

## Chapter 24

The warlock stands before you, powerful and menacing. His hands slowly move up to his hood, and he pulls it back, revealing a man with an almost childlike excitement. "Well met travellers," he says, still dramatic but now with a lighter note. You and Mira look at each other confused at this sudden change in tone. "Please, come in come in, welcome! Make yourselves at home." He ushers you towards the ice couch, which you're sure will give you a UTI if you sit down. "My name is Mikael, Mikael Shott, nice to meet you. I'm so glad you could make it!"

"What is happening?" Mira whispers to you. "He's the one who cursed everyone?" You nod and sit down, despite your reservations.

"Can I get you something? Ice chips, perhaps?" He laughs, very amused by his own joke which you didn't know was a joke.

"We're fine, thank you." You watch as he waves a hand, and the ice throne appears across from you. He sits down, folding his hands in his lap.

"How was your journey? Tell me all about it!" He's sitting there with a grin, looking genuinely excited about all this. You and Mira give each other sceptical looks before you recount your journey to him. He gives little "mhm"s as you talk, sometimes giving very dramatic reactions and laughs to certain parts of the story.

"What I'm hearing is you've had a lot of fun!" He leans back, setting his elbow on the throne-arm and resting his head in his hand. "And I provided that fun."

"Okay, we're here, she found you. What now? Will you lift the curse?" Mira asks impatiently.

Mikael studies her, which is making Mira visibly uncomfortable. Then, he laughs. "Of course I will lift the curse! You found me after all."

"So I've proven myself?" you ask, confused at why he's laughing.

He continues to laugh, almost uncontrollably. It's not an evil laugh, it's the laugh of someone who just pulled off the most elaborate prank and is very pleased with themselves. "Yes, you've proven yourself."

You can feel your anger rising as you get the feeling he's mocking you. "Seriously, what is going on?"

"I got you! I got you good," he wipes away a tear as he laughs. "You fell for it so easily."

Mira's fists clench and you actually feel with her this time. "You'd better start explaining," she says, and you can see the veins have started peeking out of her shirt.

"The old king was so boring. He never wanted to play, always so serious." He looks at you, genuine joy in his eyes. "But you took the challenge. You're different, you're fun. I thought this would be a fun way to welcome the new princess."

"You cursed the entire kingdom," you say seriously. "And you're saying you did it for fun?"

His laughter starts dying as he realises you're not sharing his joy. "It wasn't serious. I was gonna reverse it eventually."

You realise that this was never an elaborate scheme, this was probably an impulsive decision for a prank he didn't understand the gravity of.

"Mikael, you took everybody's joy away and kept it away for days. Everyone has been miserable, and all because you wanted to have some fun?" you say, not angrily but sternly. Like you're trying to help a child understand the repercussions of their prank. He looks away.

"I was gonna give it back," he says again, sheepishly. "And now that you've found me, I'm gonna give you the best Christmas you've ever had as a reward." He looks at you, checking to see if he's swayed you.

"Have you been watching? Do you have any idea what she's done to get here? The dangers she's faced?" Mira asks.

"Yes," Mikael says, getting more serious. "I have been watching. I've watched you save people, save towns, help people you had no reason to help. And I've watched people love you for it. I helped people love their new princess. Because of me, you'll be a beloved ruler."

"Oh that's not..." Mira starts, but he interrupts her.

"I've watched you too, you know." His eyes lock with hers. "I know what you've done, what you carry inside you."

Mira doesn't respond, seeming at a loss for words. Mikael waves a hand, and a medium-sized wooden container engraved with beautiful patterns appears in front of him. He opens the box, revealing just empty space inside. "I can help you. I can lock away what you've been storing since you left the guardian."

Mira narrows her eyes. "I don't trust myself with that energy, I definitely don't trust you."

"What? Why?" Mikael asks, looking genuinely perplexed.

"Do I really have to say it? You have enough power to curse an entire kingdom, and you did it just for fun. So no, I don't trust you with all that corrupted energy."

Mikael sighs. "Do you know what makes a warlock a warlock, and not a sorcerer or wizard?"

Mira nods, you shake your head. His eyes turn to look at you. "A sorcerer is born with their powers. A wizard gets them through knowledge, through learning. A warlock got their powers by making a deal with a deity or demon." He pauses, turning to look at Mira again. "I don't need that energy you're carrying for anything. I channel the powers of a god. But I am offering, as a reward and maybe an apology, a chance for you to lessen the burden."

"You can cure her?" you ask.

"No, I cannot. The curse is not mine to break, I couldn't do anything about that if I tried. But I can take what you took from the guardian, lock it away somewhere safe."

You turn to Mira. "I think you should accept." There was no ripple as he spoke, no indication that he lied. Mira looks at you, checking your sincerity.

“Fine, but if you try something...” she says, but Mikael has already started. He’s saying some words in a language you don’t understand, and the carvings on the box begin to glow. Mira’s face contorts in pain as black smoke seeps out of her and into the box. You offer her your hand, and she squeezes hard. Almost as quickly as it began, the smoke stops pouring out of her as the last of it disappears into the box and the lid is sealed shut. She breathes heavily, letting go of your hand.

“There we go. No more bad guardian corruption for you,” he smiles, very pleased with himself.

“Why did you make that deal?” you ask as Mira recovers. The veins that had started creeping up are still there though. Mikael notices what you’re looking at.

“Ah, that was part of her curse. I can’t do anything about that, but hopefully it’s easier to bear without that extra energy.” His eyes lock with yours. “I took the deal because I thought it was fun. I wanted people to laugh at my jokes, to enjoy my skits and bits and pranks. I got more than I bargained for.” He laughs, but it’s not heartfelt.

Despite what he did, you almost feel bad for him. He’s clearly not some evil warlock, he’s a lonely man who wants attention and wants people to like him. Who doesn’t want people to like them?

“I am sorry about the curse. I didn’t think it through. I just... the last king was so bad. He didn’t like me very much, so he exiled me.” He looks down at the sealed box in his hands. “I thought this was a nice way to see if you were better than him. And I thought you would have fun in the process. I’m sorry I was wrong.” He looks up, his eyes going wide as he realises what he said might be misinterpreted. “About this being fun for you, not about you being better than him. Because you are, in every way, better and kinder than him.”

Damn it, you wanted to stay mad at him, but he’s just sad. “I can banish your exile, but if I do, you have to keep your powers in check. Maybe run it by me if you want to do an elaborate prank, so we don’t end up with a cursed kingdom again. Does that sound fair?”

He looks at you, clearly not expecting that response. Then he nods repeatedly, “I promise, I will do my best not to deliberately cause more harm.”

“That’s all I ask. And that you lift the curse, of course.”

“I will do you one better. I promised you I would give you the best Christmas ever, and I will. But I also have another gift for you, as an apology, and a thank you for being you.”

He closes his eyes again and begins chanting in that language you don’t understand. You feel a surge of energy coursing through you, settling deep in your bones.

“Congratulations, you can now speak with animals and summon an animal companion whenever you need it,” Mikael says once he finishes his chanting.

“Any animal companion?” you ask in disbelief.

Mikael nods. “Yes, including your cats, or a giant bear if you want. But, for the summon to work you will have had to befriend the animal already. So if you want to summon a giant bear, you’ll have to befriend a giant bear first. Understand?”

“Yes, thank you! That’s a very generous gift!”

“It’s the least I could do after cursing everyone.” He now turns towards Mira. “Like I said, I can’t reverse your curse, and I can’t stop what has already started,” he says, gesturing to her veins.

“But I can silence their voices, I can make it more bearable, if you’ll let me.”

Mira looks at him sceptically. She looks down at the box keeping the corrupted energy. Then, she looks at you, studying your reactions, your expressions, probably looking for any adverse effects of what he gave you. Seeing none, she nods. “I do actually feel lighter after you removed the energy.”

Mikael looks excited as he starts chanting again. You didn’t notice this when he did it to you, but his eyes glow a burgundy red as he does his magic. There’s no visible effect on Mira, other than her closing her eyes and letting out a deep sigh as he finishes his magic.

“Are you okay?” you ask her.

She nods softly. “It’s so quiet.” She looks up at Mikael. “Thank you,” she both looks and sounds like she’s trying to choke back a cry.

“It was my pleasure, really,” he says sincerely. “I also gave you the power to cast illusions, so you can hide the effects of the curse if you want.”

“Thank you,” she says again, her voice low, but sincere.

Mikael gets up from his throne. “Now, shall I get you back home?”

Your head perks up. Already? You went through all that trouble, expecting maybe a real confrontation with some bad guy. Instead, you feel like you’ve just been scolding a grown child for a prank gone too far. “But the curse?” you ask.

“I will lift it, don’t worry. And while I do, you have a party to prepare for. Are you ready to be teleported home?”

The party! Damn it, you forgot once again to invite Ronn! “It’s okay, we can walk back home,” you say mostly because you know Ronn is waiting for you on the boat right outside.

Mira turns to you. “Seriously?”

“Ronn is waiting,” you remind her.

“Don’t worry about that. I can teleport you home, and I’ll let Ronn know.”

It does sound appealing to not have to trek all the way back. “Okay, thank you. You’re of course invited to the party, by the way, just don’t forget our agreement.”

He beams at you. “I won’t forget, I promise!”

Once again, he chants in the unfamiliar language, and you feel that strange, tingling sensation you’ve come to associate with teleportation. Then, Mikael and the ice palace disappears from view.

## Epilogue

It's been a few days since your "confrontation" with Mikael, and he's kept his promise. The courtyard is now filled with jolly people enjoying their holidays. The castle is nicely decorated with garlands and lights and other festive decorations. By the fountain stands a large Christmas tree, courtesy of Vignette. They had done their best to find a good tree, despite their circumstances, and you gratefully accepted. It's beautifully decorated, with a star at the top. It's the night of the party, and you had made sure to send written invites to everyone, including the ones you forgot to verbally invite. You walk around the courtyard, mingling with the guests. Lezli and Benji are standing by a stall handing out free calzones to all who want them. Monnika and Chanandler stands next to them, handing out free Christmas ale. Joeh and Captain Kollt are nearby, Joeh gleefully playing with Gouda. Monnika waves you over as she spots you, and she hands you a couple bottles of ale. Not any of the bottles from her stand, but from behind it. "We did a little something to help speed up the fermentation process. I hope you like the ale you made."

"Thank you!" you say, accepting the bottles and place them in a small bag you've brought with you.

Roza is sitting by a small table next to the ale stand, enjoying an ale together with June and Ronn. Jeena is nearby, performing some sort of dance, you think, and the others are pretending they're paying attention to it. You tell them all you're happy they made it and keep walking through the courtyard. Elisa, her son, and Dana, the girl you met at your grandmother's teashop, are admiring the tree while eating a calzone. The kid spots you and runs over to hug you. You hug him back, and they tell you Vignette has started recovering. You compliment them for the tree and tell them you're very thankful they sent it to you.

Lisa and Don are sitting around another table, next to a coffee stand, with Jimminy and Pamellara. They all have a steaming mug of coffee or hot chocolate or any other hot drink the stand offers. You sit down with them for a bit, having a chat. Lisa and Don are both very pleased and excited to meet Pamellara. Well, Lisa is visibly excited, Don you hope is excited on the inside. He's smiling, so that's something at least. Lisa is very interested in hearing about your journey, so you tell her everything. She tells you you're very brave and other compliments that warms your heart. You also tell Jimminy about Dwite and the trolls. Apparently, Dwite had retaliated by putting some kind of itchy powder in his underwear. Speaking of, you hear Dwite nearby showing off his tranquet to probably some random people who happened to look at it.

"Pernille," you hear by the coffee stand and turn to see Brakin and Broadin, one with ale and the other with coffee.

"Hi! I'm glad you could both make it!" you say and smile.

"Of course. Have you seen Mira?" Broadin asks, a hopeful look in his eyes.

You shake your head. "No, sorry. She's probably around here somewhere."

He nods, his smile sad. You wish each other merry Christmas, and you walk off.

By the courtyard entrance, you spot your grandmother walking in with your two cats. Your face lights up as you run towards them, embracing your grandmother in a heartfelt hug. "I'm glad you could make it!" you say, bending down to pet your cats who are very happy to see you.

"We've missed you," says an unfamiliar voice, and you startle as you realise that was one of your cats. You had completely forgotten you could talk to animals now.

"And I missed you," you say, giving them an extra scratch behind the ear.

Your grandmother looks at you curiously as you answer your cat. Then, she shakes her head, and hands you a wrapped gift. "Here, I got this for you."

"You didn't have to," you say but accept it and open it. Under the wrappings is a black coat, embroidered with beautiful patterns. You look up at her. "It's beautiful. Did you make this?"

She nods, smiling. "Try it on."

You take off your cloak, and she offers to hold it for you. Then, you try on the coat and give your grandmother a little swirl so she can see you from all angles.

"It fits you perfectly. You look beautiful," she says proudly.

You feel your eyes watering, and you give her another hug. "I love it! Thank you!"

She pulls back from the hug, her hands holding firm on your shoulders as she locks eyes with yours. "I am very proud of you. I hope you know that." You fight back the extra tears threatening to spill as you say a weak, but sincere "thank you." That's all you manage to get out.

You take your cloak back and put your hand in your pocket. You close your hand around a little box and take it out of your pocket, then hand it to her. She takes it and opens it, revealing a gorgeous brooch with a purple gem on it. You had spotted it when you were in Phoenix, and asked Brakin in his invitation to either send it or bring it when he would get here for the celebration. Her finger brushes the gem before pinning it to her grey turtleneck sweater. It now sits nicely on her left collarbone, and she tells you how pretty it is and how unnecessary it was to get her a gift.

"What did you get us?" one of your cats ask, startling you. It's going to take some time before you get used to that.

"You get some adorable socks and a pretty sweater." The cats look at each other and run away before you get the chance to dress them. You laugh as you watch them scutter off. That's when you feel a tap on your shoulder. Turning around, you see a tall man with tired, grey eyes standing there. There's something vaguely familiar about him, but you can't pinpoint what.

"Are you Pernille? I was told you're Pernille," he says, his voice raspy.

"Yes, I am," you respond.

He nods. "I just wanted to thank you."

You frown at him. "For what?"

“For not killing me. For insisting on helping me.” That’s when you realise, he’s the bird-human you met way back in the forest.

You look at him with wide eyes. “They did it?!” Your smile is wide as you look at him, glad to have helped in some way. “I’m so happy for you! How are you feeling?”

“Strange,” he says. “But I’m re-learning.”

Shieldonn walks up to you, looks like he’s contemplating taking him by the arm, but deciding against it. “Come on, we have more tests to do,” he says.

You shake your head. “No, not tonight. You’re both going to enjoy the night.” Shieldonn sighs and dramatically shows his displeasure. You wonder if Oftenbridge has managed to get away from him. Looking around, you spot him watching his friends, two-one aeronauts, perform Christmas songs on a little stage that has been set up for anyone to perform if they’d like to. You’re supposed to give a speech on that stage, something you’ve been postponing. Taking a deep breath, you make your way towards the stage.

Before you get to the stage, Nixy appears in front of you in a puff of smoak, blocking your path.

“I see our friend isn’t with you. Did she give in?” she says with a smirk. You hate this girl, and the fact that she’s pretty just aggravates you more. You imagine her looking like a hag instead.

“Mira is doing fine, no thanks to you.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Oh? That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“Just so you know,” you start, ready to give her a piece of your mind, “we’ve been through a lot on this journey, and not once did she use her powers for selfish reasons.” Okay, maybe a couple of times, but she doesn’t need to know that. “Those shadows are corrupting her because she had to use them to save a bird-mutant, a corrupted guardian, and Dwite from three trolls.”

“Yes, Dwite’s told me all about the demon who threatened him,” she smirks.

You want to punch her. “But she also saved him from being eaten by trolls, and teleported him out of the caves. Also, she took in all of the guardian’s corrupted energy and held it inside her, despite how difficult it was to bare.”

“Am I supposed to be moved by this? She’s a liar and a thief. I’m sure she’s off somewhere now, conning some poor bastard.”

“You clearly don’t know her,” you say, but you know she might not be wrong. “But the powers you gave her has done a lot of good, and a whole town is saved because of it. It’s a shame all the good she’s done is corrupting her.” Nixy gives you a really judgy look, but she doesn’t respond. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a speech to give,” you step around her. “Happy holidays,” you say with no emotion behind it.

All eyes turn to you as you step onto the stage. No pressure.

“Thank you everyone, for celebrating this joyous day with me,” you say, everyone’s attention on you as you speak. You’re about to continue, when there’s a loud bang and a cloud of smoke exploding on the stage. The smoke quickly disappears, and before you stands Mikael facing the crowd. “Welcome everyone! To mine and Pernille’s Christmas celebration! I am your host, Mikael,” he says dramatically. You don’t want to interrupt him, but you’re also a bit worried about what he’s going to do. The guards are immediately on alert, your personal guard Steve in the forefront. You wave them off, trusting that Mikael hasn’t planned anything bad. Mikael raises his hands to the sky, and snow starts falling down, coating every surface with a beautiful, white blanket once again. The snow is sticking and filling up quicker than it should and soon you have enough snow to make snowmen. Mikael keeps talking, clearly enjoying the spotlight. You let him, glad to have the public speaking job taken from you. When he’s finished, you say a quick “Merry Christmas!” to everyone, and exit the stage.

Off stage, you summon one of your cats with your new abilities and ask her to go find Mira for you. She scurries off, and you turn to Steve who’s standing nearby. “I hope you’re enjoying the night too and not just working.”

“Don’t worry about me, Pernille.” When you had returned from your journey, Steve had demanded you tell him everything. He’d done well to lead everything while you were gone, but everyone had been worried about you, him most of all though he wouldn’t admit it. You had tried giving him a few days off, but he flat out refused. He’s very stubborn, which is why you don’t bother arguing with him now either.

Mikael approaches you, beaming like a child. “Isn’t this nice? Isn’t this the best Christmas you’ve ever had?”

“Yes, it’s great!” you entertain his excitement, not bothering with a lecture about taking credit and attention that doesn’t belong to him.

“And later, I’m gonna set up an amazing light show!” he claps, then scurries off.

Your cat returns to you, telling you Mira’s sitting on the beach. “Thank you,” you say, giving her a treat.

The beach is quiet, the ocean covering hitting the sand in soft waves. You wonder if there’s a reason Mikael’s snow hasn’t affected the beach. Mira is sitting alone on the sand, looking out onto the ocean with an almost empty bottle of ale in her hand. You sit down next to her. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she says, looking ahead. You don’t need the ripple to know she’s lying. “You enjoying your celebration?”

“It’s nice. Everyone’s here,” you say.

She looks at you. “Everyone?”

“Broadin was looking for you,” you respond, checking her reaction. She nods, and looks back out the ocean.



“Oh, by the way! Monnika gave me the ale we made together! Shall we taste it?”

She smiles and nods. “Let’s do it!”

You take the ale out of your little bag and hand her one of the bottles.

“Thanks. I like your coat by the way.” She says, pointing at your coat with the bottle. The lid is conveniently easy to open with your hands, which is unexpected for an ale bottle.

“Thanks! My grandmother made it for me!” you grin.

In the sky, you see the light show Mikael talked about. It’s illuminating the sky with reds, and greens and blues. You look at Mira, the lights reflected on her face. That’s when you notice the veins have now crept up her neck and have started small on her cheek.

“Seriously, are you okay? I can tell when you’re lying.”

She looks down, taking a sip of her ale. You taste yours, grimacing at the taste but it’s fun knowing you made it.

“Nixy came to talk to me,” she says.

“Oh?” you wonder if it was before or after you talked to her.

Mira nods. “Yeah. She lifted the curse. Said it was my Christmas gift. Then she told me I was lucky she was in a giving mood and left with a threat about stealing from her again.” Then it was probably after you and Nixy talked.

“I’m sorry, I hate to tell you this, but you’re still looking...”

Mira nods again. “I know. The thing is, she let me keep the powers. I can use the shadows, and they won’t corrupt me. But she couldn’t do anything about the physical marks they’re leaving. It’s the price I’ll pay for tapping into their powers. Apparently, it’s their way of leaving their mark or whatever,” she says, taking a big sip of the ale. “But hey, it’s better than a full-on corruption, right?”

“So the marks will keep growing, but they won’t fully transform you?”

“Something like that,” she shrugs.

“If it’s any consolation, I think it looks cool.”

Mira lets out a small huff of air through her nose as she smiles. “You think so?”

You chuckle and nod. “Yeah, makes you look badass and scary.” That apparently deserved proper snort from Mira. “And I’ll help you control it. Maybe we can find a way for you and the shadows to co-exist without it being a bad thing?”

She nods, then changes the subject in true Mira fashion. “I saw your cat, by the way. Did you use your new powers?”

“Yeah, they scared me when they first talked.” You both laugh, then silence befalls both of you as you stare up at Mikael’s light show. It really is beautiful.

After a while, Mira reaches into her cloak and takes out a wrapped present. “Here,” she says simply and hands it to you.

“What’s this?” you ask, taking the gift and unwrapping it. In your hand now, you hold a book. Specifically, the sequel to your favourite book, the one you found in Riptide. You gape, and look at Mira. “You didn’t! When did you get time to get this?” you thought you’d been with her the whole time.

“Remember you were all suspicious about where my shadow had gone?” she asks, giving you a mischievous look. You choose to ignore the hint at the nature of how she retrieved this book.

“Thank you, Mira. This is a wonderful gift.” You fish out a wrapped present yourself from your little bag. “I’ve got something for you too.” You hand it to her, and she takes it and opens it. You’ve given her a silver dagger, with beautiful engravings, and perfectly suited for being subtle.

She looks at you, gratitude clear in her whole expression. “Thank you!” she says, her face telling you more than any words can.

“Merry Christmas,” you say.

“Merry Christmas,” she responds.

You smile at each other, before Mira stands up. “You said Broadin was looking for me?”

You chuckle. “Yeah, he was by the coffee stand last I saw him.”

“Enjoy the rest of your party,” she says before walking away from the beach.

You sit alone in silence for a while, taking in the soft breeze, the scent of the ocean. Then, you head back to the party, but not quite entering. You lean against a fencepost separating the courtyard from the beach. You watch as kids are actively working to make new footprints in the snow, making snowmen and snow angels, making pretty snow lanterns that glow in the night. You watch as everyone come together to celebrate, to socialise and enjoy this day. You watch as old friends and new mix and mingle, sharing a drink, whether it’s warm coffee or ale. Your heart melts and you don’t fight the tears coming as you take in everything you’ve accomplished. You let yourself be proud of yourself. With wet cheeks and a smile, you head back into the party, towards the new friends you made on your journey. Mikael was right. This might be the best Christmas you’ve ever had.