

Kings Breeder 871

[Chapter 871](#)

Eliza

Traveling from Saboreef to the capital of Erogen took a week.

That was a week of roughing it on lumpy, rocky ground.

No matter where we put the tent, I always ended up with a root or something sharp poking into me.

Jared was there, serving as a comfy pillow that helped with the worst of the discomfort.

Even though we'd had a nice break from crummy camping food while we stayed in Saboreef, I was definitely ready to eat some real, well-cooked meals after that long, long week on the road.

If I could get meals cooked by someone else, professionally, that would be even better.

Fortunately, the weather was nice.

I wasn't completely expecting that, given the massive storm that had nearly flattened the village we were in.

For our entire trip to the capital, the skies were clear.

One morning, while Jared cleaned up the campsite and I made sure the fire was out, I kept glancing at the clouds in the sky.

"Eliza, what are you looking for?" Jared asked.

Sighing, I rubbed my hands on my thighs and kicked around in the ashes.

The fire was definitely out.

"The entire time we were preparing for that sea storm, I kept having this feeling that it was just the beginning, that the storm would bring darkness. But..."

I threw my arms out to the sides and tipped my head back.

Smiling, I spun around in the bright sunlight.

Jared chuckled and looped his arms around me, spinning me in a circle.

"Isn't it a good thing that the storm didn't bring some dark omen?" he asked.

I nodded and rested my head on his shoulder.

The warm sun felt good on my skin, but it was nothing compared to the warmth from Jared's body as it permeated my tight-fitting hiking clothes.

"I guess. I still feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop...."

"Come on, Eliza. Maybe the storm did bring darkness, but it wasn't until after the storm that we got our first real lead for breaking the curse. Maybe all the light we have now is the hope we were missing before."

I bit my lip and nodded.

"You know, you might be onto something."

We finished cleaning up the camp and set out on the road again.

I felt like we'd been walking for weeks.

At least, when we'd been out in the wilderness, there'd been differing terrain—mountains, hills, rocks, rivers.

But the trek back to the capital was flat and tough. By the time we made it to the main road into the capital, my feet felt swollen.

"Can we rest for a minute?" I asked, plopping down on a rock on the side of the road.

"We're almost there. We only have another thirty minutes of walking." Jared sat down beside me.

Without me even asking, he lifted my leg into his lap and pulled my shoe off.

His hands started to work into the tender, aching muscles of my foot.

"Oh...wow. That's really great. If you could just do that for a few weeks or so..."

Jared smirked and dug his knuckles into the ball of my foot. He worked on that foot for a few more minutes and then started on the other one.

"And I thought there was nothing that could relax me as much as...that other thing you do."

I giggled and sighed, melting into Jared's massaging touch.

After another couple of minutes, he put my shoes back on.

"Come on, Eliza. We've got to keep moving. Getting to the capital is just half the battle. We still need to secure passage to the Light Realm."

He stood up and held his hand out to me.

Sighing, I took his hand and he pulled me to my feet.

Amazing, all the aching and swelling was gone.

I stared down at my feet and shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

"Wow, I feel a lot better," I admitted.

"Good, because we aren't going to get into the capital on the main road. It is far too out in the open. We'll need to use a secret entrance."

"You know a secret entrance?" I asked.

"You might be surprised by all the things I could tell you."

He winked at me and led me off the main road. We looped around to a side road that wasn't even paved. It barely looked used.

No one was on it and when we got to the edge of the capital, I noticed there weren't any guards on this road either.

"Once we get inside, I'm going to work on securing a vessel that will give us safe passage," Jared told me.

"And what do you want me to do?" I asked, creasing my brow.

"Stay under the radar and don't be spotted." He glanced over his shoulder at me.

"Okay. Where should we meet up?"

Jared gave me directions to a small coffee shop where we could meet up once he had our travel arrangements prepared.

"Be careful. Don't be seen," I said, hugging Jared's neck quickly before we parted ways.

I could barely remember the last time we hadn't been around each other every second, minus the few brief moments we were parted during our journey.

This was different, though.

The capital was busy and there were people everywhere.

The streets were filled with pedestrians and vehicles.

Shops were packed full of consumers.

There was a heavy military presence too.

The royal army hung around on the streets.

They were clearly there for protection and observation.

Had the Alpha King got wind of Aeri's plans? Was he already putting his own defenses in place? While waiting for Jared, I snuck to a place where I could send my cousin Lena a message.

I wanted to warn her about what was going on and what I was doing.

It wasn't the best way to go about it, but I really didn't want her to be blindsided.

I headed straight to the coffee shop once the message was sent.

Keeping a pair of sunglasses on and a sun hat tipped over my face, I ordered myself a latte and sat out on the patio, sipping my drink and watching people in the capital moving about.

None of them seemed bothered by the presence of the royal guards.

They laughed happily and moved around with each other like it was any normal day.

My curse shadow stirred and my stomach growled.

I put my hand on my stomach and tried to calm it.

The shadow was getting stronger.

Did that mean the time of the curse was running out? Or was I just getting weaker? Another latte landed on the table across from me.

I started and looked up.

Jared had a sweater on with a hood. He had the hood over his head, keeping his face concealed in shadow.

"I've gotten us passage out of the capital on a trading vessel. It should give us cover to travel without suspicion," Jared said.

He sat down and cupped his latte between his hands.

"Where will it take us?"

"We'll get as far as Breles. It won't be the most comfortable ride, but it will get us there. There's a lot more security on passenger transports."

"Breles.... I should be able to get in touch with my family from there."

Nodding, I took another sip from my latte.

"That would be ideal, but if not, at least we will be a lot closer."

"I sent word to my cousin while we were here. I just thought that she had the right to know what was going on. I wanted to warn her."

Jared smiled and nodded.

"I'd expect nothing different from you."

Biting my lip, I absently played with the locket around my neck. It had become such a totem to my everyday life.

I thought if I ever had to take it off, I'd feel naked without it.

Several gasps and excited utterances caught my attention.

Glancing over, I saw what the crowd was getting so excited about. I reached across the table and grabbed Jared's hand, squeezing.

"Look,"

I whispered, nodding in the direction of the commotion.

Jared's eyes slid in that direction.

One of his eyebrows shot up, but he remained silent.

Xander and Lena were walking down the main street of the capital.

It seemed so weird to see them out of the palace and walking together like they were regular people.

They seemed really happy together.

Xander had one arm around Lena's shoulders. He had his other arm across his chest, holding her hand.

There were guards around them, at a distance, giving them the space to almost act like a regular couple.

"We can't let them see us," Jared said, frowning.

"I know. It is weird to be so close to them and also...so far..."

I looked into my half-empty cup.

"It won't always be like this, Eliza."

I narrowed my eyes and scrutinized him.

"Oh, so now you think you have a future?" Jared smirked.

"Like I said, I've had a lot of newfound hope recently. I'm trying to ride that wave as long as possible."

"Then I will be hopeful, too." I picked up my latte and held it up.

Jared grinned and held his up, too.

We clinked our paper cups together. I looked back at Xander and Lena. I felt a little bad about leaving them when we knew Aeris was out there, planning to attack them and start a war. I wasn't even sure how much help we'd be if we stayed.

Xander and Lena could take care of themselves.

All the royal guards in the street were a reminder of that. I finished my latte, stealing looks at Lena and Xander as they walked through the streets.

Lena looked beyond happy, and a slight pang of jealousy formed a pit in my stomach.

Would there ever come a time when Jared and I could simply walk arm in arm like that without having to worry about curses and witches and artifacts? Would we get our chance to live happily ever after? A frown tugged at my lips as I stared at the happy couple.

It seemed unlikely we'd ever have that.

Every time we got close, something else rose up from the shadows to threaten our future.

Suddenly, I noticed that Lena and Xander had stopped walking.

Xander was talking to someone on the streets but Lena...she was looking right at me.

Quickly, I checked my glasses and my hat.

They were in place.

"Jared, we need to go," I whispered. I grabbed his arm and pulled him into the coffee shop. I half dragged him out a door on the other side.

With my hat and sunglasses, I seriously doubted Lena would recognize me, but she had definitely seen me.

[Chapter 872](#)

* Jared* Life aboard the trading vessel was...confined.

The ship was taking us up a river that went directly into the Light Realm.

Eliza and I had been given a room that was normally reserved for the crew.

Since they were short-staffed, we'd managed to get passage on the trading ship as crew members.

The manifest has us listed like that, so if anyone boarded or inspected the ship, we'd look like we were supposed to be there. I stood on the deck of the ship, looking out over the river as we slowly moved against the current.

"First time?" a gruff, masculine voice asked, coming up beside me.

I glanced over at the crew member. I'd seen him around, but he hadn't spoken to me before. He was wearing a crew uniform, but he was practically bursting out of the sleeves with his thick arm muscles. His hair was shaggy and he had a scruffy beard.

"Excuse me?" I arched an eyebrow.

"To the Light Realm," he clarified.

He smirked, a twinkle in his eye.

"I can always tell someone that is on their first crossing."

"Well, yeah, it is. I'm sorry, it must be strange for you to have passengers aboard on a regular trade run."

"Ehh...not really. My name is Rex, by the way."

He pulled an apple out of his pocket and bit into it.

"You and that girl of yours haven't made much of a fuss."

"We like our privacy."

Rex chuckled and nodded.

"I'm sorry to intrude, then."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant."

I pressed my palm to my forehead.

"I'm Jared. My girlfriend is Eliza."

"Hmm. I haven't seen much of her since the two of you boarded the ship," he said.

He finished the apple and tossed the core overboard. It made a large plop in the still water and the ship slid on, forgetting all about it.

"Can you tell me more about the Realm of Light?" I asked.

Rex rubbed his beard and shrugged.

"All realms have some similarities. Though, the Light Realm does seem to have a certain beauty and elegance that other realms lack. Did you know it was created for one of the Moon Goddess's twin children?" I nodded.

"I've heard that story before."

"Well, I can say that the White Queens are... truly magnificent, should you have the chance to see them with your own eyes."

Rex smirked and clapped me on the shoulder. He was strong and I stumbled to the side, not expecting the force of his gesture.

"Is there anything a newbie like me should expect or be prepared for entering another realm?"

Rex mimicked my position, putting his elbows on the rail of the ship like me. I stared out at the water and the setting sun. It reflected perfectly off the glassy surface.

The only imperfection was small ripples from the ship as it sliced through the water.

"From the realm, nah. You'll be fine. There's nothing too surprising there. It has been a peaceful realm for a long time. But that family, they've got some drama."

"Drama?"

I arched an eyebrow. I knew Rex was talking about Eliza's family. He seemed like a "no bullshit" kind of guy that would tell it to me straight. I was curious to know what someone who didn't know who I was, or winepies ee Cee e Cece Oe who Eliza was, would have to say about her family.

"Nothing major, it's just some rumors here and there like how when Queen Rosalie had Ethan and his brother Soren trying to court her at the same time."

He chuckled and shook his head.

"As I said, rumors, but they make for good stories."

I nodded and listened to what else he had to say.

It sounded like prestigious families had a lot of their own problems, though I preferred family drama to family curses and blood debts. I hadn't met Eliza's family yet.

Knowing more about them and her extended family made me feel better.

The truth was, Eliza was going back to them newly cursed, and she'd been cursed because of me.

Would they hold it against me? Would they find a reason for us not to be together? I'd have to explain to her family, and her people, why she was cursed and what my hand was in all that.

I knew Eliza could handle herself and she'd make her own decisions.

I didn't have parents or a family that would ever need to approve of Eliza as the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

But she did have a family.

When Rex finished his stories, he headed back to work, I returned to the cabin Eliza and I were sharing.

In the past few days, she'd only emerged for meals.

There was one time she came to the deck to catch some sunlight, but she'd been preoccupied.

I didn't blame her.

Traveling back to the Light Realm was nothing new for her.

This was my first time there, not hers.

As I suspected, Eliza was still in our cabin.

She had all the texts and scrolls we'd been given by the elder of Saboreef, and she had been combing through them since we arrived on board.

I leaned against the cabin door frame and smirked, watching as she sifted through the different scrolls.

She had her hair thrown up in a messy bun, several strands hanging down, brushing her neck.

With only a tank top and a pair of pajama shorts on, she sat on the bed with her legs crossed, one scroll in each hand.

She lifted one, then the other, squinting as she read the text.

I smirked at her, loving to see her work as she tried to make sense of all the information.

She must have sensed me looking at her because Eliza turned to the doorway.

Smiling, she set the pages down.

"How long have you been there?" she asked.

"Not long. I was just admiring you at work,"

I teased, sticking my tongue out.

Eliza started gathering the pages and books together in a pile.

She leaned over, putting them on the nightstand.

When she leaned to the side, the hem of her tank top lifted and I caught a glimpse of her stomach and her bellybutton.

I licked my lips and stepped into the cabin, the door closing automatically behind me.

"There's so much to go through here. I feel like I could spend years just on these books and scrolls."

Sighing, she shrugged and pulled her ponytail out. She ran her fingers through her hair, ruffling it and shaking the strands loose.

It framed her face beautifully, adding to the athletic, rugged, yet oh, so sexy vibe she had going on.

For a minute, I imagined running my tongue over every inch of her skin.

"Since you've been studying it all night, every night, I'm sure you'll get through it eventually."

Tossing her head back, she laughed.

"Don't get me wrong. I love looking through these documents late into the night. But you know what else...?" she patted the bed beside her.

Smirking, I crossed the room and sat on the bed behind Eliza. Putting my hands on her hips, I pulled her toward me until her back pressed against my chest.

"You know, all you had to do was ask," I purred. I pressed my lips to her shoulder, leaving a warm, wet kiss there.

Eliza gasped and leaned into my kiss.

She reached her arm back, putting her hand on the back of my head.

I kissed along her shoulder and slid my hands to her stomach. I moved my thumbs under her shirt, gently caressing her stomach and navel with gentle, featherlight fingers.

Eliza melted in my grasp. Her fingers tightened in my hair and she leaned her head against my shoulder. I grabbed her tank top strap with my teeth and slowly pulled it down her arm. Her skin heated under my touch as my teeth grazed her skin.

"It is more fun to make you guess," she whispered, panting slightly.

I chuckled and hooked my thumb in her other tank top strap, pulling it down her other arm. I pushed her shirt down, exposing her breasts and torso.

From behind, I cupped her breasts and teased her n****s, Eliza trembled and rotated her hips, her butt pressing into my groin. I gasped as my c**k stiffened and I pulled her closer to me. I kissed and sucked at her neck and shoulder, eliciting soft moans and gasps from her lips. I trailed my lips up her neck and to her ear.

Sucking her earlobe into my mouth, I nibbled, teasing it with my teeth.

Eliza shivered.

I moved my hands down her stomach, brushing my thumb over her belly button.

Lower, I slid my hands into her shorts and teased her waistband.

My fingers traced the V-line of her hips and I brushed her inner thighs with my fingertips.

She moaned and leaned even further into me, her backside pressing against my hard, pulsing c**k.

I could feel the warmth of her p***y on my hands, sliding up her inner thighs.

They were already slick with her arousal. I nibbled on her ear.

"I don't want to feel like I'm competing with some old, musty books." Eliza giggled.

"You don't have to compete..."

Her words came in short, breathy bursts.

Smirking, I kissed her neck again.

I moved my hands to her folds, running my fingers through her swollen, puffy lips, sliding against her warm wetness.

I pushed one finger into her tight, warm insides, moving my finger around inside of her.

Eliza moaned, and the tight ring of muscles contracted around my finger.

Sucking on her neck, I moved my other hand higher, pressing my finger against her swollen clit.

She trembled in my grasp and moaned loudly, arching into my touch.

I moved one finger in and out, stroking her inner walls and circling the other around her pleasure bead.

She quivered and moaned, her legs clenching.

"Jared...!"

she gasped, tensing and moaning as she reached her climax.

My name on her lips made my c**k jump, my pants tighter than before, almost painfully tight.

Quickly, I stood up and stripped out of my clothes.

Sighing, Eliza lay down on the bed, wiggling out of what scraps of clothing she had left.

I hovered over her, wrapping my arm around her back.

Eliza bent her legs, cradling my hips.

She clenched her knees around me.

Growling, I leaned down, capturing her lips, kissing her urgently.

I nipped at her lower lip.

Eliza moaned, grabbing the headboard and rolling her hips.

I tightened my arm around her back and thrust into her.

Sighing, I buried my head in the crook of her neck, hugging her tightly as her warmth surrounded me and took me over.

[Chapter 873](#)

Eliza

My body exploded with warmth and fire. Moaning, I threw my head back on the pillows and wrapped my arms around his neck.

My thighs clenched around Jared's hips and my insides tightened around his thick c**k.

Jared's hot breath tickled my neck. His hands ran up and down my sides, tingles shooting into my abdomen and down my legs.

My insides quivered around him.

Jared groaned, thrusting faster.

I rolled my hips to meet his thrusts, pleasure building in my core, ready to snap.

He kissed and nipped at my neck, holding my hips firmly as he moved inside of me.

Gasping and panting, I moved with him, my body arching and responding to each thrust.

The pleasure inside of me built until...

I moaned and writhed on the bed, my body shuddering as I fell over the edge of bliss.

Jared's c**k trembled and he groaned, releasing inside of me.

Sighing, I hugged him against me, refusing to let him go. I didn't want him to move away. I wanted to stay connected, feeling him all around me.

Jared and I fell asleep still wrapped in each other's arms.

When we woke up, I immediately knew the boat wasn't moving anymore. I got up and went to the window.

We'd made it to Breles.

Jared yawned and came up behind me, hugging me against his chest.

I sighed and leaned back against him. His body was so warm, arms so strong, I almost forgot all about why we were there. I turned to face him, slipping my arms around his neck and pressing my breasts to his firm, muscular chest.

Jared smirked at me and cupped my butt.

I bit my lower lip and gasped. The bed was just a few feet behind him. I could just push him back and we could stay there all morning...

A horn blasted outside, making me jump, and I was pulled back to the present. We were here, in my homeland.

The thought unsettled me for a moment and I looked at the floor.

"We made it," I said.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

I pulled away from Jared and found some clothes to wear.

"Yes, it is good that we are here. There's just... a lot..."

Sighing, I shook my head. I'd been putting off thinking about what I'd tell my family or how I'd reach out to them. They weren't exactly expecting me and there was a lot they didn't know about. Talking to them would come with a boatload of questions.

"I don't want to reach out to my family... at least, not quite yet," I told Jared as he dressed.

Jared frowned and creased his brow. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "It's not that I don't want to see them. But like you said, time is of the essence. We should focus on finding Mila and the Diadem before it is too late."

"Alright, it does seem like we should focus on the most time sensitive venture first."

"Yeah. My parents will be there when we are done. Besides, with all the questions they'll ask, we might get stuck answering them until the curse expires."

I giggled and started packing everything I could carry into a backpack. Everything we'd need to find the Diadem.

"Well, the day isn't getting any younger. Let's get out there and start searching."

Jared grabbed his backpack and we left the ship.

There was some hairy, burly crew member that swung by before we took the plank to the dock.

"Welcome to the Realm of Light," he said, waving to Jared.

"Thanks. Maybe we'll see you again on the return journey." Jared waved back.

"Who's that?" I asked, stepping onto the bouncy plank as I left the ship. Jared followed close behind.

"He kept me company while you were busy deciphering those old scrolls."

Breles was busy. With a trading vessel and several passenger vessels arriving all at once, the docks were full of people moving around. There were a lot of people greeting the new arrivals.

I took Jared's hand and we stuck close together. I kept my head down, trying to avoid contact. It would be an odd coincidence if anyone that knew me just happened to be hanging around the docks but I didn't want to take any chances.

"Eliza!"

I glanced at Jared.

"Someone is calling for you."

"Come on," I said. I pulled him further into the crowd.

"Eliza, where are you going!?" that voice called again.

I winced. If they kept shouting my name, it would defeat the whole purpose of trying to travel covertly.

"Ugh. We've got to tell them to stop yelling my name," I muttered.

"Good call. I was going to say, wasn't the whole point of traveling on a trading vessel to avoid detection."

Jared smirked at me.

I scoffed and shook my head. We headed out into the open where the people calling to me could see us.

Charlie and Oliver raced over as soon as they saw me.

"Were you trying to run from us?" Charlie asked, crossing his arms.

"No... not exactly..."

"We weren't expecting to see you here," Oliver said, wiggling his eyebrows at me. "Oh, and who is this?"

I glanced apologetically at Jared. It was too late to escape now.

"Oliver, Charlie, this is Jared. These are my second cousins." I motioned to the two brothers.

"It is nice to meet you," Jared said, without missing a beat. He shook their hands.

"And how do you know Eliza?" Charlie asked. He circled around Jared like a vulture circling for a meal.

"Come on, guys, we don't have time for this. There is a reason we were trying to travel without being seen."

"Yeah, what a good idea that was! Do you know how pissed the entire family is at you for just disappearing?" Oliver asked, his voice harsh.

"I know... I mean, I should have sent word before now." I shrugged helplessly. There wasn't much I could do about it now.

"Everyone is absolutely livid. How could you just take off like that with no word? It was like you vanished!" Charlie scolded.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Hey, the last time I checked, I am an adult and can make my own decisions."

"Well, that wasn't a very good one, was it?" Charlie challenged.

Sighing, I shook my head. "Do I need to break down all the amazing decisions you've made in your life?"

Charlie gave a sheepish grin and held his hands up in surrender. "No, no. Please, don't do that."

"Then stop judging mine!"

"Okay, okay. I'm mostly just glad to see you're okay," Charlie admitted.

"Me too. My family is visiting for a bit but your parents... they took off to the Dark Realm to try and find you. They seemed determined not to come back until they brought you home," Oliver explained.

I chewed my lower lip and nodded. My parents were probably really worried about me. Worried and pissed, by the sounds of it. I wondered if we'd just missed each other.

It was a little ironic that they were in the Dark Realm ready to drag me back and I'd shown up in the Light Realm on my own.

I looped my arms around myself. I did feel guilty for the trouble I'd caused. There were a lot of people that cared about me and clearly, they were upset and worried by my disappearance. I should have sent word sooner.

But every time I had a moment to breathe, there had been more pressing demands on my time and attention.

"I bet you've had your hands full with her, huh?" Charlie asked Jared.

I put my hands on my hips. "Hey!"

"You have no idea," Jared grinned.

"What!?" I gasped in shock.

Jared looped his arm around my shoulders. "It's not like I haven't enjoyed it."

I relaxed a little and shook my head at Oliver and Charlie.

"You guys, stop making trouble for me. Jared and I are here on very important business and time is a major factor."

Unconsciously, I rubbed my arm. Whenever I was in public, I tried to keep it covered so people wouldn't see the curse tattoo. But I could feel it creeping along my arm, getting stronger and darker every day.

"Alright, alright, we won't hold you up. Are you staying at the house?" Charlie asked.

I looked down the road that led to the family home. It felt like forever, another life, since I'd been there. My life had changed so much. I had changed so much.

"Right now, we are trying to find Ciana and Theo." Jared interjected.

I nodded in agreement.

After studying all the information in the books that the Sabroeef elder had lent us, I'd determined going to Ciana and Theo would be the fastest way to find Mila.

Ciana was her daughter and I knew that she was easier to find than some mysterious witch who seemed to want to be hidden.

If anyone knew where Mila was, it would be her daughter.

"Ciana and Theo?" Oliver asked. He rubbed his chin and looked off into the distance. "Well, the last I heard, they were living in Winter Forest."

I perked right up. "Good, that's exactly where we need to go, then."

"We can get you there. There's an airport not too far from here," Oliver offered.

"Thanks, that is appreciated." I nodded, and Jared and I followed them off the docks.

"So, Jared, what exactly are your intentions with Eliza?" Charlie asked. He clapped Jared on the shoulder.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Jared said.

He glanced sideways at me and I shook my head. I could tell he was playing dumb and I rolled my eyes at him.

"Well, the two of you are obviously close. I mean, you traveled into another realm with her. What's up with that?"

"Jared and I have shared... a few experiences. Now we are here trying to take care of some lingering issues," I said.

I wasn't sure how much I wanted to tell them. If we told them about the curse, they'd have all kinds of questions that Jared and I didn't have the time to answer!

My internal agitation encouraged the curse shadow within me to stir. It seemed angry, it that was possible, like it knew I was trying to get rid of it.

Absently, I played with the locket on my neck, hooking the chain around my chin and sliding the locket back and forth, making a sawing sound.

"And Ciana and Theo are going to help? What exactly did you get her into?" Oliver arched an eyebrow at Jared.

"She got herself into it," Jared grumbled.

"So, I take it you weren't planning on visiting us, then?" Charlie asked, falling into step beside me.

"Well..."

"Ouch!" Oliver said, clutching his heart dramatically, like I'd stabbed him. He staggered back a few steps for extra emphasis.

"I'm sorry. But like I said, Jared and I are on a tight schedule. We were going to do what we came here to do and then we were going to plan visits and all that."

"I suppose that is acceptable," Charlie nodded.

"You'll still come see us again after you take care of this mysterious business, right?" Oliver asked.

"We will definitely try," I assured.

Charlie and Oliver seemed satisfied with that answer and they stopped all the interrogations.

I was glad of that because I really didn't want to lie but I didn't want them to get involved, either.

Our next stop was the airport.

[Chapter 874](#)

Jared

We boarded the plane and I stopped dead, staring down the narrow tube that was supposed to fly us tens of thousands of feet in the air.

"What's wrong?" Eliza asked, turning to me.

"This... is very small."

Eliza shook her head and grabbed my hand. "Come on, it is perfectly safe."

She pulled me to our seats. Like an expert, she sat down and fastened her seatbelt.

I mimicked her. When the plane jolted, I grabbed the armrests and pressed myself into the back of the seat.

"Jared, we're not taking off yet. They'll make a big announcement, it is fine," she assured, taking my hand again and holding it in her lap.

She relaxed in her seat and closed her eyes.

Glancing around the plane, I noticed that everyone else was getting settled into their seats and they didn't seem at all concerned.

Sweat practically poured down the back of my neck. I breathed in and out repeatedly and looked around at the tiny tube that was somehow an acceptable form of transportation.

When everyone was on the plane, the announcement for takeoff was made.

The engines roared to life and the entire plane vibrated.

"And you've done this before?" I asked, leaning toward Eliza.

She smiled and nodded. "Yes. I promise, nothing will happen."

She squeezed my hand comfortingly.

I nodded but I wasn't entirely convinced. It was such an odd contraption. Sure, it beat walking all the way there, but my mind raced with all the things that could go wrong from a narrow, metal tube hurtling through the sky tens of thousands of feet above land.

I clenched my fists as the plane raced down the runway, squeezing Eliza's fingers. If it hurt her, she didn't show it.

My jaw tensed and I ground my teeth together, getting sucked back into the seat as the plane went faster and faster.

Suddenly, my stomach leapt into my throat and I felt like I was floating. I glanced out the window and saw that we weren't on the ground anymore. The plane was in the air, angled upward, and ascending quickly!

I looked over at Eliza and she was completely unconcerned.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to relax and try to enjoy this flight.

Eliza was humming the song from the locket. I looked over at her and saw her fiddling with the necklace.

She was doing that more and more, it seemed. Like the locket was somehow a reminder of what we needed to do.

There was something different about her. From the moment we stepped off the boat, I'd noticed it. She was lighter, happier, more relaxed.

Sitting on the plane, a piece of technology she'd been exposed to as a child, it seemed like it was an everyday activity.

There was nothing like planes in the Dark Realm. It was wild and far less luxurious.

Eliza had never looked so at peace in the Dark Realm. She was always on the go, tenacious, and pushing forward. Was that because she was on edge?

Sighing, I looked around the plane and the wonder of technology that it was.

How could I expect her to give up the luxury and ease of life in the Realm of Light and come back to the Dark Realm with me?

If we broke this damned curse, I couldn't ask her to give up this technology and luxury. I couldn't ask her to give up the light.

Eliza kept her eyes closed, humming the song to herself softly. I could only hear the song in her voice now. and that didn't bother me.

She was so relaxed that she was practically glowing. The light behind her from the plane window gave her a beautiful halo, framing her curls and her soft features.

I wanted to see her glow like that, always!

When the plane landed, Eliza and I got our bearings in the airport.

She rubbed her stomach.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, touching her shoulder.

"I'm hungry. We didn't even have breakfast and then we did all that traveling," she groaned.

"Alright, let's get something to eat." I looked around the airport for a possible place to eat.

"Actually, I'm pretty tired, too. And my back is a little sore from the plane ride. Maybe we should get a hotel first and find food there," Eliza suggested.

"Sure. Then we can put our bags down, too."

Just outside the airport, there were several large hotels. Right away, I noticed they were all a lot nicer than any place we'd stayed in the Dark Realm.

Eliza went right to one of the hotels, apparently familiar with it. She booked us a room and we dropped our bags off.

There was a garden restaurant in the hotel, so we grabbed some lunch and sat out in the garden.

There was a lot to get used to in the Realm of Light, but it definitely agreed with Eliza. She just kept smiling and glowing.

"I have Theo and Ciana's contact information. I'm going to give them a call and schedule a meeting." She pulled her phone out.

"Alright. What are you going to tell them?"

"Just that we are looking for Mila. Do you want me to tell them who you are?"

I tapped my finger on the table top and I looked into Eliza's sweet, imploring eyes. I knew she'd do whatever I asked of her out of respect.

"Maybe not. I'd rather meet them first. I don't want them to think that I'm after something from the family."

Eliza nodded and made the call.

I hadn't really thought about how I was meeting my own aunt and uncle soon. Family had always been a murky subject for me.

It was hard enough to admit that I had an extended family, let alone that I'd be meeting them soon.

"Hey, Ciana, it's Eliza," I heard Eliza say into the phone. "Yeah, yeah, it is good to talk to you, too. I was wondering if you and Theo had some time to meet with me and a friend."

There was a pause as she listened to Ciana on the other line.

"Lunch. That sounds great. You'll be meeting with me and my friend Jared. Just let me know where you want to meet. We can get to any convenient restaurant."

Eliza hung up the phone and grinned at me.

"So, the plan is in motion," I said.

"Yes. Are you ready to meet your aunt and uncle?"

I smiled and nodded but my smile felt tight and strained. Eliza didn't seem to notice because our food was brought to us at that moment.

As much as I wanted to meet my family, it still made me uneasy. Once Theo and Ciana found out who I was, they might think I was trying to extort something from the royal family, like money, power, or status.

Royal families were complicated enough without estranged relatives showing up.

What if they rejected me? What if they didn't like me?

It was all too much? I hadn't felt this insecure about anything since I was a pup!

I took off my shirt and pants, wearing just boxers, and slipped into bed. It was late and we'd traveled all day. Eliza and I needed to rest in order to get ready for this family reunion.

"Eliza, what are you doing in there?" I called to her.

She'd been in the bathroom for a long time.

Eliza appeared in the doorway. She looked a little pale, her legs shaking.

"Are you okay!?" I jumped out of the bed.

"Umm... I'm not feeling all that well," she admitted, touching her stomach.

I looped my arm around her back and helped her to the bed. "Come on, lie down. Did you get sick?"

I helped her into the bed.

"Yeah... I think I just overexerted myself today."

I pulled the covers up around Eliza and tucked her in.

"Get some rest. I'll have something brought up for your stomach."

She nodded and leaned back into the pillows.

I called down to room service and had them bring up some chicken noodle soup for Eliza.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I spoon fed her the soup.

"I'm feeling a lot better. You don't need to take care of me like this." She smiled weakly.

"Finish the soup. It is obviously helping your uneasy stomach," I said, putting another spoonful in her mouth.

She swallowed and nodded.

Taking care of her also helped keep my mind off of the meeting with Theo and Ciana.

"Okay, Jared, I'm totally full. I can't eat another bite," Eliza argued, putting her hands up and pushing at the air toward me.

Chuckling, I set the nearly empty bowl aside. Turning back to her, I put my hands on either side of Eliza and leaned in slightly, holding her eyes with mine.

Even when she wasn't feeling well, she looked absolutely beautiful, with the way her wild hair bobbed around her face and the glow that still lingered around her.

"I don't understand..." I whispered.

Eliza creased her brow. "Understand what?"

"How you could leave the Light Realm for the Dark Realm."

"It wasn't that hard. The pathway between the realms is pretty easy to navigate." She grinned at me, completely aware that she was taking my meaning too literally.

I smirked and shook my head at her. "I meant... how could you leave a realm with so much luxury and comfort in order to live in the dirt of the Dark Realm?"

Eliza's brow furrowed more and she sighed. "Well, that's an easy answer. I mean, the luxury is nice. It makes life easier and comfortable but..."

"But what?" I pressed when she didn't answer right away.

"Even though I don't have my wolf, I really liked being able to live wildly in the Dark Realm."

Chuckling, I grabbed one of her wayward curls and tugged it, making it bounce like a spring.

"Wild like your hair?" I teased.

Eliza smiled brightly and nodded. "Exactly."

"Maybe this is selfish of me, but I am glad you have a selfish streak," I murmured, pressing my forehead to hers.

Eliza giggled and then sighed. I pulled back slightly and looked into her face. She had a very subtle frown on her lips.

"No matter what my family might think or want, I know that I'll never be anything like White Queen Lena."

"Well, I've never had an issue with that," I said, kissing her forehead.

I'd always enjoyed Eliza's wild streak. Though, I got the sense that her family didn't appreciate it as much as I did. I wondered if that was one of the reasons she left the Light Realm in the first place, and why we were so drawn together.

"A lot of the time, I feel more like my dark cousins... so to speak," she said, smiling.

[Chapter 875](#)

Eliza

"Believe it or not, I do understand," Jared murmured to me.

"I know you do. That's one of the things I like about you," I said. I sighed and sank back on the pillows.

Now that I was stuffed full of chicken noodle soup, I was absolutely exhausted!

Jared crawled into bed with me and wrapped his arms around me. He hugged me against his bare chest.

I pressed my cheek to his skin and listened to the steady, strong rhythm of his heart.

"There was a time when I was younger when I was almost jealous of Xander, growing up in a cushy castle with everything he could ever want," Jared said. "But I realized that I never wanted to be anything like him or have the life he has."

"Like me and Lena?" I muttered a little sleepily.

"Yeah. I just thought that having all that money and a comfortable palace would make life too easy. And I think having a more... difficult life, has been an asset for me."

I creased my brow and pulled my head from Jared's chest. My fatigue got shoved deep down.

Slowly, I shook my head.

"Jared, your brother's life was far from a fairy tale. You know, your stories are kind of similar..."

Jared scoffed. "How so?"

"Your father... sort of abandoned you by dying before you were born and then your mother died when you were young. Xander watched his father die and his mother left him behind..."

"I guess I never thought about that," Jared admitted, sighing.

"After that, your stories differ but it's not that different of a start," I continued.

"Right. My life was a struggle and his was surrounded by luxury and wealth."

I pulled myself away from Jared and shifted in his arms. "Despite what you think, no amount of wealth or the luxury of life in a palace can make up for parents' love. You both lacked that growing up."

"I take your point."

Jared reached up and cupped my cheek. Slowly, he pulled me back against his chest and wrapped his arms around me a little tighter.

I snuggled up to him.

"I know you don't want to meet your brother but you never know... it could help both of you," I whispered, my fatigue coming back quickly.

"Help us? I don't see how..."

"Jared, the both of you lost your parents young. You and Xander are the last of your immediate family. If you met him, you might be surprised to find that it fills a void for both of you, brings you both peace."

Jared sighed. I glanced up at him as best I could. He had a deep, pensive look on his face. I could tell that he was taking my words to heart and really listening to what I had to say.

"You never know, he might need the same closure as you, about your parents. You probably know more about your mother than he does. And he knows more about your father."

"Eliza, what would I do without you?" Jared chuckled and kissed the top of my head.

I giggled and nuzzled my cheek against his chest.

"Probably never have closure."

Jared sighed and stroked his fingers through my curly, unruly hair.

A lump formed in my throat suddenly. What if we didn't break the curse? How many more moments would I have like this with Jared? Would I ever get to make amends with my family after disappearing?

If we didn't break the curse, I knew I would have to make things right with my family before it took hold.

"Jared, can you promise me something?" I asked.

"You know I'll promise you anything."

"If we don't break the curse..."

"Don't talk like that, Eliza. We have a good chance, now," Jared urged, squeezing me in a warm hug.

"Just listen, please. Things with my family are bad right now, and if we don't break the curse, I know I will need to make things right with them before the curse... ends me. So, I want you to promise me that if we don't break the curse, you'll do the same with your brother."

"I..."

Jared's arms loosened around me. I could practically feel the confusion seeping from him.

"Please. If we don't break the curse, I want you to meet him. It could be the final closure for you and it could help him a lot. I want you to tell him about your mother and... why she left..."

"Alright, I promise. But we're going to break the curse," Jared said.

I smiled against his chest and snuggled as close as possible as we fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

The next morning, my stomach was a little iffy. As I got dressed, I noticed that my muscles were still weak and fatigued.

We'd been traveling so much, all over the Dark Realm and to the underground city. Then all the way back to the Realm of Light. No wonder I was still exhausted.

One good night's rest wasn't going to replenish me after all the inane running around we'd been doing.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Jared asked when he emerged from the bathroom.

He was dressed, his hair combed, and he looked completely fresh. I could tell it was to make a good impression on Ciana and Theo.

He did care about his family, as much as he tried to play it off like he didn't.

"I'm still a little tired. Between the curse getting stronger and all the travel... it'll be nice to get some rest when this is all over."

"Agreed."

"Theo and Ciana are waiting for us."

We met Ciana and Theo at an upscale restaurant where they'd made a reservation.

"Eliza, over here," Ciana's voice met my ears.

She waved me over, standing in the lobby of the restaurant.

"Hey!" I gave her a quick hug and smiled at Theo. "Are we going to get a table here?"

"We made a reservation for one of the private rooms. They're just getting it ready for us," Theo explained. His eyes widened as he looked over my shoulder. "And who is this...?"

"I'm Jared," Jared introduced, reaching a hand out to shake Theo's.

Ciana studied Jared closely. She stepped up to Theo's side and looped her arm through his.

Both of them wore serious looks on their faces.

"You look... like my father, King Sebastian," Theo said, c*****g his head to the side. "And... a lot like my nephew, Xander."

Jared glanced at me and we both smiled tightly. I should have known that they'd recognize a member of the Dark King line.

Theo smirked and clapped Jared on the shoulder. "It is very easy to spot someone of the Dark Alpha line in the Light Realm."

He chuckled and shook his head.

I laughed to help break the tension and soon Ciana and Jared joined in.

"Ciana, Theo, this is Jared. He's actually Xander's brother..."

Theo arched an eyebrow. "Oh, this is going to be quite the tale isn't it?"

The hostess came into the lobby and told us the table was ready. She led us back to the private room.

It was dimly lit with double doors that opened onto a patio. The breeze brought the scent of fresh flowers in.

There was one table at the center with a pure white tablecloth and silk napkins.

The hostess held our chairs for us and one by one, we sat down. As soon as she left us, Jared and I began explaining Jared's story and all about the curse.

After a while, Jared took over the storytelling. I was fine with that, feeling like I'd recounted the story too many times to count at this point.

We only paused long enough to order food and get our meals delivered.

Both Theo and Ciana wore thoughtful yet concerned expressions but they listened without interrupting until...

"Now that Eliza is cursed..."

"Eliza is cursed too?" Ciana asked.

Sighing, I nodded.

Ciana grabbed my arm and pushed my sleeve up, revealing the tattoo marks of the curse. When she ran her fingers along the mark, my curse shadow shifted restlessly.

Instinctively, I reached for the locket around my neck. Somehow, the necklace had become like a talisman to me, a symbol of hope.

Ciana's brow furrowed deeply as she examined the curse mark.

"I will contact my mother right away. She will want to know about this," Ciana said, slightly under her breath.

"Thank you, Ciana. It means a lot to have your help." I pulled my shirt sleeve down.

"I'm sure there is a lot more to this curse than what you've been told. My mother should be able to help figure out how to break it. She's broken a lot of curses in her day," Ciana said, smiling warmly.

"So, I've heard." I nodded and smiled back.

Theo sighed loudly and leaned back in his chair. His eyes were fixed on Jared. Slowly, he stroked his chin and c****d his head to the side.

His eyes were a lot more upset than he was letting on with his facial features, like he was sad and trying to mask it.

"What's wrong, Theo?" I asked. I reached over to Jared under the table and put my hand on his leg.

He covered my hand with his and squeezed my fingers lightly.

"I wish your mother had explained..." Theo clamped his mouth shut and shook his head.

"Explained what?" Jared asked, perking up at the mention of his mother.

"Nothing. I can be overly critical of parents, but then I think of my own father, King Sebastian, and I remember what an asshole he was." Theo chuckled and sighed. "Anyone looks like the patron saint of parents compared to him."

"And you somehow turned out okay," Ciana teased, nudging him with her shoulder.

"After you worked on me for a while." He winked at her and they shared a long, intimate look full of memories.

We finished our lunch and headed out to the front of the restaurant.

Jared and Theo shook hands and Ciana hugged me again.

"I'll be in touch with news from my mother and keep you updated of her movements," Ciana promised.

"I really can't thank you enough, Ciana. You've been a huge help."

"Don't thank me yet. My mom can be rather elusive," she warned.

I pulled away from her and shrugged. "You're willing to help and that's what matters."

"Eliza, you haven't seen your family yet, have you?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at me.

Sheepishly, I bit my lip and looked at my feet. "No, I haven't."

"Please, don't put off seeing your family. This is important." Ciana touched my shoulder lightly.

"I know... but my parents went to the Dark Realm to find me. We just missed them."

"I know you have more family here," Ciana said pointedly.

I nodded. It was true. My grandmother Georgia was still around. Maybe it was time to see her.

[Chapter 876](#)

Jared

"Eliza, are you okay?" I asked.

As soon as Ciana and Theo left, I noticed Eliza's shoulders sag slightly and she let out a deep breath like she was beyond exhausted.

"I'm just... tired..."

"Come on." I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and supported her against me.

She leaned heavily on me and I could feel her legs tremble a little. Eliza was far more tired than she should be after a little outing.

I tried not to let it bother me. We'd been very busy, traveling all over the place for weeks. Not to mention coming to her home realm to face her family.

She was probably emotionally drained as well.

I supported Eliza back to the hotel and sat her down on the bed.

"Is it the curse?" I asked.

She rubbed her arm where the curse tattoos were hidden under her sleeve.

My own shadow had been very dormant since arriving in the Light Realm. I wondered if that was because I was so worried about Eliza and focused on her.

"I don't know... it feels like it is getting stronger. I've just been so tired." She sighed and laid back on the bed.

"I know the feeling," I admitted. I sat down next to her.

Even though my curse didn't weigh as heavily on me right now, I'd been feeling the fatigue of all our travel as well.

But it wasn't like what Eliza was feeling. I was worried about her.

She'd been glowing the day before, now she looked a little thin and pale.

I reached over and put my hand on her forehead, feeling for a fever. She didn't have one.

"What are you doing?" she asked, smiling sweetly at me.

"I think you should see a healer. Just to make sure there isn't anything else going on."

Eliza scoffed and gently pushed my hand away. She sat up and tucked the locket into her shirt like she wanted to keep it hidden and protected.

"I just need to rest a little more."

"Maybe so, but we've still got a lot to do. I'd rather have a healer confirm that you aren't coming down with something so we can focus on breaking the curse. If you get sick it could slow us down..."

Eliza narrowed her eyes at me. I knew that would get her attention. She was the one constantly saying time was of the essence.

"You have the same curse as me and I can tell you're tired, too. So, I'll see a healer the day that you do."

I gaped at her. What argument could I give her to disagree? She wasn't wrong. We both suffered the same problem.

"As you said, Jared, every second counts." She crossed her arms and gave me a sideways look. "We need to be productive."

"Aren't we waiting for Ciana and Theo to give us word about Mila?" I pointed out, arching an eyebrow.

Eliza giggled and shook her head, her curls fluttering around her face like butterflies. Despite the slight paleness in her cheeks, she still looked so beautiful and lively.

"We can't just sit around and wait. Once they get in touch with Mila, we'll need to be ready. We should use this time to find the diadem."

"I suppose you're right..."

Grinning Eliza jumped up and grabbed my hands. She pulled me off the bed.

"Good. We should go to the Temple of the Moon Goddess right away. We should be able to find out more about the Diadem there."

"Right now? I thought you wanted to rest some," I grumbled, reluctantly standing up.

"It is the one thing Mila will need in order to get the curse out of us. We should be prepared. I'm sure it will make her job easier." She tugged me toward the hotel room door.

I was still worried about her but it was hard to ignore her enthusiasm. She did have a way of throwing herself into whatever she was doing and frankly, I didn't mind getting swept up in her wake.

"Eliza, I can go to the temple and get the diadem if you want to rest."

Eliza froze and whipped around, glaring at me. I never thought I'd see an evil look in her eyes, but there it was!

She scoffed and set her hands on her hips.

"You're not serious, are you?"

Chuckling, I raised my hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. Lead the way."

Eliza called a car service and a nice, black town car picked us up in front of the hotel.

"We're headed to the Moon Goddess Temple," she told the driver.

It wasn't a very long ride. I stared at the window at the Light Realm city we were in. It was more elaborate and shinier than anything I'd seen before. I imagined that my brother's palace wasn't as nice as some of the hotels we drove by.

The Moon Goddess Temple was huge! It was gilded gold on the outside and the courtyard had a massive Moon Goddess statue in the center of a fountain. She held a staff and water spiraled out of the top of the staff, swirling around her statue as it cascaded into the basin below.

Inside the temple, there were several people kneeling on silk and velvet cushions praying.

The cathedrals ceilings were so high I had to tilt my head all the way back to look up at it.

At the front and back of the temple were massive, round stained-glass windows that made the sunlight inside appear golden and red. It gave the temple an ethereal appearance.

There were several smaller statues throughout the temple and candles clustered on pedestals to provide light.

Soft music played through speakers somewhere, filling the temple with a lovely, melodic sound that echoed through the massive space.

Eliza walked right up the center aisle, seeming to know where she was going.

I did admire the way she took charge. I also admired the way her butt moved in her jeans as she walked purposefully toward the front of the temple.

There were several Moon Goddess priestesses dressed in glossy lavender robes with silver embroidery.

Eliza approached the closest priestess.

"How can I help you?" she asked, bowing to Eliza.

"We're looking for something kind of... rare. We heard it was here but it might be a topic better discussed in private," I said, standing beside Eliza.

The priestess's eyes widened for a moment.

"I see. Please, follow me." She motioned to a door behind the main altar where the other priestesses were gathered.

They had some scrolls open on the altar and were reciting prayers in different languages and making signs with their hands.

Eliza and I followed the priestess through the back door into an old, musty smelling library. The shelves were full of old scrolls and books.

She lit a lantern and set it on the desk. "What are you looking for."

"We're looking for something called the Diadem of Nyx," I explained.

"Yes, that is a rare item. The most likely place it is located is in Nyx's tomb. Why should I entrust you with such a prize?"

"I'm related to the White Queen line, and my friend here is related to the Dark King line. That diadem is important to us and the longevity of our family lines," Eliza said.

She bit her lower lip and glanced sideways at me. I shrugged.

That was a very loose way of describing why we needed it.

"Will, I will not stand in the way of the White Queen and Dark King lines. I will take you to Nyx's tomb."

She picked up her lantern and led us to another door. She opened it, revealing a spiral stone staircase down into a dark pit.

"This leads to the catacombs. I will show you." She led the way down the stairs.

It was pitch black in the catacombs. We were underground, beneath the temple.

Eliza stuck close to me. I felt a shiver go through her and put my arm around her shoulders.

It was damp and chilly in the catacombs with only the priestess's lamp to guide us.

She led us all the way to the end, to the farthest tomb. "Here is where Nyx was put to rest."

I gasped when I saw the tomb. It wasn't just a tomb, it was a shrine. The tomb was some kind of crystal-like structure and Nyx was completely preserved inside. I could see her face and everything she was buried with.

Sighing, I bowed my head and frowned. "The diadem isn't on her."

I noticed that the Priestess frowned as well. "All items of importance were buried with her. That is our way... unless..."

"Unless what?" I demanded a little gruffly.

How could we have gotten all the way here just to come up empty, again? This was supposed to be a sure thing. Every time I felt like we were getting closer to a cure for the curse, it slipped a little further away.

I felt like such a fool for letting myself get hopeful every time!

"If the diadem was considered a powerful or dangerous tool, it may have been locked away somewhere else," the priestess explained.

We left the catacombs and went back to the main area of the temple.

Eliza looked even more tired now. Her face was a little smudged with dirt. For the first time, she didn't look hopeful anymore.

"Let me show you something that might aid you on your search," the priestess said, motioning to a painting on the wall.

I nudged Eliza's arm. "Hey, we might have a new lead."

I didn't feel as hopeful as I sounded but I wanted to see that spark in Eliza's eye again.

She nodded slowly and followed the priestess.

"This is a painting of Nyx. She's wearing the diadem." The priestess waved her arm over the painting.

Nyx was sitting straight, a tight smile on her lips. She was dressed finely and dripping with jewels and fine accessories. Her hair rippled around her loosely, like a waterfall.

One her head sat the diadem.

A silver tiara looking piece was tucked into her hair, holding it in place. The tiara had a large moonstone at the center and several smaller diamonds all around it. It sparkled and glittered like the finest jewel ever.

Eliza huffed and stamped her foot.

"This is just..." She clamped her mouth shut.

I chuckled. At least she had the restraint not to swear in a temple.

"Hang on..." Eliza stepped closer to the painting and squinted at it.

"What is it, Eliza?"

"I swear I've seen this thing before... but it was..."

"You've seen the diadem. Why didn't you say anything?"

Eliza shrugged. "I don't know if I have seen it. Besides, this is the first picture of the diadem I've actually seen. It is very familiar though."

She rose up on tiptoes, squinting more at the painting.

"Oh!"

Eliza dropped onto flat feet again.

"What, what is it!?"

Slowly, Eliza turned toward me. Her eyes wide, face pale.

"I have seen it before."

"Where?"

I didn't like the look in her eyes. She was making me very uneasy but I didn't want to jump all over her. I could tell she was pretty upset.

"In a vault piled high with gaudy jewels... Aries's vault!"

"No!" I groaned, clenching my fists. I had to stop myself from cursing, too!

We came all this way... for nothing...

[Chapter 877](#)

As we left the temple, Eliza was still quiet.

I couldn't deny that I was disappointed to learn the diadem was in the Dark Realm. But my own disappointment could wait. I wanted to make sure that Eliza would be okay.

"Ready to get back to the hotel and rest?" I asked, taking her hand.

She sighed and shrugged.

It broke my heart to see her look so down and defeated. This whole time, she'd been the one I could count on to lift my spirits and restore my hope.

"There might be a message from Ciana. I bet Mila has more information about the diadem and everything." I squeezed her hand.

She stopped walking down the temple steps, pulling me to a stop.

"What is it?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

"I think we should visit my grandmother, Georgia. Once we hear from Mila, we might have to leave right away and I'd like to see her first. I bet she'll love to meet you." Her bright smile returned to her face.

"Sounds good to me."

I wasn't about to deny her anything that brought a smile to her face!

We got a car to Georgia's house. She waited on the porch for us and Eliza ran up and hugged her.

"It is so good to see you, my dear," Georgia said, pinching Eliza's cheeks. When she saw me, her smile faltered for a moment. "And who might this be?"

"Hi. I'm Jared, descendent of the Dark King royal family. I also happen to be... Eliza's mate," I introduced, holding a hand out to her.

Georgia looked at me for a long moment, then at Eliza. She smiled widely, her cheeks turning a little red.

"Oh! You two are so cute together!" she pinched Eliza's cheek again and then vigorously shook my hand.

Eliza glanced at me and rolled her eyes. Apparently, I was making a good impression.

"It is wonderful to meet you, Jared. Please, come in. I'll make us something to eat and you can tell me all about how you two met and about your adventures."

She quickly ushered us inside.

"Well, you got on her good side quickly," Eliza muttered under her breath as we went in.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"Sure. But you put her in full-on grandmother mode. That 'something to eat' is about to be a five-course

meal with fresh baked cookies after."

I chuckled. "When was the last time either of us had a real, home-cooked meal?" I took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"You make a good point."

We followed Georgia into her kitchen. She was already bustling around, chopping vegetables and muttering something about spices and flavor.

There was a small table in the corner with two chairs. Eliza and I sat down.

"Jared, are you from the Dark Realm?" she asked, sparking the conversation.

"Yes, I am. This is my first time in the Light Realm," I admitted.

As soon as the first pot went on the stove, the kitchen was filled with the most flavorful, savory scent of whatever she was cooking.

My stomach rumbled and I glanced at Eliza. She looked perfectly at home in this older woman's kitchen as Georgia bustled around, sprinkling seasonings on things and putting meat in a pan to sear.

"How do you like the Light Realm?"

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. "It's definitely different."

Eliza chuckled. "I took him on his first plane ride. It was pretty impressive."

"It was terrifying," I laughed.

Eliza was right. Georgia prepared us a five-course meal, with a nice fresh baked dessert.

As we ate, Georgia grilled us on our various adventures. Eliza was happy to fill in the details... most of them.

I could tell she was downplaying the most dangerous parts, and left out the curse all together. It probably would have freaked her out more.

"You two have had so many wonderful adventures. Eliza, I can tell you are very happy with this young man."

"I'm very happy with her, too," I said, taking her hand under the table.

Eliza beamed at me.

"You know, dear... you barely touched your steak. And you're looking... pale. Are you feeling alright?" Georgia asked when we finished our dessert.

"I'm fine. We've been traveling so much and I'm just tired. I'll sleep well tonight."

"Eliza, you should see a doctor."

I scoffed, shaking my head. I tried that one already and Eliza had refused outright.

"Alright, I will see a doctor."

"Wh-what!?" I gasped, staring at her.

Eliza ignored me.

I couldn't believe that she so quickly agreed to go to the doctor upon Georgia's request. I filed that information away for the future.

Eliza was stubborn, but I knew at least one person that could cut through that stubbornness. There might come a day when I'd need Georgia on my side to persuade Eliza.

I couldn't deny that I felt a sense of relief with Eliza seeing a doctor. I still felt like she was too tired and pale for just being fatigued and from the curse.

It wasn't affecting me that strongly and I'd had the curse a lot longer.

Before we left Georgia's, I made a doctor's appointment so that Eliza couldn't refuse to go later.

On the day of the appointment, I went with her. She didn't appear to be getting sicker in any way. I checked her for a fever every day.

Her appetite came and went but she was definitely still eating. She wasn't showing any other symptoms, either.

"Alright, Eliza, what are you here for today?" the doctor asked, coming into the room.

Eliza was sitting on the exam table. I had a chair pulled up beside her.

"I've been feeling really tired lately. More than usual. I'm nauseous a lot, sometimes even getting sick, and I'm not eating consistently anymore," she explained her symptoms.

The doctor nodded and scribbled notes on her clipboard.

"Lay back. I'd like to take a look at you."

Eliza laid down on the exam table, the cover paper crinkling as she moved.

"What do you think is causing her symptoms?" I asked.

The doctor felt around Eliza's neck and then poked around at her stomach. She frowned slightly.

It always seemed like a bad sign when a doctor frowned.

"What is it? What's wrong" I asked nervously.

The doctor helped Eliza back to a sitting position. "I'd like to draw some blood and run some tests. But first, let me check your vitals."

She ignored my questions. I didn't like it but this was Eliza's body.

The doctor listened to her heart with a stethoscope and then checked her blood pressure.

"Alright, how about that blood sample?"

The doctor left with the blood sample, promising to be back with results soon.

"She looked nervous, didn't she?" Eliza asked when we were alone.

I touched her knee. "Nah. She's just being thorough."

"If you say so..."

When the doctor returned, she had a clipboard of test results.

"Well, the good news is, you aren't sick," she reported, smiling.

"And the bad news?" I asked, gulping.

"I'm not sure if it is bad news. But the news is that you are pregnant, Eliza."

"Pregnant!?" we both cried together.

"It take it this wasn't planned?" the doctor asked, looking between us.

"No..."

Eliza looked at me. I shrugged.

"How did this happen?" she asked.

I scoffed. "Do you need me to answer that...?"

"Oh... right..."

"Eliza, I'd like to do an ultrasound to check on the health and development of the baby," the doctor cut in.

"Sure..." she looked a little dazed as she laid back on the table again.

The doctor pulled a machine over and lifted Eliza's shirt. She put some weird gel on her stomach and pointed the screen at us. She pressed a wand to Eliza's stomach and suddenly, an image came up on the screen.

I heard the steady rhythm of a tiny heartbeat.

Instinctively, I took Eliza's hand.

"Your baby is developing just right. Everything looks healthy and there is a strong heartbeat."

"That's... good..."

Eliza still seemed confused, like she hadn't processed the information yet. I hadn't fully processed it either. Fortunately, my concern for Eliza was keeping me grounded.

"I'll print some of these ultrasound images off for you and grab some pregnancy literature."

With all the pamphlets and pictures, Eliza and I went back to the hotel room. I set the pictures and information on the table beside the bed.

Eliza sat on the bed, looping her arms around herself. I sat next to her. Part of me wanted to reach for her but she hadn't said a word since we left the doctor's office.

I rubbed my hands on my thighs and suddenly, a huge smile spread across my face.

I couldn't help it. Even though I didn't know how Eliza felt about this, I knew it was a good thing.

"What are you smiling about?"

Eliza grabbed a pillow and tossed it at me.

I caught it and squished it in my arms.

Eliza..." I threw the pillow aside and grabbed her, pulling her against me in a warm hug.

"What?"

"All my life... I never thought there was anything good for me. But this baby... It is the best thing I've ever created. It's my purpose."

Eliza sighed. I felt her trembling in my arms.

"What's wrong?"

"It's not that I'm not happy. But Jared... the curse..."

"I know what you're thinking. But don't worry."

I grabbed the necklace around Eliza's throat and held the locket between my fingers. I thought about my mother and everything she went through. She'd carried the curse and passed it to me. That's what Eliza was afraid of.

"How can I not worry? I'm still cursed and we have no idea what it will do to the baby."

"Yes we do, because that's how I was cursed. But Eliza, we are going to break this curse, remember?"

I moved my finger to her chin and tipped her head back.

"But what if we're too late? What if the baby is already cursed and breaking the curse on us isn't en-"

I pressed my lips to hers, cutting her off.

Eliza gasped and after a moment, she leaned into my kiss, returning it.

When I felt her relax in my arms, I pulled back from the kiss.

"Listen to me, Eliza. No matter what, I will always protect you and our baby. I will give my last breath for the two of you."

Eliza looked at me with tear-filled eyes. "I know you will, Jared. And I trust you."

We sat there in silence for a few moments, just holding each other. I could feel her heartbeat against my chest, steady and strong. It was a reminder of the life growing inside of her.

"We'll figure it out, Eliza. Together. We'll break the curse and give our baby the best life possible."

She nodded against my chest. "Together."

[Chapter 878](#)

Eliza

Jared was so kind and gentle to me after he managed to calm my fears.

I still worried about the curse and the baby but he'd managed to make me see the bright side of things.

I was getting tired again, though.

"You should get some more rest," he said.

Yawning, I stretched. "Yeah. I'm not going to argue with that anymore."

Sighing, I laid on the bed and looped my arms around my stomach.

Jared pulled my shoes off and fluffed a blanket around me.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked.

I yawned again and nodded. He was just so sweet!

"Yes, I'm comfortable."

"Do you need anything? Water, tea, something to eat?"

"Jared, I'm fine. You don't need to wait on me hand and foot." Although, I did kind of like him worrying about me and being so cute.

Jared chuckled and slipped onto the bed behind me. He curled up against my back and put the blanket over himself, too.

"Well, if you don't need anything, I'll join you for a nap."

"I'm okay with that."

Jared chuckled and nuzzled his nose against the back of my neck. He slipped his arms around me, pressing his palms against my stomach.

Smiling, I hugged my arms around his, covering his hands with mine and entwining our fingers together.

"Are you sure that you're excited about the baby? I know it isn't something we've talked about and with everything going on..."

"Jared, I'm excited about it. Like you, there aren't a lot of things in my life that I feel are amazing. But a baby... that is amazing."

"I'm glad you think so." Jared kissed the back of my neck and a shiver went down my spine.

"Why are you being so sweet to me?"

He chuckled. "Why wouldn't I be sweet? You've given me one of the greatest gifts I could ever imagine."

"It is a gift for both of us."

"Agreed."

"So... Do you want a boy or a girl?" I asked.

My eyelids drooped a little but I was still awake enough to talk. Jared and I had spent so much time together lately but our focus was always on the curse and breaking the curse.

It was nice to talk to him about something personal for once, something we shared and that meant a lot to both of us. And something that was good, not something that threatened us.

"I don't know. I think a girl with your wild and crazy hair would be adorable. But I also think a boy would be fun. How about you?"

I shrugged. "I always thought I'd want a daughter. But I don't really care what we have. I'm just happy to be having a baby with you."

"Mhmm." Jared kissed my shoulder and nibbled lightly.

I gasped and bit back a moan. I felt closer to him just talking than I'd ever felt before.

"I like the name Asher for a boy. And Violet for a girl."

"Those are good names," I agreed. "What about Henry for a boy or Audrey for a girl?"

"There are so many possibilities. Ethan, Leo, William."

"Grace, Naomi, or Emma," I added some girl's names.

"All good choices. But we don't have to decide on anything yet," Jared whispered in my ear.

"Jared... do you think we will be good parents?"

Jared chuckled. "Of course, we will be!"

"You sound so sure..."

Jared hugged me tighter against him, my back to his chest. "I am sure. Because you're one hell of a woman and I don't think you would ever accept failure."

He chuckled and nuzzled my neck. I giggled and shook my head. That was such a strange response, but it made sense, too.

"In all seriousness, Eliza, the two of us have a lot of strengths and interesting experiences that I think will make us great parents. And we have a good vibe with each other."

"You're right. What am I worrying about, anyway?" I sighed and adjusted my head on the pillow, trying to find the most comfortable angle.

"You're worrying because you're going to be a mother soon, and that's what mothers do. They worry."

Jared laughed lightly and I couldn't help but laugh too. Sometimes, the things he said were just too perfect. He was still being insanely sweet and tender with me. I absolutely loved it!

"Now, you should really rest. This was a pretty big shock and you need to take care of yourself for the baby's sake."

"You're right," I agreed with a heavy sigh.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep quickly.

When I woke up again, Jared wasn't on the bed with me. He was across the room, packing his things into his backpack. He had a serious look on his face and I had a strange, uneasy feeling in my stomach.

I creased my brow and sat up, the blanket sliding off of me.

"Are you going somewhere?" I asked.

Jared started and looked up like he hadn't expected me to be awake.

"I've been thinking about something. And I know you're not going to like it."

"Well, when you start with that, obviously, I'm not going to like it."

Jared sighed and dropped a folded shirt into his backpack. He rubbed the back of his neck.

Impulsively, I ran the locket back and forth on its chain, chewing my lower lip.

"Look, we know that the diadem is in the Dark Realm. It is also in Aries's vault and heavily guarded."

"Okay..."

"I was thinking... Since you're pregnant, you should stay here in the Light Realm while I go get the diadem. I can be there and back in just a week or so."

"What!?" I snapped. I crossed my arms and shook my head.

"Eliza, this isn't just about you and me anymore. It is also about our baby. I want to know that both of you are safe."

"And I want to know that you are safe! We are in this together, remember?" I pouted.

"Oh, don't look at me like that..." Jared winced and turned away.

I kept pouting at him.

He glanced back and grimaced and tried to look away again but he kept looking back at me.

"You're too adorable for your own good."

"Does that mean you'll let me come with you?"

Jared sighed and nodded slowly. I could tell that he was not happy with the idea of me going along but I knew that my reasoning, and my pouting, had finally got to him.

"Besides, you'll be able to protect me and the baby if we stay with you."

Jared smirked. "Yeah. Right."

"Oh, Goddess!" I slapped my palm on my forehead.

"What, what is wrong?" Jared asked, nearly jumping out of his shoes.

I laughed and shook my head. "Nothing is wrong... well, that depends on your definition of wrong."

Jared arched an eyebrow at me. He started folding some more clothes and gathering up the pregnancy pamphlets we were given.

"Miriam might have some strong opinions and some choice words about me being pregnant when we aren't married," I reminded him.

Jared scoffed. "I'm not scared of Miriam."

"Right..."

The phone on the bedside table started to ring. I started and stared at it. I'd been so focused on Jared and our current predicament that I'd practically forgotten the rest of the world existed outside of our hotel room.

Jared grabbed the phone. "Hello? Yeah. Okay... be right down." He hung up quickly.

"That was a fast call."

"The real call is waiting at the front desk for us. It's Ciana."

"Ciana!?" I jumped off the bed and grabbed my shoes. "We have to go talk to her!"

Whatever argument I had for Jared about Miriam disappeared from my mind and my only focus was on talking to Ciana and finding out about Mila.

Jared followed me closely but I made it to the front desk first.

I took the phone from the concierge.

"Hello, Ciana?"

"Hey, Eliza. I hope you're doing well," Ciana said.

"Actually... yeah, I'm doing really well." For a moment, I thought about telling Ciana the good news.

When I glanced at Jared, I bit my lower lip. Right now, I was enjoying the closeness we were feeling toward each other because of the baby and I didn't want that to go away. I felt like if we started telling people it wouldn't seem as special anymore.

"Well, I finally got in touch with my mother," Ciana said.

"Oh, what did she have to say?"

"I wish I had better news, Eliza, but it looks like Mila and Soren, my parents, are back in the Dark Realm. I know you just left there but..."

"Oh, no, that is good news. Jared and I were just getting ready to head back. There's something we need to get in the Dark Realm to break the curse." I dropped my voice to a whisper, glancing around the hotel lobby to see if anyone was listening.

No one else was there but Jared.

"Then I guess it is a good thing they are already there," Ciana laughed. "My father said they would meet you back in Jared's village."

"What is she saying?" Jared asked, moving a little closer to me.

I covered the phone receiver for a moment.

"She says that Mila and Soren are in the Dark Realm and they will meet us at your village," I explained.

Jared smiled and nodded. "That's perfect, actually. If we're going to break into Aries's vault, we'll need all the support we can get. I can get my entire crew from my village to help."

"Are you sure full force is the way to go? Shouldn't we be stealthy?"

"I'm not saying it is a plan. But we will need their help," Jared said.

"Eliza, are you still there?" Ciana asked.

"Yes, I'm here. Thank you, Ciana. You've been a huge help."

"I'm glad I could help. Is Jared there with you?"

"Yes, he is."

"Do you mind if I talk to him for a moment?"

"Uh... sure..."

I handed the phone to Jared. He arched an eyebrow at me.

"She wants to talk to you."

Jared frowned for a moment and took the phone. He stepped away from me slightly.

That was odd. What could Ciana have to say to Jared that she couldn't say to me? Why was Jared acting so secretive all of a sudden?

"Uh-huh... yeah... mmmm..."

He made several sounds indicating he was listening to her but I couldn't hear what she was saying, just some muffled mumbles on the other line.

Finally, Jared said goodbye and hung up the phone. He didn't immediately turn to me to tell me what they'd talked about?

I thought about asking but I didn't want to pry. Curiosity gnawed at me but I knew if it was important, Jared would tell me.

He always did.

[Chapter 879](#)

"Remember, we want to get through the capital unseen," Jared whispered, his arm around me, as we deboarded the same trading vessel that had brought us to the Light Realm in the first place.

"You don't need to remind me of that. It's not like we have to stay long. We're just passing through to get back to your village," I said.

Jared nodded. "Right. No coffee dates to spy on our distant relatives this time."

I scoffed and rolled my eyes.

It had taken us nearly a week to get back to the capital of Erogen and we still had a few more days to go before getting back to Jared's village.

I was happy to be back. But it sure would have been nice to have a plane to get on to fly to his village rather than having to go by foot.

Fortunately, we got out of the capitol without any incident. It was a nice change to have everything go smoothly for once.

When we got back to Jared's village, a strong sense of peace and belonging came over me.

Was this what it was like to come home?

I saw so many familiar smiling faces right away. Smiling, I nodded to the people that waved at me. Some of them I knew by name. Others, I didn't. But they all seemed to know me.

The village had changed some. Summer was in full bloom and the trees in the streets were covered with deep green leaves and little flower blossoms of different colors.

Porches had blooming flower boxes and I saw some house cats out sunning themselves in the warm, golden rays of the summer sun. There were pedestrians everywhere and people in the front of their shops, washing windows and tidying things up.

It never ceased to amaze me that a little warm weather could lift everyone's spirits.

Jared sighed heavily and inhaled through his nose.

"Are you happy to be back?" I asked, nudging him with my arm.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, curving up one side of his face.

"After everything we've seen, it is nice to be back to a familiar place. Here, I know the people, I know the land. It's comfortable."

"I agree. As soon as we crossed through the borders, I felt this warm peace come over me. I've never felt that before..."

Jared grabbed my hand. He lifted it to his lips and placed a warm kiss on the back of my hand.

My cheeks warmed and I bit my lip, looking down.

"I'm glad you feel comfortable here."

"Jared, what are we going to tell everyone?"

"About what? The curse, the diadem, Mila and Soren? Or... do you mean the baby?"

I sighed and shrugged. "All of it."

"Well, I think we should be honest about why we are back. I don't want to hide anything from my friends. Besides, they'll have questions when Mila and Soren show up. It is probably better to prepare them for that."

I nodded in agreement. "And... the baby?" I put my free hand on my stomach and smiled lightly.

After the initial shock of finding out I was pregnant, and the heart to heart Jared and I had, everything to do with the baby brought a little smile to my lips.

We hadn't told anyone yet, though, and I wasn't sure if I was ready too.

"What do you want to do?" Jared squeezed my hand.

I grinned foolishly. "Well, to be honest, I kind of like having this secret just between us."

Jared chuckled and shook his head.

I glanced over at him, his handsome features made more so by the warm summer sun all around us. I'd gotten to see so many sides of him since we met but the light-hearted, sweet, tender man he'd become since we found out about the baby was definitely a version of him I enjoyed.

"I kind of like having that secret, too."

"Then, maybe we shouldn't tell anyone right away. We've got a lot of other stuff going on, anyway."

"Good idea. I'm going to leave you with Giselle and Scarlett while I try and get in touch with Abe and get a full update on what's been going on. Is that okay?"

I nodded. The worst of my symptoms had cleared up after learning I was pregnant. I'd been getting better rest and eating more. Jared was watching over me like a hawk.

But the curse was still draining me and I could tell that Jared's careful watch over me along with his curse was starting to wear him down, too. We'd have to keep our smiles strong so other people wouldn't worry about us.

Jared brought me back to the packhouse. It felt like forever since I'd been there but it hadn't changed at all. I found myself feeling very at home. There was a part of me that had been missing this place, even though I didn't know it until I was back.

"Eliza! Welcome back," Giselle came right up to me, hugging me.

"Where have you been? We thought you were only going to be gone for like a week," Scarlett said, hugging me too.

Despite seeing some of my own family and oldest friends back in the Light Realm, Giselle and Scarlett welcomed me back much more warmly.

My eyes pricked with tears as I hugged them. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones already?

"I missed you guys."

"Come on, you need a bath after all that travel. And you need to tell us everything," Giselle urged. She grabbed my hand and hauled me upstairs.

I followed along without argument. A bath sounded great.

Giselle and Scarlett drew me a bath. I felt so pampered and cared for.

While I soaked in the warm, silky bubbles, they sat in the bathroom with me, chattering about everything that had happened since I left.

I closed my eyes and absently put my hands on my stomach. Suddenly, keeping the baby a secret seemed like a lie somehow.

"Where have you and Jared been? The last time we talked, you guys were heading to some ancient city to break the curse. I feel like you've done a lot more than that in the past several weeks," Scarlett said, turning her attention to me.

"We've been everywhere; Saboreef and all the way to the Light Realm... it has been a wild adventure." I smiled widely, hoping to mask the exhaustion from the pregnancy and my shadow that were constantly dragging me down.

Scarlett held a towel out for me and the two of them looked away as I got out of the tub. I wrapped myself up in the towel and stepped out of the tub.

"There's something different about you," Giselle said. She stood next to me, narrowing her eyes slightly, studying me closely.

"Oh, did you and Jared finally take the next step in your relationship?" Scarlett teased.

I groaned and shook my head. "Guys..."

"No, seriously, there is something different about you."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It was impossible to keep anything from these two.

"Okay, if you're going to twist my arm about it... I'm pregnant..."

"What!?" Scarlett gasped.

"Holy crap!" Giselle cried.

"Are you sure?" Scarlett asked.

"I'll show you." I went to the pile of my things and grabbed the ultrasound pictures. I handed them over to Scarlett and Giselle.

They looked at the images and gushed over them while I threw some clean clothes on.

"Oh my gosh! Is that a little head? Or a heartbeat?" Scarlett asked, screwing up her eyes.

"Are those fingers?" Giselle asked, pointing.

"I'm pretty sure it is too early to see fingers," I giggled.

"You're pregnant! You're going to have a baby!" Giselle cried.

Scarlett and Giselle hugged me and jumped up and down in a circle around me.

"It hardly seems like the time to celebrate." Miriam strode into the bathroom, a stern look on her face.

Giselle and Scarlett stopped cheering. They stepped away from me.

"Hey, Miriam. It is good to see you again." I smiled warmly at her.

"There's still a lot of work to do."

She spoke with a tone that walked a fine line between stern and emotionless and yet somehow, she still managed to almost sound friendly.

"Let me see your arm."

"My arm?" Absently, I grabbed my tattooed arm.

Miriam knew about Jared's curse but I hadn't been back to see any of them until now.

"Jared sent word, telling us that you managed to get yourself cursed with the same one that infects him. Let me see it."

I pulled my sleeve up my arm, showing the curse tattoo that marred my skin.

Miriam frowned. She grabbed my arm and twisted it from side to side, examining the tattoo.

"Jared and I are working to lift the curse. We know what we need to do now."

Miriam nodded, but her frown didn't ease up. I could tell that she was still worried.

Sighing, she ran her hand up my arm, tracing the curse lines. Her eyes glinted with a hint of hope. The same hope I felt when we'd found out about the diadem.

But underneath hope, I could sense sadness in her.

She pulled my sleeve down and stepped away.

I grabbed the locket necklace off the sink vanity and clipped it around my neck again. I tried to take it off as little as possible. The necklace just felt like it belonged around my neck.

"I have something for you, Eliza," Miriam announced. She handed over a large bundle of mail, tied together with twine. "These came for you a while ago."

"Thank you." I recognized the handwriting as my cousin's and I clutched the letters to my chest.

"Speaking of family," Miriam smirked.

A pit formed in my stomach. I got the sense that she was just waiting for the right moment to say what she was about to say.

"Curse or no curse, a baby needs a family... a real family. What are you and Jared waiting for?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, creasing my brow.

"When are you two going to get married?"

"Oh... I..."

"Come on, Miriam, she's just getting settled in. It's not the right time to pester her with questions. Besides, that is really a question for Jared. He's the one that needs to propose," Giselle said. She ushered Miriam out of the bathroom.

I gave her a grateful smile and returned to my bedroom. Once I was alone, I opened the letters from Lena.

Sitting on the bed, I leaned against the pillows, propping myself up with one arm as I read through the letters she sent me.

She sent word that she got my warning, thanking me for the heads up. She also told me that she had received my parents and assured them I would be home safely as soon as possible.

I nodded to myself and tucked the letters away. I wondered if that meant that my parents had returned to the Realm of Light. Had we missed each other again?

Miriam's frown haunted my thoughts and I pulled my sleeve up again, looking at the curse mark. It hadn't changed, as far as I could tell, since it fully formed. Her frown made me think she'd seen something in the curse mark that I'd missed.

How much longer would it take until Mila arrived?

[Chapter 880](#)

Jared

"You were right, Miriam wants us to get married," I said to Eliza, looping my arm through hers.

We walked through the main street of the pack village, arm in arm.

"I told you so."

"Yes. By now, I should know to trust you." I kissed her cheek quickly.

Even though she was tired a lot, I tried to make sure she got out for a walk every day. It was good for the baby.

"Have you thought about it at all?" I asked.

Eliza creased her brow and tilted her head slightly in an adorable, thoughtful look.

I turned toward her and cupped her cheek. She leaned into my touch and I traced my thumb along her bottom lip.

"You mean, have I thought about us getting married?" she clarified, lifting her big, bright orbs to look me straight in the eye.

I nodded. "Yeah. Like what kind of ceremony you'd want?"

"Trust me, Jared, every girl has thought about what her wedding would be like." She giggled, a sound that was music to my ears.

"Well, how did you imagine your wedding?"

"Nothing too outrageous. I like the idea of it being simple but elegant. You know, tasteful."

"I can agree with simplicity." I nodded. "What about guests. Did you imagine a wedding with 250 guests?"

Eliza scoffed and rolled her eyes. She started walking again and pulled me along, our arms still looped together.

"No. Nothing like that."

"Well, how would you feel about getting married without family present?"

Eliza's eyes fell to the sidewalk. She remained silent, shrugging.

It didn't seem like she liked that idea but she didn't outright disagree. It wasn't like I had anything against family being there but I didn't have much family... and none that I was close to.

"Can you show me the rest of the pack village?" She looked at me with pleading, hopeful eyes.

I knew it was Eliza's way of changing the subject.

"Sure. We just walked the main street, but over this way, there are a lot of residential homes."

I pulled Eliza down one of the neighborhood streets and showed her the homes.

We walked by several homes and buildings that were a little shabby, missing exterior paint and had sagging rooves.

"There's still a lot of work to be done to get this village up to working order." I sighed.

I brought Eliza to a small park with a little pond and some ducks swimming around.

"I'd really like to fix this park up, make it larger, get a playground for kids put in. Some areas still need running water and electricity."

"I forget that some places in the Dark Realm are kind of behind the times," Eliza said. She went to the pond and crouched down, flicking the water's surface. Light flickered off the locket on the surface of the water.

"Education is a major problem here, too. I'd like to establish a formal education system for my people."

Eliza turned back to me and smiled. She stood up and came to me, taking my hands.

"You have some beautiful dreams for this place. I'd like to be a part of that."

"You will be." I hooked my finger under her chin.

"You know, the Alpha King and Luna Queen could help."

"Eliza..." I put my hands on her shoulders. "My pack has always and will always take care of itself. I'm not going to be running to the king and queen for anything... ever."

I saw the light fade from her eyes. There was an argument on her lips but instead of speaking, she sighed and slouched forward slightly.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked, hugging her to my chest.

"Just a little tired..."

"Let's get you back to the pack house." I supported her with an arm around her shoulders and we went back to the pack house.

I knew how badly Eliza wanted me to get to know my brother. Her recommendation for asking the king for help probably had more to do with opening communication between me and the king than anything.

I did appreciate her efforts and I felt bad for being harsh. Especially seeing how easily she was still getting fatigued.

We got back to the pack house and I got Eliza some food and water, putting it on the bedside table for her. She laid down without any hesitation. I got her a blanket and spread it over her.

By the time I left, Eliza's eyes were closed and her breathing had evened out.

It was hard to tell what was bringing her out more, the pregnancy or the curse.

A few doors down from the bedroom, I ran into Archer.

"I heard you were back." He nodded at me.

"Yeah, I've got some stories for you."

"Oh, like how you came home with a brand-new ball and chain?" he teased with a smirk. "Maybe it will tether you down long enough to stick around for a bit."

Grinning, I shook my head. "Careful, you're talking about the mother of my child."

Archer winked.

I hadn't been mad when I found out that Eliza had told people she was pregnant. The only reason I had agreed with her idea to keep it a secret was because it was something she wanted. It didn't matter to me either way, so I'd let her make the decision.

"Speaking of Eliza, she made an interesting suggestion."

Archer and I started walking downstairs to the living area. "She said I should reach out to the palace for help to get the village up to date."

"Why is that interesting?" he arched an eyebrow at me.

"I've tried to live my life without turning to my rich brother for help. I feel like it has made me... stronger, and better as a leader, but if it is for the sake of the whole village..."

"So, the only reason you don't want to ask is because the Alpha King is your brother?" Archer clarified.

I shrugged. There was a certain sense of accomplishment I gained from doing things on my own, with my own strength, my own resources, and my own abilities.

I'd always felt like that. It seemed like cheating to me to ask someone more powerful and more well off for help, especially when that person would have to help out of family obligation.

"Jared, let me ask you this. If the Alpha King wasn't your brother, would you feel the same about taking his aid?"

"I want what is best for the pack."

"And isn't the best thing for the pack getting the village up to date as quickly as possible?"

"Yes. But is the right way to go about it in a manner that will leave us beholden to someone else?"

"Would you be beholden to the Alpha King? He is your brother..."

I crossed my arms and sighed. "It is a complicated paradox. He might feel obligated to help because we are related, whether he wants to or not. If he doesn't want to help, then he could use that as leverage against us later. But I doubt he will outright say he doesn't want to help. So, upfront, it could seem like a good deal until he calls in the favor later."

"I see what you mean... do you really think that the Alpha King and Luna Queen are that malicious? I always thought they were kind and benevolent."

I rubbed the back of my neck and thought about what Archer said. He did make some good points about my brother being a good person.

There was nothing he'd ever done to make me think that he wasn't a good person.

Was I letting my own pride and biases towards a man I didn't know cloud my judgement?

If I really wanted what was best for the pack, shouldn't I just swallow my pride and do what was needed for their wellbeing?

Sighing, I bowed my head.

It was strange to me to think that asking for help for a quick and easy fix was the "right" thing to do. I'd lived my life thinking that it was hard work, commitment, and determination that paid off.

But what was family for, if not helping?

"Look, Jared, the king and queen are your family. What you want to do with that is up to you," Archer said, shrugging one shoulder. "But the truth is, if they are as noble as they appear, they should want to help the packs in their kingdom."

"You're saying that they'd help any pack, regardless of family ties?"

"That's my thinking. Blood shouldn't matter when it comes to good leadership."

"That doesn't change the fact that the pack village would be indebted to the crown," I pointed out.

"But if the king and queen are noble and simply helping their people as good leaders, you wouldn't be indebted to them."

I nodded slowly. Reaching out, I clapped Archer on the shoulder.

"Thanks."

He made good points and gave me a lot to think about.

I headed back to my room. Eliza was still sleeping soundly, her arm thrown over her eyes. I went to her side and pulled the blanket further up her body, keeping her warm.

My balcony had some of the best views of the village. I went out on the balcony. The afternoon sun was warm and bright, the sky a gorgeous powder blue. There wasn't a cloud anywhere in sight.

Leaning my elbows on the balcony rail, I looked at the village spread out around the mansion.

If I didn't ask for my brother's help, my village would go years without modern updates that would increase their wellbeing and overall comfort. I'd continue to have a non-existent relationship with my brother, either.

On the flip side, if I did reach out to him, Eliza would be happy. The village would be updated and my pack would be happy. And I'd get the chance to see what kind of man my brother really was.

When thinking about it like that, the pros definitely outweighed the cons.

But I still had to worry about long-term effects of what a deal with the king would mean.

Eliza believed that he was a good man that wouldn't hold this kind of thing over my head.

Archer seemed to believe it too.

Perhaps I'd let my animosity toward royalty and palace life color my thoughts and opinions of my brother.

There was another problem I was contending with too... was I ready to reach out to my brother and attempt a relationship?

Was that really what was holding me back?

Of course, I wanted what was best for the pack. But I didn't know if I was ready to connect with my family on that level.

Getting to know Theo and Ciana had been enough of a shock and they were more distant relations.

My heart ached suddenly and I stood up, clasping my hands over my heart. My lungs heaved as I breathed heavily.

Eliza was right. There was a part of me that longed to meet my family and connect with them. And maybe then, the emptiness inside would feel less consuming.

It was time to reach out to the palace and my brother.