Not only that, but I was linked to some of Eliza's relatives, too. It was a little unsettling; how close our families were. But at the same time, it seemed to make sense.

It was a lot to unpack and I wasn't sure I was ready to face it all. There was a lot about my family and my past that I hadn't had to deal with yet. The more I learned about my extended family, the less I wanted to learn.

There would be time to figure out all the details, but it wouldn't be until after we dealt with the curse.

Sighing, I shook myself out of my thoughts.

Eliza was still scouring through the tome like there was more information to discover from it. I took the book from her and snapped it closed.

"When we break the curse, we can study all this more," I said.

Eliza pouted slightly. "But I was learning a lot."

"And I'm sure dissecting family lines is fascinating for an archeologist, but we do have something more pressing to focus on."

Eliza glared at me. It was a fake glare. I knew enough about her to know that. She was just being playful, and it was absolutely adorable the way her nose crinkled a little and how she bit her lip just right to emphasize that she was teasing me.

I turned back to the elder and handed him the tome. "Thank you, Elder," I said lamely.

"May the Goddess guide you on your journey," he said.

Eliza and I left the temple. I wanted to start on our journey right away, so we left the oceanside Saboreef villages and headed deeper into the territory.

It was already getting late, so we only made it one town over before stopping for the night.

"Do you find it odd?" I asked Eliza as we settled into our room for the night.

"What?" she asked.

"That our families have so many connections?"

Eliza frowned. She came over to me in nothing but a tank top and a pair of panties. She licked her lips slowly and tilted her head to the side.

Smirking, I put my hands on her hips, the soft silk of her panties slipping enticingly against my palms.

"It isn't that surprising. We're both connected to royal families, just from different realms," she said, shrugging.

That was good enough for me, especially since the heat of her body radiated through my boxers and her tank top, into my skin.

Leaning down, I kissed her swollen lips, forgetting about everything but the radiant beauty in my grasp. Eliza kissed me back fervently, wrapping her arms around my neck tightly. A small, delicious moan escaped her lips.

Growling, I grabbed her butt and lifted her off the floor. She wrapped her legs around me and I carried her to the bed. Kneeling on the edge of the mattress, I leaned down and pressed Eliza into the comforter.

She wrapped her legs around me, her thighs tightened around my hips.

My c**k stiffened and the heat of her skin spread through me like fire. I ran my hands up and down her sides and pushed my tongue past her lips, into her mouth.

The shadow inside of me stirred excitedly, responding to my desire and excitement. I took a deep breath, squashing it far down so I could enjoy this time with Eliza without worrying about anything else.

She was all that mattered.

I tasted her sweet, succulent flavor on my tongue, wishing I could drink her down completely, like a glass of delicious wine.

Eliza shuddered beneath me and my c**k ached, straining against my boxers.

I pushed her tank top over her head and covered her breasts with my hands.

Moaning, she arched into me, pressing her n****s against my palms. I grunted, pleased, and nipped at her neck, causing her to moan and writhe on the bed.

Her legs quivered around my hips.

"Jared..." She moaned my name.

My ears tingled and I squeezed her breasts harder. I gripped her n****s between my thumb and forefinger, rolling them and pinching lightly until they tightened into pert little buds.

Eliza moaned and rolled her hips against me, pressing against my firm c**k. She was impatient, but I wanted to take my time.

If none of this worked out, we might not have many more moments like this. I was still intent on enjoying whatever time we did have together, even though we had more hope of breaking the curse than we'd had before.

I ran my hands down Eliza's sides, causing her to squirm. I hooked my thumbs into the waistband of her panties, running them back and forth, caressing her lightly.

She rolled her hips against me again, tightening her legs around me.

Gasping, I bit my lower lip. Heat surged through my c**k and I ached to feel her skin on mine, to feel her muscles clamping around me.

I slipped her panties off and kissed Eliza's stomach. She gasped and moaned, a sound so beautiful and enticing, I nearly burst through my boxers.

Grabbing Eliza's hair in fists, I kissed her hungrily on the mouth, nipping and kissing until her lips grew red and swollen.

She ran her hands down my back, tracing the line of my spine.

Moaning, I fell on top of her. I tugged at her hair, kissing her jawline and down her neck. I sucked gently on her artery and rolled my hips into hers, grinding my swollen, aching c**k against her.

Eliza's hands pushed at my boxers. She slid them down my thighs and I kicked them off.

I nipped and kissed at her earlobe, sucking it into my mouth and teasing it with my tongue.

Eliza threw her head back, moaning and arching her back. Her fingers curled into my back, her nails digging into my skin.

Grabbing her hips, I coaxed her legs apart and positioned the tip of my erection at her soaking-wet entrance. She moaned and shuddered as I pushed inside of her.

I bit back my moan as her p***y walls tightened around me, squeezing and pulsing around my c**k. I squeezed my hands tighter around her hips. The heat in my groin swelled and I thrust into her.

Eliza shuddered and rolled her hips, meeting my thrusts.

I moved my hands up her sides and gripped her hair again. Firmly, I pulled her head back, extending her neck long, and nibbled at her neck.

She moaned and her nails bit into the skin on my back.

I felt her muscles constrict around me and convulse as she reached her climax.

The friction around my c**k increased and a shudder ran through me, down my spine. Grunting and groaning, I burst into her, clinging to her with all my strength.

Still breathing heavily, Eliza and I slowly pulled apart. She giggled and curled against my side, pressing her head to my chest.

"What?" I asked, looping my arms around her and hugging her close.

"I thought we had stopped to get some rest before our long journey tomorrow," she teased, nuzzling against my chest.

I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. My heart thrummed in my chest, a mixture of peace and completion with the blissful calm that followed our intimacy.

"Well, I'm still happy to be enjoying whatever time we have together," I said, slipping my fingers through her hair.

"Me too. So, tomorrow we head to the capital and find our way to the Light Realm..."

"Are you ready to go back?" I tilted my head, trying to see her expression.

At our current angle, I couldn't see Eliza's face, but I could imagine the deep, thoughtful look she wore, the same look of concentration I was familiar with.

"I'm ready."