

## Chapter 14

In Vignette, you're standing next to Elisa who's hugging and kissing her son, brushing his hair with her fingers. "We did it mom! I was right! It was the guardian!" Jason is so excited, and you wonder why he isn't shaking in his boots by what happened. The mom looks at you, gratitude and tears evident in her eyes. "How can I ever repay you?"

"You can repay me by celebrating Christmas with us in the capital," you smile, but it's troubled. You need to go back and find Mira.

Elisa's eyes go wide. "Christmas in the capital? Oh dear, we haven't even sent you a Christmas tree this year!"

You smile and shake your head. "It's alright. As long as you show up, I'll be happy," you say. Mira mentioned that they're scared of using the trees in Gloom like they used to, so you don't want to trouble them further. You can manage without the tree, even though you had hoped for one.

"I must leave now, but I wish you the best, and I hope to see you in a few days." You turn around and start walking. Even though you'd wished to never return to Gloom again, you can't just leave Mira there. Just as that thought enters your mind, Mira meets you by the town entrance. She's looking like herself again, but there's something behind her eyes you can't quite place.

"Was it a happy reunion?" she asks, leaning against a fencepost with crossed arms.

"What the hell happened?!" you ask, not sure how you feel.

"We saved the guardian and the kid, she gave you a gift, then teleported you out."

Her answer annoys you. Of course, you know that part. You punch her arm, not too hard, but enough to get some frustration out. She brushes her arm where you punched her.

"Shall we move on then?" She asks, nodding towards the road.

You want to say more, but you nod and start walking.

"Hey, kid!" Mira shouts after Jason. "Don't ever do something like that again!" Then she turns and joins you.

After getting far enough away from Vignette, you ask, "Seriously, are you just never going to tell me what happened? What did we do and why did it work?"

"You healed it," she says simply.

"Mira, come on," you're getting fed up with her avoidance.

“Like I said, that guardian was corrupted with the same darkness that I can control. What happened, was that I drew the darkness out of her, and you healed her at the same time. Had you not done that, had you not sealed the wounds so to speak, she would’ve just been filled with darkness again. It wouldn’t have mattered how much I drew out, like a never-ending cycle.”

“And what happened to all the energy you drew out? Is that why you wanted a container?” she nods at your question. “But we didn’t have a container. So, what happened to it?” Mira doesn’t respond, and you realise, “Please don’t tell me it’s inside you.” She looks at you then, but she doesn’t respond. To you, that’s a confirmation. “Mira, why would you do that?”

She shrugs. “You wanted to save the kid.”

“Oh, please. I saw the way you shielded Jason when the guardian first appeared. You wanted to save him too.”

“If the kid had died, he would’ve just been food for the corruption.”

You snort. “Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.”

You walk in silence for a while, before you ask, “If we could heal the guardian, and she had the same type of energy as you, can’t we heal you the same way?”

Mira shakes her head. “I wish. No, the guardian’s corruption was probably the result of many bad souls buried in that graveyard, poisoning the land. We could draw them out of her. What I have is a curse. It’s the same energy, yes, but in two different ways.”

“But now it’s all inside you...” She nods. “Are you going to become like her?” you ask, remembering the veins and black eyes she got from absorbing the guardian’s energy.

“No. Well, not yet anyway.” You look at her curiously. “After she teleported you out, she approached me. I’m not gonna lie, I was struggling. If all that energy did that to a guardian, you can imagine what it would do to a mortal like us. And with the curse as well...” she pauses, looking down. “I honestly thought I was a goner. But the guardian gave me a way to contain it, at least for a little while. As thanks for the aid, you know.”

“So it’s not inside you anymore?” you ask excitedly.

“Oh, it is. But imagine we did have a container, and we sealed all that energy inside it. Now, imagine that container is in here,” she says pointing to her chest. “It’s still there, I can still hear their whispers, but for now it’s muted and contained. That doesn’t mean they will not erupt one day.”

“They whisper to you? What do they whisper?”

“Temptations. Urging me to tap into their power. It’s nothing I’m not used to. The curse does the same.” She casually kicks a rock as you walk. “The more you give in, the louder they get.”

“How did you get cursed?” you have asked her before, but last time she hadn’t answered.

“That’s enough about me,” her response, sadly, doesn’t surprise you. “How are you doing? Are you coping alright?”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m feeling it in my legs,” you laugh. “Why didn’t we bring the horses?”

Mira chuckles, “That’s a good question.”

“It’s a lot to take in. I’m experiencing a lot of things I never did in Hometown or the Capital.” Mira nods as she listens attentively to you. “I don’t know. I’m exhausted, but I’m proud of all we’ve done since we started. We’ve helped a lot of people, including a corrupted guardian. How crazy is that? And yet, I have no idea what to do once we find this warlock. If we find him, that is.”

“What did he say when he cast the curse?” Mira asks.

“Just that he would send me on a journey to prove myself.”

“In what way?”

You shrug. “I don’t know. But I’m helping everyone I come across, and I’m actually making my way towards him. If that isn’t proving myself, I don’t know what is.”

“Is that why you’ve been going out of your way to visit every town we pass? Like with Morph and Bird’s Tail?”

“No,” you shrug. “I genuinely want to help. And arguably, Bird’s Tail was on you for not reading the map properly.”

“Don’t blame me. I think that was just whoever sent us on this journey’s way of filling our time until we’re ready to get to the final point.”

You keep chatting as you talk. The sky is getting darker, signalling the end of the day. In the distance, you see some red tents set up on a large space next to the path. There’s music and muffled chatter coming from the tents, and smoke is rising to the sky. You and Mira look at each other, shrug, and head towards them.