



BECOMING THE ORC QUEEN: I

BE BROUILLARD

Fire  
Becoming The Orc Queen  
BE Brouillard

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Cover design by: Covers By Aura

Proofread by: Hira P @ Ash P Reads-Editing Services

Edited by: Ash P Reads-Editing Services

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Vespyr

I can't breathe.

My lungs are burning, my chest heaving. I'm light-headed and dizzy with the need for oxygen. But I can't stop running.

*Run, by Blood!*

Slowing down is not an option. Nor can I use magic to get me out of here. It's the only thing keeping me on two legs right now, and I can feel it ebbing away.

*Run. You have to run!*

Behind me, the sound of footfalls is rhythmic and steady. A measured beat that tells me that my pursuer is nowhere near tiring yet.

He'll never tire. He'll never stop hunting me. I know it as clearly as I know my own name.

*Vespyr Lyenede Bellingham...you have to keep running!*

The dense thicket of trees is giving me some cover as I weave through ancient tree trunks and duck through heavy undergrowth. This is no lush forest, however. The vegetation is dark, and thorns snag me as I crash through black brambles. My clothing offers some protection, but the heavy blue velvet of my long skirt tangles around my legs as I move; I'm not dressed for this. Then again, how could I expect that my plans would go so badly off-track?

I'm too slow. Right now, the only thing keeping me ahead of the hunter is the fact that he doesn't know which direction I'm going to dart in. I've slipped left, right, and doubled back my tracks in my efforts to lose him. Nothing has worked. It's as if he's picked up my scent and is tracking me like a hound.

*Can't...go...on!*

My thigh muscles are screaming, and I feel my legs threaten to give way. If I don't take a moment to rest soon, I'm going to collapse, and then there'll be no escape. Once I go down, I'll never get back up again.

Casting a quick glance about me as I reach a clearing, I spot a pair of oddly intertwined tree trunks – broad enough to hide behind and even remain hidden if I can find the strength to hold a glamor around me. With shaking legs, I slip behind it and rest my back against the rough bark. It takes every bit of strength inside me to conjure up the shimmering shield that will hide me in plain sight. Gritting my teeth and curling my fingers into fists, I feel the first tingling tremors as the magic goes up.

The sound of boots grows closer. I hold my breath, trying not to swallow for fear that he'll hear it. The steps slow and then grow softer, as if the hunter has come to a walk and is looking around him.

Time seems to slow down as I hold the glamor in place, my mind filled with a single thought: stay hidden.

The sound of the hunter's footfalls grows closer and closer, seeming to echo inside my head as I wait for him to pass by.

But he doesn't pass. A shadow flits over me, and then I can hear him. Smell him, even. A rich, woody aroma enhanced by the warmth of his body. By Blood, it's like I can feel that, too. He's close. So close. My heart thunders in my ears, and I squeeze my eyes shut as if that will stop him from seeing me.

*Please! Please don't see me!*



His presence looms, and for a moment, I feel like something small and fragile within the sights of a hovering bird of prey. Any moment, he could swoop in, and I will be lost.

I take shallow breaths, which are made more difficult by the constriction of my tightly laced corset. I can't take time to loosen it now; fear and anticipation are bubbling up inside me, threatening to burst out of my throat.

He can sense me. I know it.

*Can he feel my magic?*

If he can, he doesn't show it; he just stands there – patient and watchful. Maybe he knows it's only a matter of time before I falter and give myself away.

Slowly, cautiously, I open my eyes. And then it's all I can do to stop myself from clapping a hand over my mouth to stop myself from gasping aloud.

He's standing right in front of me.

*Blood save me!*

The man is huge. Towering head and shoulders above me, he's a mountain of muscle and gleaming tawny skin the color of golden caramel. Intricate patterns of ink trace over his bulging biceps and chest, which is bare aside from a criss-cross of thick leather straps. Each massive arm is encircled at its thickest point by a heavy band of steel. Arms like that could crush the life from me. But I'm more concerned about the giant ax he has strapped across his back.

I shudder.

A face carved from stone remains impassive as intense eyes rove over the surrounding forest before settling right on the place where I'm standing. And I'm lost in a glittering sea of emerald green.

Hawkish nose, chiseled jawline; his features are cruel and brutal yet beautiful, and I can't tear my eyes away.

*It's fear. That's what it is.*

Or perhaps just my mind playing tricks. Things have been so foggy lately...Bart tried to tell me it was because I'm afflicted. He's wrong. Jealous of the powers I've gained. It's why he's trying to take them away. Yet I can't help staring as muscles bunch and flex as the hunter lifts a giant arm attached to an equally giant hand and reaches toward me. Thick, callused fingers stretch out.

*No!*

I flinch away, cringing. Sweat prickles down my back. But then he drops his hand just as quickly as he raised it. Heavy brows pull together as he frowns down at his fingers. He rubs them together as if he's feeling something unseen between them. I gnaw on my lip, wishing he'd simply turn and walk away.

That's not going to happen. Of course, it isn't

Suddenly, he speaks: "Princess Vespyr of Ryacyn." His voice rumbles through my nerve endings, settling into a place deep in my chest. It's a deep sound, emotionless – not angry or threatening, but still, it has me holding my breath again. My lungs burn with the need for air. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"Princess Vespyr of Ryacyn," he repeats. "I know you are here."

## Vidarok

She runs like the wind and has the scent of the sun. This is odd because we saw her quarters back at Ryacyn. Vespyn Bellingham seemed to hate the sunlight. Even those dank tunnels we'd tracked her to seemed to have been chosen for their darkness.

I inhale a deep breath and try to fight the feeling that she's closer than I realize.

I know she is here.

I can smell her.

If not near, then she was here just moments ago. It's like she stamped herself on this place. Turning a slow circle, I run my eyes over the clearing I'm standing in. There's nothing to see – no movement, no sign of life; these trees are long dead, only leafless husks remaining – but somehow, I know that she's here. It's an instinctive knowledge, as though she left something of herself behind.

I take a step forward, and then another, and still another, until I'm standing facing the huge trunk of a tree.

A tree?

This makes no sense. I take another look around. Without warning, the air shifts, and the forest feels alive with energy. Every dead leaf rustles like a whisper; every blade of dried grass seems to be reaching out for me.

Is that what I'm feeling? What's left of the life in this forest? I doubt it somehow. We've emerged into the

Shadowlands. The no-man's-land between dimensions that is home to nothing. Aside from this vegetation that's clinging to its existence, nothing lives out here. It's forbidden.

I turn back to the tree that had drawn my attention. The dark, heavy bark is knotted and gnarled, and as I stare more intently at it, it seems to shimmer and shift. Are my eyes playing tricks on me? I give my head a shake to clear it, blinking a few times to clear my vision. Things are crisper when I focus again. And yet still...not.

There is magic here. It's everywhere around me; in the air that I breathe, and the ground beneath my feet. I can feel it humming through me, cold and pulsing, a harmony of power.

I pull in a deep breath, and something catches my senses. The tree is glimmering again. I reach out to touch the rough surface, but something prickles over my fingertips.

*Fire and fury!*

Sorcery is at play.

When I inhale once more, I catch it again; her sunshine scent, laced with hints of jasmine and lavender, just a whisper in the air that touches my senses. That same heat flares within me again – stronger this time – a physical reminder that she was here not so long ago.

Or maybe she still is.

“Princess Vespyr of Ryacyn,” I say, keeping my eyes fixed on that shimmering spot in front of me. Something prickles in the air like a breath being stifled.

She's here.

“Princess Vespyr of Ryacyn. I know you are here.”

Nothing happens for a moment that seems to stretch on for hours. And then the air in front of me splits open like it's been struck by lightning. Wide eyes stare into mine from a face that is drawn and gaunt, skin tinted to an unhealthy pallor.

She is starving.

That doesn't stop the female from planting both hands against my chest with a force that must be fueled by an unholy power. Before I realize it, I've staggered back a step. Hair like spun gold swirls wildly as she sidesteps nimbly and then streaks past me. I spin to face the direction she's gone in but find myself rooted to the spot.

"Dragh!" I spit out. She's hexed me. Lifting a foot feels like I'm tearing free from granite. Somehow, though, the feeling that I'm more aware of is the touch of her fingers on my bare flesh. I glance down, half-expecting to see flaming marks where her palms rested on my chest.

Part of the magic, I am certain of it.

It takes all my strength to pull myself from the spot I'd been standing in, and then I'm running again.

She's weak. I have no doubt about it.

There will be no life for her to feed on in this world, and it won't be long before she falters.

And when she does, I will be there.

I'm going to catch her. And then I will take her back to Ryacyn for her reckoning.

## Vespyr

I'm running yet again. And I can't go any further. The brief moments from earlier, where I'd stared into his face, have been all the rest I've taken since I arrived in this place.

I need to feed. The magic I used to create the cloaking shield drained the last of my energy. This thing they call the Curse – my Gift – is a hungry beast, and it needs to be fed regularly to keep me strong. This is the longest I've gone without blood since I was touched by the blessed power.

I don't like it. I don't like it one bit.

The thirst claws at my insides like a rabid animal. My brother might tell me it's a sign of madness, but it's not. All vampires thirst for blood; I simply need it a little more often. But I can't take the time to find a way to hunt right now. I haven't sensed life since I burst into this realm – aside from the beast that pursues me.

I sense him now, gaining on me once more. I'd managed to slow him with the remnants of the cloaking shield, weaving it around him to slow his steps. I knew it wouldn't last long; just enough time to give me a slight head start. Not that it seems to have helped much.

I can hear him breathing.

It's slow and measured, the steady breaths of an athlete. He's fitter than I am, which is hardly surprising. I'm a princess, for fuck's sake! I wasn't raised to be running like prey.

*Why are you doing this?*

My headlong flight seems pointless since I know he's going to catch me. But then again, I'm not wired to give in. Not ever.

But my legs are doing that now. I stumble ahead, feeling my feet dragging.

“Wait!” It's a harsh, guttural rasp. That voice again. It ripples over my skin and makes me shiver. I swear I feel my nipples tighten.

*Fear will do that, Vespyn. It's adrenaline.*

I ignore him, flinging myself forward in a frantic rush. It's a bad idea. The toe of my shoe hooks beneath a fallen branch, and I fly headlong onto the soft earth.

“Fuck!” It's the last thing I say before a weight lands on top of me with enough force to crush the air from my lungs. For a second, we lay like that, my hunter and I. He's hard. Heavy. Hot air grazes the sensitive skin of my neck. Another second passes as I inhale the heady scent of him.

And then I thrash. It's feeble, but I put every ounce of strength I have into it. It does me no good. A heavy arm bands around me and thick thighs pin my kicking legs.

“Get off!” I scream, snapping my teeth at the bare skin of his arm. The scent of blood surging beneath his flesh is almost maddening.

*If I can just sink my fangs in...*

My mouth is watering.

“Be still!” The voice touches my skin again...and again, I feel myself shiver. I keep fighting. Of course I do. “I said be still!” he growls. Something hard and thick is pressing up against the small of my back, and I know it's not his forearm because one is wrapped around my throat, and the other has just pinned my flailing arm down.

*By Blood! What the fuck is that?*

It can't be!

I redouble my efforts. There's no way I've got this far only to be assaulted by this animal.

“Don't you dare!” I snarl, still snapping at him. “I'm a princess! If you dare to...to...defile me, my king will *execute* you!”

“Your king *sent* me.” His weight shifts, and with it, the heavy pressure against my back is gone. Thank fuck. Because if that was what I think it was...

*Don't go there!*

He rises from me completely, and I sag for a second, catching my breath. “I have no intention of *defiling* you, Princess.” Contempt laces his voice.

Then my shoulders are firmly grasped, and I'm being hauled up unceremoniously. I dangle from his fists, trying to kick him again, but my legs are too weak.

“Get your filthy hands off of me, you animal!” My words have no impact. I hang in the air as if I weigh nothing, and then I'm set on my feet. I twist like an eel in his grasp, raking my nails down his skin whenever I can reach it. I'm not rewarded with torn flesh; it's like scraping at a tanned hide.

“Dragh!” he snorts. “Stop fighting me!” He gives me a small shake, and my teeth practically rattle. He turns me around to face him, and I hiss like a cat. “I am taking you back,” he says, and I shake my head vigorously.

“When my brother finds out how you've mishandled me, you will be thrown into the dungeons!” I know it's not true, but I don't have many threats to dole out right now. I'll never admit to him that I know my brother plans to take me out. He had me locked up for months, and now he thinks I planned to kill his pathetic little Fae. If I go back there, I'm as good as dead.

“Once again,” he says, “*your brother* sent me.” His nostrils flare as he huffs out a breath. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course, I know who you are.” My lip curls. “You're the Orc...Vidarok. That bitch's pet.” I'd spit on



the floor if my mouth wasn't so dry.

“You will speak of Princess Aurora with respect,” he growls.

“And you will treat *me* with respect! I am a princess!” I try to muster my dignity, but it's not easy when I'm being held half of the ground.

“I am treating you with respect, *Princess*.” His jaw tightens.

“Really? Then just what the fuck is that?” I point at the bulge in his pants where the thick leather is tented. I level him with a glare hot enough to sear flesh.

He has the good grace to look sheepish. “I... It... I'm not here to explain anything to you. You are coming with me. If you need to say anything, we can talk on the way.”

“Talk?” I spit the word. “I have nothing to say to dogs who snap at their master's bidding!”

The barb rolls off the Orc like water. Insolent brute! His kind are only fit to take orders, not think for themselves. I'll teach him to forget his place.

Or perhaps not. When he releases me, my legs buckle, and I sag to the floor.

“Lord Bartholomew will be pleased to have you back, Princess. He will explain your situation on your return.”

I bristle at the mention of Bart, bitterness churning in my gut. He dares extend me an olive branch now, after branding me public enemy number one? My next words come out in a venomous hiss.

“My brother wishes to speak with me? After setting his hounds to hunt me down? We both know what will happen if I go back there.” Imprisonment at best. Probably execution. I'll die by my own hand first.

The Orc ignores the barb, holding my gaze steadily. “He wants you home. Safe. He cares about you, Princess.” The giant wastes no words. But something about his tone gives me pause. Could Bart truly regret how everything

spun out of control between us? A faint spark of hope flickers in my chest, but I crush it. I know better than to trust so easily now. I thought I'd found an ally once before in Magnis, and it nearly cost me everything. Never again. No. I can't afford to hope. The risk is too great. Better to trust no one and rely only on myself, as I've always done.

"Lies," I snap. "He wants me chained and leashed, made docile. Or dead."

"No chains. No leash. Only open doors, if you wish it."

"He wants me dead!" I repeat.

The Orc shakes his head. "It's not true. That's just your madness speaking. The Curse has affected your thinking."

"I am not mad!" I half-yell. "I have a *Gift!* My brother wants to strip it from me."

He stares at me as if I'm certifiable but doesn't say it. "You will be safe." He speaks as if I'm a child who needs soothing. "Come home, Princess."

My eyes narrow, searching for deception. "What are his conditions?" I don't know why I ask. I don't plan to give him the satisfaction.

"There is a cure, Princess. For the Curse. You will take it. Then, you will be welcomed back with open arms. I promise it."

I give a snort. The Orc and his pretty promises can go to hell. "Fuck you!" I snarl, twisting in his grip again.

He gives me another shake. "Last chance," he rumbles. "Come home willingly or—"

"Or what?" My voice strains with the effort it's taking me to keep fighting him.

"Or I will carry you." He says it so simply that I know it's not an empty threat.

"You wouldn't dare." I let venom drip from the words. "Now let me go if you wish to keep your head."

The chuckle he gives rolls in a way that seems oddly warm, considering our circumstances. I find that I like it. Which is ridiculous.

*It's the fog in your head, Vespyn.*

“The king misses his sister, Princess.” He changes tactics, probably hoping to soften me up. It’s not going to work.

“The sister Bart remembers is gone.” A disgusted noise escapes me. “She’s long dead, thanks to that traitor.” I raise my chin. “But I’m more now. Infinitely more. I am not going back so he can strip my powers. I will never go willingly. Never!”

The Orc stares at me impassively, then gives a one-shouldered shrug. “Suit yourself.”

Before I realize what he’s about to do, he stoops, picks me up, and flings me over his shoulder.

“No!” I scream for the umpteenth time today. “Put me down! You oaf!”

He ignores me and turns to retrace the path we’d cut through the forest. I dangle down his broad back like a ragdoll as he trudges steadily onward.

For the first few minutes, I cuss him out soundly, bringing his bloodline into question, cursing all his future generation’s offspring to a fiery hell. It makes no difference. He doesn’t acknowledge me. Eventually, my weakness wins out, and I hang limply, letting my arms trail and flop against him. I try not to stare at the gleaming ax right beside me. But it’s hard not to look at him, either. The huge muscles of his back bunch and bulge as he walks.

*By Blood, he's built like a god!*

I turn my head away, averting my eyes from the expanse of golden skin that moves smoothly. Eventually, exhaustion consumes me, and my eyes droop as my body sways to the rhythm of his loping body.

Against all odds, I sleep.

Vespyr

I don't know how long I'm out for. All I'm aware of is being gently set down onto something soft and spongy.

"You're awake," he says unnecessarily as my eyes open.

I glare at him rebelliously, not gracing him with an answer.

*Brute.*

"We will return through the portal we came through." He's running his eyes along a cliff face that we've stopped in front of. He's settled me onto a grassy bank. I'd get up and run again if I could find the energy to get to my feet. I fix my eyes on his throat, where I see a heavy vein pulsing.

*Thirsty!*

As if aware of my thoughts, he tosses his head, and a thick wave of black hair falls forward to shield his neck from me.

"It was here." He jerks his head back to the cliff. "The doorway."

I shrug. What does he expect from me?

"Open it," he says.

"What?" I look at the wall of stone. "There's nothing there."

“The portal back home. We used it once before. We can do it again. Open it.” He jerks his head at the unyielding rock.

“Why don’t you do it?”

“I don’t have powers of teleportation.” The words are matter-of-fact. I notice he has no shame in admitting that his abilities are limited.

“What makes you think I can do it?”

“You have power.” Huge forearms cross over an equally huge chest.

“Power?” I scoff. “I used the last of it running from you, you fool!”

He scowls at me for a moment. He raises a meaty fist and rubs his jawline. It seems like it’s made of the same rock as the cliff beside us.

“How do you make more?”

“More power?” I narrow my eyes on him. He nods. “I need to feed.” Again, I’m looking at that pulsing vein in his throat. If I had just a fraction of my strength back, I’d take him with one hand tied behind my back.

“I have blood,” he says. I lick my lips. I can almost imagine the rich copper of the life force running through him. He will taste so good. I already know it. Like a deep, ruby wine. “I brought provisions,” he adds, patting a small satchel hanging against his hip that I hadn’t noticed before. I find myself strangely disappointed.

Probably because I prefer my blood fresh. I hate the vials and bags that my foolish brother has forced our people to drink from. As if our fangs weren’t made for piercing sweet flesh.

Reaching into the pouch, the Orc extracts a vial. It gleams in the low light of the dull sun that seems to exist here. In spite of my disgust, when he bends down to pass it to me, I grab it greedily.

“You should—” he begins. The lid twists off, and I suck it dry before he can finish the sentence.

“Ahhhh...” I exhale as I feel the tingle of life burn through me. I shut my eyes and let it seep into my cells. I open them again and look at him. “More.”

He shakes his head. “That’s enough. Open the door.”

“I can’t do it. I’m not strong enough yet.”

“You’re plenty strong.” He jerks his head at the wall. “Open it.”

“Or what? You’ll chop off my head with your mighty ax?”

“Don’t tempt me, Princess.”

I heave a sigh, any hopes of overpowering him dashed as I realize I’m nowhere near full strength yet. Pushing myself to my feet, I move closer to the cliff face. It’s been nearly two days since I was here, and nothing is recognizable to me at all. I may have come through from the Parisian catacombs, but there’s no sign of those tunnels now. Of course, that’s not unusual. Most portals change form from one dimension to another. But I’m not picking up any sign of it.

“Stay back,” I mutter, hoping I can catch a trace of it if I get closer. If I can open the door and slip through before he reaches me, I’ll close it behind me without him getting in. I make it a dozen paces before I hear the scrape of boots right behind me. “I told you to stay back!” My voice echoes harshly off the stone that towers over us. Vidarok ignores the warning, continuing his approach with infuriating calm.

“My orders were to find you. Not to let you slip away again.” He shrugs those massive shoulders. “So, I cannot.”

The matter-of-fact words ignite my simmering temper. “How am I supposed to slip away? There’s nowhere to go.”

“There will be, as soon as you open that door.” He cocks his head. “Do you think I’d be foolish enough to let you get through and then close it behind you?”

*Curses!*

I set my jaw, hating the fact that he saw through my plan so easily.

“Fine,” I huff. “You don’t have to trust me.”

“No. I don’t.”

He’s smarter than I gave him credit for.

I move along the sheer wall, running my hands over it. The rough surface is cool and lifeless beneath my fingertips. No sign of the prickle of energy that would be the telltale sign of a portal into another world.

“What’s taking so long?” he says eventually. I’ve been prowling along the unyielding wall for what feels like an hour.

I scowl at him. “I can’t find it.”

“What do you mean you can’t find it?” It’s his turn to scowl now.

“I mean, I *can’t find it!*” I roll my eyes at him. “It’s not here.”

“It’s gone?”

“That’s pretty much what ‘not here’ means, you idiot.”

Again, he ignores my insult. “Look harder.”

“I can look all day if you want me to. It’s not going to make a difference.” I lift my shoulders. “I’m not at full strength, though. If you gave me some more—”

“I’m not giving you more blood,” he growls. “Find the damn portal!”

“There is no portal. If it was here, I would know it.” I jut my jaw out at him sullenly.

“If you’re trying to trick me...” he warns.

“Why would I try to trick you, *Orc?*” I say the word like a curse. “I want out of here as much as you do.” It’s my best chance of escaping his clutches again. Back into the darkness. I could squeeze into cracks that this monster could never fit into. I’d feed on rats if I had to.

“So, what are you trying to tell me?” He narrows his eyes on me.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that the door is gone. Vanished. It is no more. There’s no way out.” I fold my arms over my chest. “We’re stuck here.”



## Vidarok

I try not to let my mouth drop open as I stare at her. Part of me is tempted to give her more blood as she asked, in the hopes that it'll help her find the damn door. But I can't take that chance. The princess is now stronger after feeding, but just barely. Although the color has returned to her cheeks, she's still gaunt, her skin pulling tautly over her features. Her collarbones jut out, and the fragile bones of her shoulders and wrists seem sharp and angular.

Still, there's no telling how much she needs to drink to make her dangerous. And I have no doubt that this female could be dangerous. I may have brute strength on my side, but I know I'd be no match for her magic. Let alone any other powers she may be hiding.

“Stuck here?” I repeat stupidly. “Try again.”

“Ugh!” She throws her hands into the air. “Fine!” Golden hair flies as she spins on her heel and stalks back to the face of the cliff. She runs her hands over it again, as if trying to feel for any trace of whatever magic was used to create the portal.

She's not looking at me. She's looking for it. For the door. I hope that means she's telling the truth. Another hour passes. Eventually, I have to acknowledge that she's probably not lying. There's nothing here.

“This isn't normal.” Her brow furrows. “Permanent portals like this shouldn't simply shut down.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t permanent,” I state the obvious.

“Or you brought us back to the wrong place.” She rolls her eyes at me.

“I didn’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I tracked us. See there? Those are your footprints from when you ran through before.”

“How do you know they’re not my prints from now?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Because the edges are softer.” I stoop down and trace the outline of one of the prints. “See? Here, where you were just standing, the print is clearer. That one over there has less definition.”

“So maybe the sand is softer. You can’t be certain.” She’s determined to argue over every damned detail.

“I track by scent, too.”

“You mean, like a bloodhound?” She seems disgusted.

“Like a tracker,” I correct her. “Every creature has its own unique scent. I simply tracked yours.”

“You can *smell* me?” Her eyes fill with astonishment.

“Yes, I can smell you, Princess.”

She frowns. “What do I smell like?”

“Sunshine,” I say before I can stop myself. “And flowers.”

*What the fuck?*

I frown at myself now. Why did I say that? It was unnecessary.

“I smell like the sun?” she scoffs. “That’s a first.”

I shrug. She turns away as if to start searching again. “You can stop,” I tell her.

“Well, thanks.” She doesn’t seem grateful at all. If anything, she appears more drained than before. As she sags

onto the floor and presses her back to the rock, I note that her skin is pale and her lips are dry. Her eyes are dull and heavy-lidded, and her movements are sluggish. She looks like every bit of energy has been sapped from her body, leaving her exhausted.

And yet, still, she is beautiful. Fragile and ethereal, with those thick blonde waves tumbling over her shoulders. Her eyes are golden. I hadn't noticed before. She's lovely. There's no way to ignore it.

Yet ignore it, I must. I'm here for one reason and one reason alone. To take the princess to safety before the Curse consumes her. Already, I can see how her mind has been corroded. The paranoia, the hint of madness. She needs help.

"We'll find another way." I look around us. The landscape is a barren wasteland. The forest we'd run through may have been lush once, but that was a long time ago, and I left those trees far behind us on our journey back to where I thought the portal would be.

Here, brown and gray sand stretches to the horizon, broken up by occasional twisted tree stumps and rocky outcrops. The watery sun does little to brighten things; the sky is an endless sea of churning charcoal, with clouds that offer no promise of rain.

Silence hangs heavy in the air, a dull, muffled sound that echoes through the air and leaves my ears ringing. There are no birds, no insects, no wind. Everything is still and dead.

*What a hellhole!*

"So?" The princess's voice breaks into my thoughts. "Had any bright ideas yet? Or did you come all this way just for us to rot here together?" She gives a mirthless chuckle.

I glance at her, then mull over our situation for a moment.

"We'll keep looking further along." I nod down the length of the cliff. It leads into a desolate ravine that seems

like it extends for miles. “The portal may have moved.” I’m grasping at straws, and we both know it.

“You have to be kidding.”

“Do you have a better idea?” I give her a level stare. She mutters something under her breath as she hauls herself to her feet. Something about my manhood rotting off. I don’t want to think about that particular part of my anatomy right now. It’s already betrayed me once.

*Couldn’t be helped. If she hadn’t—*

I dash it from my thoughts. “That way.” I jerk my head in the direction I want her to move in when I notice her hesitating.

She heaves a heavy sigh and tosses her head, then walks away with her chin held high. She’s every inch a princess. And it almost makes me feel like the oaf she accused me of being when I think of how I hauled her here.

We make slow progress, with her exploring with her fingertips and stopping occasionally as if to pick up a strange sound or sensation. But as the sun begins to sink and the shadows lengthen, it becomes ever more clear that we’re not going to find anything. It’s hardly surprising. I’m clutching at straws. The door is gone.

This was not part of the plan. But how could I have known that we’d be stranded in this realm?

I glance up at the darkening sky, and something registers.

Perhaps we’re not quite stranded.

As I take in my surroundings, at the outline of the three dull moons that flank the setting sun, recognition begins to dawn.

*Fire and fury!*

I know where we are.

“We must go that way.” I nod in a direction south of the cliff, and then I move toward the princess. She shrinks

back and curls her lip at me.

“What’s that way?”

I feel my jaw clench. “A way out,” I say.

“You mean you’ve known this all along and said nothing?” she snaps at me.

“I didn’t know it till now.”

“What changed things?” She frowns at me.

I glance at the sky. “The moons.”

She peers up. “There are three of them. So what? Ryacyn has two.”

“Their color. They’re gray.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“It’s not important for you to know more. All you need to know is that we’re following that path.” I’m not happy about this. I’m not happy about any of it. But what choice do I have right now?

“Then why are we going there?”

“Because there’s a gateway.”

“A gateway to where?” She won’t let up pressing me.

I remain silent, not wanting to reveal the truth. Not wanting to admit that I have a plan – a plan that involves us traveling deep into a place I vowed I’d never go to again. A place where we may not receive a warm reception; in fact, I expect precisely the opposite.

But as I take in the bleak world surrounding us, I know there isn’t another way.

*You have no choice, Vidarok.*

I just pray we make it through.

Vespyr

I'm draped over the brute's shoulder again. And again, we're trudging through this shithole.

"Why do you have to carry me, you big clod?"

"Because you tried to run again." He keeps walking.

"I wasn't running. I was just..." I *was* running. It had been pointless. I'd barely got a few strides before his huge fist had clamped around the back of my neck. "I veered off the path to examine something."

"Huh," he grunts. Then says nothing.

"You can put me down now. I'm not going anywhere."

"Of course, you're not." He doesn't slow his pace. "There's no place to go."

"How do you know? There's..." I trail off because he's right. I may have spent my time here on the run, but I've had enough opportunities to see that there's nothing out here. "Where are we, anyhow?"

"Shadowlands."

I lift my head to take another look around because hanging down his back is giving me an unsettling view of his beefy buttocks as he strides forward. The muscles bunch and flex beneath the snug leather of his pants. Smooth planes of ink-patterned skin pull tautly over the lean lines of his back. I'm still unsettled by the ax.

“Shadowlands?” I ask, awkwardly fixing my eyes on a point in the distance.

“You’ve never heard of the Shadowlands?”

“Of course, I have. They’re the no-man’s-land between the realms. What do you take me for? An idiot?”

He snorts. “Remains to be seen.”

“I’ve just never been to them,” I go on, not sure why I feel the need to explain myself. “I’m a princess. I don’t waste my time on places such as this.”

“Clearly not. If you did, you’d know there’s more than one reason you won’t get far in this place.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“No food.” He shifts my weight on his shoulder. Not that it seems to be bothering him much. I might as well be a wet rag for all the attention he’s paying me.

“No food?”

“Have you seen a living thing since you’ve been here?” He’s curled his forearm around the back of my thighs to balance me more securely. The heat of his skin almost burns through the heavy velvet of my skirt. For all its impracticality, suddenly, I’m grateful that I wore it. “You need to feed. You’d starve before the new day dawned, my dear princess.”

“I’m not your dear anything,” I grumble, flopping down against his back again. My cheek grazes his skin, and I’m surprised at how satiny it is. He’s telling the truth, though. He gave me another of those disgusting blood vials a couple of hours ago, and still, the thirst rages within me. I lick my lips and inhale his scent. I can feel the blood thrumming mere inches from my mouth.

“If you try to bite me, I will gag you.” His voice is calm; there’s no hint of a threat in his tone. It’s more of a promise.

I grit my teeth and fight down temptation.

“I’m not trying to bite you. I’m just...uncomfortable, that’s all. You’ve had me lumped over your big, ugly shoulder for hours. I’m winded. How long till we get there?”

He glances up at the sky. There are scarcely any stars pinpricking the inky blackness with their light. Even the stars find this place too shitty to waste their time on.

“Three days,” he says as if it’s completely obvious.

“Three days?” I squawk. “You expect me to hang upside down like this for three days?”

“No. We will rest.”

“When?” I might get another chance to run if he puts me down. But he’s right. I’ll starve. I need to get my hands on his satchel.

“Soon.”

“How about now?”

“No.”

“Yes. I’m tired. Put me down.” My insides feel bruised.

“There’s a long way to go. If we stop for too long, it may take longer than three days.”

I sigh in resignation. As much as I hate being carried like a sack of grain, the brute is probably right. The sooner we get out of this blasted place, the better. Although, if I can get hold of that blood, I can regain my strength and open a portal.

“Fine,” I snap – which isn’t easy when my face is pressed into his back. “But at least put me down so I can walk. All the blood has rushed to my head.”

He’s silent for several long moments, and then he stops. Without a word, he sets me gently onto my feet. As much as he’s a huge oaf, he’s taken great care not to hurt me; I’ll give him that. Smoothing my clothes, I pull my shoulders back and fix him with my most haughty glare. It would probably be more convincing if I didn’t feel so filthy and bedraggled. What I wouldn’t give for a hot bath and a soft bed.



And a belly full of blood. Fat chance of that in this godforsaken place.

“Lead on,” I tell him, gesturing with my hand.

“If you try to run again, I will truss you up like a hog.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

I know that he would.

“Try me.” A heavy dark eyebrow lifts over forest-green eyes. For an Orc, he’s really easy to look at. More than easy, actually.

Not that I’m looking.

“Hmph!” I tilt my jaw and gesture with my hand again. “You’re wasting time.”

He begins to walk again. After a few minutes, I start to regret my decision to get down from my place on his shoulder. With his long, muscular legs, the man covers ground quickly, and I have to hurry to keep up. I’ll never admit it, though.

I study his broad back as I trail behind him. He moves with an easy grace, his footsteps sure despite the uneven terrain that is wreaking havoc on my ridiculous satin slippers. He seems to know where he’s going, which is a relief because the last thing I want is to be lost in this place. Now that night has fallen, it feels more desolate than ever.

I wonder what portal he’s leading us to and how an Orc like him would know of a magic gateway in a place like this.

Probably had a checkered past. Maybe he was a bandit before finding a place on that viper Aurora’s security team.

I continue my uncharitable thoughts, my eyes flicking to the satchel at his side from time to time, until he comes to an abrupt halt.

“We’ll stop here and rest for a few hours.”

I peer around. There’s nothing out here except more empty space. “Here?”

“You were hoping for a luxury suite?” He turns to face me, putting his ax to one side, then setting his pack down on a flat rock and rummaging through it. I feel my mouth water.

“Very funny.” I’m still eying the satchel, hoping he’ll bring out more blood. I’m needing it more frequently now – probably because he won’t let me feed to my fill.

“You can sleep on this.” He hands me a tightly wrapped bedroll. “Get some rest. We’ll move on at first light.”

“I’m hungry.” I sound sullen even to my own ears.

“You fed just a couple of hours ago. You’ll last a few more.” He turns away, and I glare at him in the darkness. It would be impossible to see him if it weren’t for my superior senses, which, I’ll admit, are not what they could be right now.

“*You’ll last a few more,*” I gripe under my breath as I shake out the bedroll and drop it over a stretch of sand that seems like it might be softer than the rest of the craggy rock out here. I’m too tired to argue, though. But even though I’m exhausted, I can’t sleep. The ground is hard, and my empty stomach gnaws painfully.

After tossing and turning fitfully, I roll over to look at my captor. Vidarok has built a small fire and is sitting beside it, looking out into the darkness. The flames throw shadows over his face, highlighting the hard planes. Again, I’m struck by the brutal beauty of his features.

“I told you to sleep.” His voice makes me jerk.

“I’m starving.” I sit up. “You can’t keep me this way. I’m sure you know about what happens to my kind if we don’t feed.” I see him shift. “We combust,” I add for good measure.

“I have seen it.” He looks over me. I try not to shudder. I’ve heard the stories. How the remains have been found charred beyond recognition. Aside from those that were simply dust.

“Then let me feed,” I say, my voice has grown hoarse. “Please,” I plead.

He doesn't answer, merely rises with an economy of motion and disappears into the darkness. I watch him go, wondering what he's up to and praying that I've gotten through to him.

When he gets back, the satchel is in his hands. He reaches in and takes out a vial. "Don't try anything foolish." He holds it out to me. I snatch it out of his grasp and open it, sucking at the fluid.

It's tepid. It tastes nothing like the nectar that would spring from a living vein. Still, it will do in a pinch. The blood soothes my throat as it slides down into my stomach; before long, my hunger begins to ease, and energy begins to course through my cells. It's nowhere near enough to bring me to full strength, but it's better than nothing. I stand.

"I told you to sleep." He withdraws the satchel and moves back to his place by the fire.

"I can't." I join him, sinking onto a rock nearby. We sit in silence. He's clearly not planning to make me feel welcome. Not that I care much, but it would make things easier if he were just a little less watchful.

"It's bleak out here," I say, looking around.

"Yes."

"You don't need to rest either?" I ask.

Mountainous shoulders shrug. "Orcs don't sleep much."

I run my eyes over him. The firelight is flickering over thick, bare biceps and across his massive chest. Down to where the tight muscles of his abs ripple as he breathes. "You're kind of small for an Orc," I say. Although he's freaking gigantic, regardless.

He turns his head to glance at me. "I'm half human." He looks away.

*Interesting.*

"Half human? How did that happen?"

He doesn't look back at me when he answers this time. "Long story."

"I have time." I swivel slightly, facing him. I can feel the tendrils of his thoughts. The blood is working, and I feel the magic building within me. I've been able to read minds since I was touched by the Gift.

I can also influence them.

"I don't talk about it," he tells me.

*'Yes, you do...'*

He frowns a little, and I know that my silent instruction has entered his mind.

"I understand," I say. I keep my voice soft and soothing.

"My mother was human." He flicks his eyes at me briefly, that small frown still nestled between his brows.

"Was she?" I tilt my head.

*Go on. Keep talking...*

He gives a little nod. "Yes. My father was... He seduced her."

"Fascinating. Was it a great love affair?"

"No. It was forbidden."

"How tragic." I make a tutting sound. "Her heart must have been broken."

*'You're growing weary...'*

His shoulders slump a little as my silent words sink into his head. "It was. She never got over it."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. It must have hurt a lot to watch your mother suffer like that." As I say it, a twinge of guilt niggles at me. My mother suffered, too. After my father's death, she never recovered.

I can't let that stop me now. If I don't get away, it'll be the end of me.

*'You're so tired...'*

He lifts his hand to rub the back of his neck, then rolls his shoulders.

“She was a strong woman. A good mother.” He sends me another small glance.

I give a tight smile. My mother was also strong and good. Until the war that ripped my father away from us. “Every child deserves a good mother. Where is she now?”

His lids are heavy. He looks away from me and into the fire. “Gone.”

I try not to swallow hard at this admission. “I’m so sorry,” I murmur. My apology is sincere, even if my intentions aren’t pure.

*'You're so very tired. Just close your eyes...'*

“Hmmm.” He makes a sound deep in his throat as his eyelids sink lower. Surprisingly long black lashes shadow his high cheekbones.

*'Shhhh...just sleep...'*

“Mmm...” He makes another of those sounds, and it seems like it ripples through me. Probably because my nerves are on edge. I can almost feel the exhaustion radiating from his body as I press my will against him, gently luring him into slumber. It works, and soon enough, his breathing slows and evens out as his head droops forward onto his chest; Vidarok is finally asleep.

I breathe a sigh of relief and wait a minute to be certain that the spell is in place. Then I carefully creep closer, edging toward the bag that holds my freedom ticket. My fingers close around the leather strap that’s clasped in his fist. I tug a little, but he doesn’t release it.

*'Open your hand...'*

I grit my teeth as I carefully pry his fingers apart. He doesn’t resist, his hand curling open as I gently pull the satchel away. I’m so close that when his steady breath flutters out, it gusts over my hair.

*'Sleep...just sleep...'*

Holding my breath, I rise and then silently back away. I give the sleeping giant one last glance before I turn and step into the darkness.

And then, I'm gone.

Vidarok

I wake up with a start, sucking in a sharp breath. Without looking around, I know what I'm going to find. Or rather, what I'm *not* going to find.

Her.

“Dragh!” I jerk myself to my feet, running my eyes over the campsite even though I know I'll find nothing. She's definitely not here. Although the flames of the fire are still blazing. She can't have been gone long.

By the Maker, how could I have fallen asleep?

*She hexed you, fool.*

It's so obvious. I should have known better than to let my guard down around her. But when she'd pleaded for food...

Damnation, it's not in my nature to torture women. I had to let her feed. Though, I never let anyone influence me that way. I've certainly never been weak to womanly wiles.

*What is different about this one?*

I set my jaw. Now is not the time to be mulling over this. I have to find her.

She'll die out there.

*Foolish female!*

Except, when I reach for my satchel, it's gone.

Maybe not so foolish. She's taken the blood.

*Of course she has.*

Doing a mental tally of what I had brought with me, I figure she'll last a week out there if she's cautious. Which she hasn't yet shown herself to be.

I run a hand through my hair. How does she plan to find the doorway out of here?

*She'll make one.*

Of course, she will. I have no doubt that the gateway back to the catacombs was closed when we looked for it – even I could sense as much. But once she's strong enough, she'll have no problem forming a doorway to wherever she chooses. The princess is powerful. And once she's completely fed, she'll be unstoppable.

“Dragh!” I mutter. I've wasted too much time. By now, she could have consumed the blood and already be out of this realm.

Taking in a deep breath of air, I seek out her scent. It's faint but unmistakable. When I step to the edge of the small campsite, I quickly spot her spoor. Even in the darkness, my senses are honed for this. I take off, my feet silent over the ground.

I track her quickly and soon spot her in the distance. She's moving fast but clearly looking for something. No doubt a place to form a portal. I have to get to her before she can do it. I put on a turn of speed to catch up to her, my eyes scanning the area as I go. The terrain is treacherous – filled with steep cliffs and jagged rocks. Stones skitter and clatter as my feet move over them. The sound draws her attention, and she glances over her shoulder, then surges forward.

“Stop!” I shout. It's pointless. Of course, she's not going to obey me. The best I can hope for is to distract her long enough to catch up. Yet again, I'm running after this woman, and it's growing tiresome. She leaps and bounds over rocks and dead foliage with a determination I have to admire.

And then luck is on my side when she skids to a halt.

*What the...?*



She spins to face me. “Don’t come any closer!” Her arms windmill slightly, and I realize that she’s reached the edge of a cliff.

“Stay still,” I tell her. “Don’t move, or you’ll fall.”

“Exactly! If you take another step, I’ll jump! My death will be on you!”

*She can’t be fucking serious!*

“You’d die rather than come back with me?”

“Yes! I would!” Her eyes dart around wildly, tinged with madness. I see that her hand is moving toward the satchel. She’s trying to draw my attention away from the fact that she’s trying to get a vial out.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I fold my arms over my chest and take a broad stance, watching her. “Put the bag down.”

“No!” She reaches in. I know her fingers must be closing around a vial.

*Fuck.*

“Don’t do it, Princess.” I take a stride forward.

“Stop right where you are, or I swear—!” Before she can say anything more, I launch myself toward her, wrapping my arms around her and tackling her sideways. There’s a sharp clatter from inside, and then the bag flies free of her hand. I get a brief glimpse of it sailing over the cliff a moment before we hit the ground. I brace my arms to keep a grip on her as I roll away from the edge.

She’s screaming and clawing at me as we tumble down the slight slope. By the time we come to a stop, I have her pinned to the ground beneath me.

“You...! You...fucking idiot!” she screams in my face. Nails rake my arms as she claws at me, but if anything, they make me grip her more firmly.

“You shouldn’t have run,” I grit through my teeth. She’s squirming beneath me, her knees jerking up as she tries vainly to smash them into me.

“Let. Me. Go!” she yells, baring her teeth at me. Her eyes are filled with a rage that I can’t help connecting with. Her fierce determination is like a magnet, and I’m drawn to it.

*Fire!*

I can feel my body responding to her struggles, a primal heat stirring in me. She feels so small and delicate beneath me, and despite her fight for freedom, she’s unable to budge me.

“Stop fighting me!” I growl. I feel myself hardening against her as her hips thrash against mine, my need intensifying with each movement. I struggle to keep my response in check, trying to focus on the task at hand.

“I will never!” she screams. She arches up against me, and it takes all of my strength not to succumb to the pleasure of it. Her body is pressed tightly against mine now, and I can feel every inch of her writhing beneath me.

All of a sudden, I’m painfully aware that this woman is exquisite – powerful yet vulnerable – a female of great strength and character. She’s beautiful with her golden hair clinging to her skin and her eyes wild with fury.

*A job. You are here to do a job!*

My breathing grows ragged as she continues to struggle underneath me, flailing her fists at me. Gripping her wrists, I raise her hands over her head and pin them up there.

“I’ll kill you. I swear it! Give me half the chance, and I’ll take your throat out!” she snarls.

I groan deeply, then I lower my face and take in her sweet scent. It’s only when my lips graze her earlobe that I feel her go still. Aside from the heaving of her chest against me, she’s motionless.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is hoarse.

“Be still,” I tell her. It’s taking everything in me to hold my base urges at bay. Her breath comes fast as she lies beneath me. I feel her thighs move, and then her eyes fly wide as I instinctively press down against her mound.

“By Blood...” she husks out.

Never before have I responded so strongly to a woman. But how do I explain that the harder she fights, the more irresistible the pull will be?

Only after she’s lain unresisting for several seconds do I release her wrists, and then I cautiously rise, drawing her with me. As much as the princess is a strong, forceful female, she’s tiny against me.

She tips her head back to stare into my face. I realize that her palms are pressed against my chest, the skin of her hands burning against my bare skin. She licks her lips, and I watch the movement.

“What just happened?” she says eventually. I don’t respond. I’m still willing my cock to go down.

“Are you going to answer me?” she says.

“Nothing happened,” I bite out. “Aside from you running off like an idiot and throwing the last of your food into a ravine.”

Her mouth forms an “O” as she looks to the side and then back at me. Realization has just dawned. “That’s your fault!”

I shake my head. “It was a damn fool idea to run off into the night with no clue of where you were going.”

She couldn’t help herself. The madness of the Curse is clouding her judgment. I have to keep reminding myself of this.

“I had a plan,” she mutters.

“What? Find a suitable spot and form a doorway out?”

She steps away from me, dropping her hands from my chest. As she does so, she rubs her fingertips together.

“It would have worked.” Her lips turn down.

“And maybe not. You’d need time to seek out a place on the other side that is familiar to you. You were in a rush. You could have landed up anywhere. You could have put

yourself in danger.” I don’t know why the thought of that bothers me.

“Like I’m not in danger here, you brute?” she snaps.

“You’re safe with me.” I realize that’s true as I say it. The biggest threat to her safety is herself. The Curse will kill her, and now more than ever, I don’t want that to happen.

“You keep telling yourself that, oaf!” Plump lips pout out. Fuck, if I’d been on top of her for one more second, I would have claimed those lips as my own.

*Fire and fury, but she’s lovely.*

“Stop running away.”

“I hate you!” Her eyes are mutinous. “I hate being stuck with you.”

“I don’t care. My orders are to take you back, not win your heart.”

Something flickers in her eyes. “That could never happen.”

“Good,” I say. “You are the most infernal female!”

“Fine!” she huffs. “You’re a big, stupid ox!”

“I may be an ox, but I’ll tell you one thing for free...” I can’t help it when my lips turn up.

“What’s that?” She scowls at me.

“If you thought you were stuck with me before, you’re damn well going to have to be glued to my hip now. If you get lost out here now, you’re as good as dead.” With that, I turn and stride back in the direction of the campsite. She gives an angry little growl that makes my balls pull tight. A moment later, I hear her footsteps come up behind me.

I don’t look back.

Vespyr

I'm hungry.

No. There's more to it than that. This hunger is a seething mass within me, rumbling and roiling, threatening to consume me. My head is spinning with irrational thoughts. I feel like if I don't feed soon, I might just go up in flames.

*That's highly likely, Vespyr.*

I don't want to think about the dangers my Gift can bring. There have been others before me who have burned with their need for blood...to the point of catching fire.

*Stop thinking about it.*

But it's hard not to. My skin feels hot. My chest is constricted. I stare ahead at where Vidarok is walking, and my vision feels like it's filtered through a red haze.

Blood.

I can almost smell it on him.

But there's no way I could take him down in my condition. I can barely even withstand the buffeting of the strong wind that's picked up. But do I even want to try to attack him? The last time I went up against him, not only did he overpower me with ease, but there was something I felt...

I yank my thoughts away from those moments of him lying on top of me. The weight of him. The way he'd felt against me, all hard lines and—

I swallow hard. Probably because my mouth is so dry. The red haze feels like it's closing in on me. I remember being horrified when I'd learned that Magnis had survived by feeding on his own coven when he'd been trapped with them. Now I understand why he did it.

Doesn't make it right.

We never feed on our own kind. Magnis was a monster.

I don't care what they say about the so-called Curse; I'll never be like that. At least, I pray that I won't.

*Thirsty...*

I don't realize I've stopped until the Orc turns around to look at me. I'm swaying where I stand. It's taken all my strength – and probably more than a little pride – not to show him my weakness. Now, I have no choice.

My knees sag, and I fall to them.

“You can't stop.” He stands in front of me, his thick hair whipping in the wind. When I peer up, it feels like he's ten feet tall. Maybe he is.

*You're delirious, Vespvr.*

“I can't go on.” My voice is little more than a hoarse croak.

He heaves a deep breath. Glancing around us, he looks back at me.

“Please,” I beg. “Help me. I'm begging you.” They're words I don't think I've ever uttered before. But there are two more days before we reach our destination. It will not be soon enough. “I'm not going to make it.” I sag further, slumping into a heap on the rocky ground.

He sinks to his haunches before me. “Don't you wish you had been less foolish now?”

“This is no time for recriminations, Orc!” I'm surprised at how much venom I manage to inject into my voice. Still, my heart skitters when his eyes lock with mine. They're unreadable.

“You’re right,” he says when I think I can’t take any more. “You look terrible.”

“Thanks.” I glare at him. “Next time I’m dying, I’ll try to be a little prettier for you.”

“You have a smart mouth for someone who’s dying.”

“By Blood! Are you going to help me or not?” I’d yell if I had more strength.

He looks around again. “We will need shelter if you are to feed.”

“Feed?”

Instead of answering, he reaches down and scoops me up.

“Hey!” I blurt. If he flings me over his shoulder again, my bones might crack. But he doesn’t. Instead, I find myself held carefully against his expansive chest as he walks purposefully toward a grove of trees. The spindly trunks are gray and lifeless, but they break the gusts of wind that have been whirling sand around us. My cheek is pressed against the place where his giant heart is throbbing steadily. My hunger is joined by a strange sense of comfort. He’d told me that I’m safe with him, and all of a sudden, that’s how I feel. Closing my eyes, I take in a deep breath. He smells of the forest – the woody fragrance of a sturdy oak. And beneath it all, the heady fragrance of blood.

Setting me down cautiously on a fallen tree trunk, I find myself half-sitting as he kneels down in front of me.

*What now?*

Unfastening the heavy armguard on his forearm, he extends his exposed wrist. “Drink,” he says.

“What?” My eyes flare. Of course, this was what he meant when he said that I would feed. What else could he have meant?

“Drink,” he repeats. His wrist is poised an inch from my lips. I feel my nostrils flare as I see the tracery of veins beneath his smooth skin.

I breathe out, then let my eyes shut. When my lips graze his flesh, they tingle. There's a slight sound, and I realize he's just taken in a sharp breath. Did he feel it, too?

I don't care. Without waiting a second longer, I feel my fangs extend, and then I sink them into his flesh. It's harder to pierce than I'd expected, but my hunger wins out. He gives a small grunt as I draw down, but then I'm oblivious to everything around me as his warm blood fills my mouth and streams down my throat. It's like a tide of heat flooding through me.

"Mmmmm..." I hear myself moaning. He tastes like nothing I've ever experienced before. Grasping his forearm in both of my hands, I drink greedily. He stays still as I continue to feed. Lights flicker behind my eyelids as I feel my power begin to surge.

"That's enough." His voice is husky. I shake my head, not wanting to stop. "I said enough!" His hand is on the back of my neck, fingers curling around to pull me away.

"No!" I wail the word, desperate for more. I've never had anything like it.

When he yanks his wrist completely free from my lips, I cling to his arm. The force of his movement jerks me forward, and I crash up against his chest. The surprise of it has him tumbling backward, and suddenly, I'm lying flat on top of him.

There's alarm in his eyes as he stares up at me. And then they widen as I lower my head and press my lips against his.

*What are you doing, Vespyn?*

I can't help myself. I'm giddy with the taste of his blood. It swirls in me like hot, unquenched lust. And if he won't give me more, I'll take what I can.

He groans into my mouth as I run my fingers into his hair and grasp it firmly. As his lips part, my tongue seeks his out. I know he can feel the sharp edges of my teeth, but it doesn't seem to worry him. If anything, it seems to spur him –



I feel his arms encircle my waist, and then I'm clasped against a body that feels like it's made of pure steel.

By the time I come up for air, I'm straddling his hips, grinding against the ridge of what can only be the biggest cock I've ever encountered. I've noticed it before, first when he'd caught me in the woods and then again when he'd pinned me down beside the cliff. Now, it creates a delicious friction against my sensitive flesh, sending shivers pulsing down to the apex of my thighs. I run my lips along his jawline, resisting the temptation to glide down to his neck. If I sink my teeth in there, I don't know who would be in more danger. And right now, I'm more interested in the way that his hands are roving over the curves of my waist to my ass.

"Mmmm..." I moan softly. I tilt my head back when he trails his lips to my throat. His hot breath skates across the delicate skin, sending a shockwave of desire ricocheting through my veins as hotly as the blood I just drank.

A hungry little growl bubbles up my throat as my core muscles clench. Feeding and sex usually go hand in hand, and since I can't have more blood—

"Stop!" he says sharply. I give another growl, tightening my thighs around him. "Princess..." the word is a warning. Abruptly I'm being lifted up and away by the scruff of my neck.

"What are you doing?" I snap.

"I could ask you the same question." He's on his feet and has me at arm's length. For a big guy, he moves with surprising grace.

"You fed me. It is my right." I raise my chin. I'm feeling so much better. I'm feeling...

"You have no rights here, Princess." He's still holding me firmly away. As if I'd jump him again if I got a chance.

Maybe I would.

I run my eyes down his chest and lick my lips. His nipples are puckered. When I look into his face again, his eyes

have turned the color of a stormy ocean. He wants me too. I can practically taste it.

Pulling free, I flick my wrist. “I don’t want you anyway.” I’m dismissive. “What would an oaf like you know of pleasing a princess?”

I turn away just in time to hear him say, “Plenty.” He doesn’t continue. My curiosity has me itching to ask what he means, but I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“Are you going to stand around all day, or shall we get moving?” I keep my back to him as I walk out of the cluster of trees.

“Unbelievable,” he mutters behind me.

This time when we walk, I don’t trail behind. He may not have given me much of his blood, but what courses through my veins now feels more powerful than anything I’ve consumed before. It may not take much to bring me to full strength. Then I’ll be gone. And next time, he won’t stop me.

## Vidarok

It's been hours since she said anything offensive. Anything at all, for that matter. Still, I won't let my guard down. I already learned that lesson once.

"Do you need to rest?" I ask her, glancing sideways.

"I'm fine," she mutters, and I leave it at that.

She's fallen in step beside me, matching my stride for stride even though I tower over her. She glides with grace. The blood has made her strong.

My blood.

I don't want to think about what happened back there. What *almost* happened.

But I can't help it. The feeling of her teeth piercing my flesh lit something inside me that I hadn't expected. Even now, the memory of her body pressed against mine sends a thrill through me. It unsettles me how close I came to succumbing to temptation.

*Just a job, Vidarok.*

I take a deep breath and push away the thoughts. We still have miles to go, and there are more pressing matters at hand than my inappropriate urges. Thankfully, she seems happy to stay silent as we push through the wind that seems to be fighting our progress. When a heavy branch flies by, I slow my pace, taking care to shield her.

“What’s that?” the princess points to the distance where a shadow seems to be forming against the skyline.

I squint at it, trying to make out the shape. It’s not easy since it seems to be changing. Shifting. Whatever it is, it’s coming closer...fast.

“Sandstorm!” I say sharply, spinning around to look about us. “We need to take cover.”

I may be large, but there’s no way I can protect us from the force of nature that’s heading our way.

“Move quickly!” I instruct her, then reach for her hand without thinking and break into a run. She keeps pace with little effort, and again, I’m struck by how graceful she is. She may still be too thin and frail, but there’s a lot more weight to her now.

My eyes sweep the terrain for any sign of shelter, and I feel a wave of relief wash over me when I see a ridge not too far off. I spot an overhang shading a hollow in the rock. We make our way there quickly and discover a cave beyond the rock face.

“We can take cover in here,” I shout over the sound of the sandstorm raging toward us.

We get there just in time. The sand hits the rock with a roar that sends shockwaves through the air. Vespyr gives a shriek and clings to my arm.

“By Blood!” she gasps, seemingly unaware of how her fingers are gripping me. I don’t pull away. The wind howls around us, feeling strong enough to shake the walls of the cave. The sound is almost deafening, like an angry beast trying to break through our shelter.

“Easy now,” I tell her as if soothing a skittish horse.

“What kind of place is this? These Shadowlands! I hate it here!” There’s a strange vulnerability to her voice as she says it. As much as I know that she’s stronger now, she seems softer somehow. Tortured eyes turn to me as if looking for comfort.

“It will pass, Princess.” I stroke the back of her hand. “Now, let’s see what this cave holds.”

Setting my things down, I take a moment to examine our shelter more closely. It’s larger than expected and surprisingly dry inside despite being exposed to the elements for so long. Probably because a slightly angled wall forms a natural barrier to the world outside.

The princess takes a seat on a flat ledge in one corner of the cave while I lean against the opposite wall. We both watch each other warily as if expecting something else to happen between us after that moment back in those woods when she was drinking my blood. Nothing does, though – only silence permeates this place as we wait out the storm together.

“How long will it take before it clears?” she eventually asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know the Shadowlands well. The weather here is alien to me.”

She nods. There’s more silence...aside from the roaring that continues outside. I rise and peer out of the mouth of the cave. The sand has passed, but the wind is still gale force. There’s no point in trying to continue until it dies down.

“We’ll wait here until it’s safer outside.”

Minutes tick by. I’m tempted to catch up on some rest, but I don’t feel comfortable letting her out of my sight. I feel her eyes on me.

“Do you need to feed?” I have no idea why I ask it. She’s gone longer without blood before. Normally, I don’t relent until she asks. Or begs. Yet here I am, half-hoping she’ll say yes.

*What the fuck?*

“I’m okay.” She presses her lips together. “But...thank you.”

“Hmph,” I grunt. There’s another awkward silence. “You should take the time to rest,” I tell her when it seems like she might nod off. “It looks like it’ll be hours

before we move. That wind has been building up for some time.”

“I...” She gnaws on her lip. “Can we...talk a little?”

I blink in surprise. “Talk?”

“Yes. You know. Get to know each other.”

“Get to know each other?” I’m parroting her words like a fool.

“Unless you’d rather sit there and stare at me like a big ox.” She huffs the words.

*Ahh. That’s more like it.*

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I’m curious. Because I’ve been stuck with you for days, and I may as well know who my abductor is.”

“I’m not your abductor, Princess. I’m trying to help you.” I know she can’t see it that way as long as the madness lives in her, but I can’t help trying to explain myself.

“Help?” she scoffs. “Whatever. We can sit in silence if you’d prefer.”

“Fine. Let’s talk.” I rise and move to the space between us, unwrapping the bedroll I’d retrieved from our last campsite and setting it down on the floor. She hesitates and then walks closer, sinking onto the edge of the blanket. I sit cross-legged on the other side of the bedroll, setting my palms on my knees.

“Well...this is awkward.” She gives me a tight smile.

“What do you want to talk about?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Nothing in particular. I just thought that... since we’re stuck in this place together, we could try to be a little...friendlier.”

“Friendlier?” I scoff. “You’re the one who’s been threatening me.”

“Because you abducted me!”

“No. I’m taking you back to where you belong. To the people who love you.” I don’t care if I have to say it until I’m

blue in the face.

She gives a snort. “You have no idea what you’re leading me into.”

“There’s a cure for the Curse, Vespvr.” It’s the first time I’ve addressed her by her name. I like the way it feels on my tongue.

*On my tongue?*

Where the hell did that come from?

“I don’t want this *cure* you speak of, damn you! Don’t you see it’s going to kill me?” Her eyes have grown wild again.

I raise a hand to stop her. “This might not be the best way to get to know each other.” We’re definitely on dangerous territory. And for some reason, I don’t like the idea of upsetting her.

She sags slightly. “You’re probably right.” She sits for a moment, observing me. “So... You said your mother died of a broken heart?”

I blink at her. The female has no filter. “I don’t like to talk about that.”

“You did last night.”

“Because you bewitched me!” I feel annoyance rise.

“You wouldn’t have told me if you didn’t want to. I can’t force that sort of thing. I just let you say what was in your heart.”

I smooth my hands over my knees, thinking about this. “You think that’s in my heart?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? You loved your mother, didn’t you?”

“More than anything.” My throat tightens as I feel the pain of her loss. Even after all these years, the hurt is still raw.

“I miss my mother, too.” Vespvr stares down at where her fingers are interlaced. “Her heart was also

broken.” She looks up at me, and for a moment, our eyes lock.

“It’s a terrible thing,” I acknowledge. I hated watching my mother wither away.

“What’s even more terrible are the monsters who cause those heartbreaks!” Her voice has risen.

I shake my head. “My mother was scorned. There was no monster. She was abandoned.” It hurts to say it because I wasn’t the one who left her.

“There’s always a monster,” she mutters. “Monsters took my father from us, and that’s why my mother lost hope.” Her throat works.

“Real monsters?” I frown because, in our worlds, anything is possible.

“The enemy.” Vespvr pulls in a breath. “The army who attacked our people and assassinated my father.”

“And who was the enemy?”

She glances at me. “Humans. Shifters. Those who wanted us to be weak. That’s how they won. By making us weak. And we stayed that way.” She spits the words out.

“Who told you that?” I cock my head.

“Those who knew.”

“You mean Magnis? You know he was a madman, Vespvr.”

Vespvr sets her jaw. “That doesn’t mean he was wrong. Vampires were meant to be strong.”

“And you need blood for that.” I can still see the change in her after she fed from me.

“More than that. We need...” Her nostrils flare slightly. “We need the Gift.”

“The Curse, you mean?”

“It’s a gift, Orc. You don’t understand what it brings with it.”



“It brings madness, Vespvr.” Again, I use her name. A day ago, she would have rejected it. Now, she simply watches me.

“I’m not mad, Vidarok.”

When I look at her now, she seems lucid. “I know,” I tell her, running my eyes over her face. Her cheeks have filled out. There’s a flush of color on her skin, and the shadows beneath her eyes have faded. It’s as if she gets lovelier every time I see her.

I shouldn’t be thinking that way. But for some reason, I can’t help it.

“What happened today?” I ask the question that’s been plaguing me. I don’t expect coyness from her, so when she looks me straight in the eye, it doesn’t surprise me.

“I wanted you.” She shrugs. “It happens when we feed. The blood heats us. Many of us desperately need sex – it’s part of our nature. I suppose you could say that it softens us. Some even use it for mating.”

“That was a mating ritual?” My eyes shoot open. I stare down at my wrist, where a pair of puncture wounds mars the flesh.

“Don’t get excited, Orc. It has to work both ways for there to be a mate bond.”

“So, then your prey would have to feed from you too?” The thought of being bonded to this female is unsettling.

“Did you feel like *prey*, Vidarok?”

I shift my eyes away because it had been nothing like that. My skin still throbs where her mouth had covered it. And the sensation has nothing to do with pain. “No.”

“You wanted me too. Don’t try to deny it.” She leans forward a little. “And even before. I *felt* you. You were hard for me.”

There truly is nothing coy about this woman.

“It was nothing. Just a reaction to...” I trail off. I’m not prepared to get into this with her.

“To what? Pinning a woman down? Overpowering her?” Her lip curls.

“No.” How could she possibly get it so wrong?

“Then what?” She eyes me curiously.

“You are strong. It is a good quality.” I rub my jaw, wondering how much more I can say. Nothing would be best. I stand abruptly. “You should rest.”

“Running away, Orc?” She chuckles.

I scoff. “If you wanted to know more, you could simply bewitch me again, Princess.”

“That would be cheating. I want you to tell me of your own free will,” she says lightly. “The way you offered your blood to me earlier. You wanted me to drink, didn’t you?”

Damn woman. All about mind games and powerplay. I’ve had enough.

“It’s not important.” Though I sense that it is. “I’ll let you know when it’s safe to leave.” I walk to the entrance and keep my back to her as I speak. “Don’t try anything stupid. This time, if you run, you can’t take the blood with you. Because the blood source is me.”

Vespyr

I've decided that I'm an idiot. My pride will be the death of me.

*Why did I turn him down?*

I glance over at the tall, unmoving shape silhouetted in the cave entrance. I lick my lips. I can still taste him. I want to taste him again. I've never had Orcish blood before, and I think it might be my favorite.

I've stretched out on the bedroll he set out for us earlier. It's not the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, but then again, it's not the worst. I roll onto my side, still watching him. There's more to this man than the brute I took him for. Something in those eyes that keeps drawing me in. A keen intelligence. Or maybe it's because he lost his mother, too. A shared loss.

*Don't let it weaken you, Vespyr. He's still your enemy.*

I have to stay strong. But right now, the hunger is building. I can feel it deep in my bones. I start to get up but then hesitate. Is this what I really want? If I go over there, will it be because of hunger or something else?

*Hunger. You need to feed, Vespyr!*

What else would I need him for? I may not be at the point of starvation, but it makes sense to want to build my power more. It's how I'll get out of here.

Still, it occurs to me that despite the hours that have passed, I don't need blood as much as I did before. I'd needed

the vials with much more frequency. His blood has sustained me for far longer.

*Stop dwelling on this, dammit!*

I move toward him, realizing from his taut bearing that he must be aware of me.

“I’d like to take you up on that offer, Orc.”

He turns to me, his eyes unreadable in the shadows.

“Hmm,” he rumbles. “Really? And what offer would that be?”

Bastard. He’s going to make me plead. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying not to let my temper flare. It’s easier than usual. My hair trigger seems less active right now.

“I’m hungry, Vidarok.” There. I said it.

He hesitates, and then unfastens the armguard on his forearm and holds his wrist out. There’s no sitting down this time, no invitation to close the distance between us. He’s keeping me at arm’s length quite literally.

*Fine. Whatever.*

Without warning, I grasp his arm, raise it to my lips, and bite down. Again, he grunts when I sink my teeth in and pull in a deep mouthful of blood. And again, the warm rush begins to flow through me. It’s like tapping into pure energy.

“Mmmm...” I groan in the back of my throat, not breaking the contact with his skin. I try not to drink too greedily in case he stops me too soon again. He doesn’t, though. Instead, I feel a soft brush against the top of my head, and then he’s stroking a hand over my hair.

“There you are,” he murmurs, his tone gruff. I want to purr contentedly.

*What the hell?*

He’s closed the distance between us, and I can feel the heat of his body. His chest is inches from my nose. And what a chest it is; a tantalizing invitation that’s hard to resist. Broad

and strong, with smooth muscled ridges that disappear beneath the waistband of his pants.

I barely realize I've stopped drinking until I feel my lips grazing over his nipple. They leave a little smear of blood in their wake.

His sharp intake of breath is all the encouragement I need to keep going. His hand cups the back of my head as he presses my face closer. I can taste him on my tongue and feel myself wanting more of him.

I've wanted to do this since those moments when I fed from him before. That first taste sparked something inside me that I've been longing to explore. Although, if I'm honest with myself, he's intrigued me from when I'd first felt his hard body against me. There's something irresistible about a man in his prime.

He doesn't move as I glide my lips up his chest to his collarbone and then nip at the base of his throat. It's not to feed now. There's another type of hunger at play that's been stirred by the intimacy that's building between us. I get up on my toes, hoping to reach his lips, but I can't. The top of my head doesn't even reach his chin. The man is like a mountain...which is probably why I want to climb him.

"Princess..." he groans when I slide my arms around the strong column of his neck. He reaches for my hips and lifts me against him. And then his mouth closes over mine and takes my breath along with it.

His lips are surprisingly soft yet firm, pressing into mine with a warmth and intensity that makes my body flood with sensation. His tongue is like velvet as it effortlessly caresses and explores every inch of mine.

*Oh, God yes...*

It occurs to me that it's been far too long since I did this. But then again, fighting a war and being locked in a dungeon would probably mess around with anyone's sex life.

Vidarok's warm breath mingles with mine as I feel him exploring my mouth with his own. The taste of him is as

unique and alluring as the taste of his blood, which I can't seem to get enough of.

When he breaks the kiss and stares down at me, I find myself lost in that green gaze again.

“By Blood, I want you.” I don't bother hiding my need. I've already told him that this is natural when my kind feed. There's no shame in it.

For a moment, I'm afraid he's going to pull away, so I hook my knee over his hip and clasp my legs around him. My hands tangle into his thick hair. When I tug at the dense strands, he gives a low moan. His hands slide down to cup my ass, huge palms hefting me easily as I grind against the hard line of his cock.

*Lord, he's enormous!*

Claiming my lips again, he takes broad strides to the ledge I'd been sitting on earlier and sets me down on it. I lean back against the wall, gazing up at him as he runs a fingertip down my chest between my breasts. The tension between us is strung as taut as violin strings.

Reaching eagerly for the front of his pants, I'm surprised when he grasps my hands and puts them at my sides.

“You're not in charge here, Princess.” His voice is like molten chocolate.

I swallow hard. “Okay.” I sound choked. Curling my hands into fists, I watch as he slides his hands over my legs and then pushes my skirt up my thighs. His callused fingers are rough against my smooth skin. It makes my nipples pucker and my core muscles clench.

When he strokes small circles along my inner thighs, my breath catches. He watches the path of his hands on my flesh, but when he reaches my bare pussy, his eyes flick to mine.

“Princesses don't wear panties?”

“This one doesn't.” My voice is hoarse. I can't clear my throat because my breath is coming hard. It grows more

ragged when he traces my slit with his fingertip. It only takes the slightest pressure for it to slide into me.

“You’re so wet,” he says, not breaking eye contact with me. I give a small shake of my head, afraid to try to speak. He strokes a teasing path between my slick lips until he reaches the throbbing peak of my clit.

My breath hisses out as he presses down on it and then traces a little circle. He teases my clit with his fingers, pressing and circling in a steady rhythm.

“Ohhhh...” I’m trembling, desire like an electric current coursing through me. His thumb moves down, and he finds my spot, pushing in deep and withdrawing sharply before thrusting again. I’m panting now, the pleasure almost too much to bear. My hands are still at my sides, but my nails are now biting into my palms.

“More?” he murmurs. He hasn’t let my eyes go, and the intensity is almost unnerving.

“Yes,” I croak. I give a small nod when the sound seems lost.

Pushing my thighs further apart with his body, he curls his fingers inside me, stretching me wide and pushing deeper each time. I’m dimly aware of heavy biceps bunching and flexing as his hand pumps rhythmically. My eyes start to water as the pleasure begins to mount. I squeeze them shut, but when I open them again, he’s still watching me hawkishly.

“Tell me how good it is,” he says.

“Good. So good!” I choke out. There’s a tightening in the pit of my belly that has my hips pushing forward. My fingers curl and uncurl into fists at my sides.

“Do you want to come?” he asks.

“Mmm-hmmm.” The sound is high-pitched. I drop my head against the cave wall behind me and arch my back, splaying my thighs as far as they can go. He’s still working my pussy like a master musician, fingers deftly finding spots that make my eyes roll back in my head. The wet sounds my body

is making are completely obscene, but I couldn't give a fuck right now.

“Open your eyes,” he tells me. “I want you to look at me when you come.”

It takes all my strength to lift my head and fix my lust-glazed stare upon him.

My skin is so flushed I can feel tiny beads of sweat prickling.

“Come for me, Princess,” he says. And I do. I come apart with a hoarse shout that feels like it's ripped from my throat. I manage to hold his gaze for all of five seconds before I throw my head back and cry out.

“Oh! Fuck!” I half-yell. Maybe it's been too long; maybe it's the combination of Orc blood and the brute force of this man, but I can't remember the last time I shattered like this. My toes curl, and my thigh muscles flex to the point that I'm afraid I'll be caught in a pleasure spasm forever.

By the time I've come down, he's still staring at me. His lips curl up, and he leans forward to brush them against mine.

“Did that soften you?” he says against my mouth.

I frown in response, still catching my breath. “What?”

He pulls back and shakes his head. “No more fighting,” he says. “You said sex would soften you.”

I stare at him, my mouth open. I don't fucking believe it!

I gasp. “Did you...? Was that...?” I feel fury rise. Did he just do that to manipulate me? I shove his chest. Hard. He doesn't budge. Of course he doesn't. He's an oaf. But his eyes darken just a bit at the rough contact; something flickers in their depths before he shuts down again.

“It's for the best, Princess. We don't have time for me to constantly worry about you running off.”



I yank my skirt down and hop to my feet. “You’re a bastard, you know that?”

He shrugs, and I want to hit him again. I don’t. Somehow, I think he’ll like it. So, I smooth my clothes, flick my hair over my shoulder, and stalk off with my head held high.

“I’m going to rest now, Orc,” I say haughtily. “Don’t bother me again unless it’s important.”

There’s a dry chuckle from behind me, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of looking back. If he thinks he can make me do his bidding after one measly orgasm, he’s got another thing coming.

*Measly?*

It was fucking incredible.

I sink onto the blanket and close my eyes.

*What the hell were you thinking, woman?*

## Vidarok

For the second time in as many days, I wake up with a start. I'm sitting with my back against the entrance to the cave, and the silence outside is almost deafening. I'd been dreaming of heated golden eyes and kiss-swollen lips and the hoarse cries of ecstasy of the woman in my care.

"Dragh!" I hiss under my breath as I glance around quickly. What a fucking stupid thing to do.

*Falling asleep, or toying with the princess, Vidarok?*

I can't think about that now. She's probably gone.

Except when I look across the cave, she's sitting on the bedroll, watching me.

*Thank the Maker!*

"I thought you said Orcs don't sleep." She tilts her head.

"Sometimes we do," I mutter, pushing myself to my feet. "Although you probably put another hex on me, woman."

She shakes her head. "Wasn't me. You drifted off all by your sweet little self."

I scoff at her words, moving briskly across the cave to gather our belongings. She doesn't get up to help. Why would she?

"The wind has died down. We need to get moving." I cross my arms over my chest impatiently as I stand over her,

waiting for her to rise so I can fold up the bedroll. She takes her time. I clench my teeth in irritation but say nothing.

Finally, she stands up and stretches her arms above her head, eyes still on me. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

I let out a breath through my nose, then start folding the blanket up. I fasten it firmly and then straighten. She gives me a haughty stare.

How is it possible for her to look down her nose at me when her head barely reaches my chin?

“You didn’t leave,” I say as I sling the pack over my shoulder, then strap my battle ax across my back. She looks away, her cheeks flushing slightly, then brushes it off with a wave of her hand.

“You said it yourself. It would be foolish to abandon my food source.”

I snort softly, then turn away from her. It’s hard not to view the cave without thinking of what happened here last night. And I’d be lying if I said I did it to manipulate her. The thought of her with her head thrown back and her chest heaving... My cock throbs.

“We should get there by nightfall,” I say gruffly.

“And just where might ‘there’ be?” she asks.

“You’ll see.” I start walking.

She gives a huff. “Why not just tell me? Is it some kind of secret?”

“No. You’ll find out in good time.” I don’t say more. I’d just rather not talk about it. Or have to go back there. That choice is out of my hands now.

“Charming. You’re a real prince, you know that?” she grumbles.

“Yes.” A skitter of gravel behind me lets me know that she’s right behind me as I head through the cave mouth.

We step out of our refuge cautiously and survey the terrain that is now unrecognizable beneath its sandy layer.

“How can you tell which direction to go in?” She peers around us.

“The sun.” I nod upward. “And the rock formations.”

“They all look the same to me,” she mutters.

I shrug because I can’t explain what I do. Just that I do it. We pick our way over the rocky outcrop and then head toward the horizon, where I know what will be waiting.

My past.

It’s been so long since I thought about that time.

I’d rather not think about it now. But I guess it’s going to be unavoidable. Squaring my shoulders, I keep walking.

The sun is high before I notice her flagging.

“Orc!”

“Huh,” I grunt. I glance over at her. She’s getting that hollow-cheeked appearance that I’m coming to recognize.

“I’m hungry.” She raises her eyebrow at me. There are slight smudges beneath her eyes. They’re not as pronounced as before, though. Nor does she thirst as often as she did.

She’s growing stronger.

I turn to face her and extend my wrist. Her fingers are smooth as she takes my hand in hers, and then runs her fingertips over my palm. I try not to frown as she lowers her head and trails her tongue over my skin. It sends shivers through me, but I work to hide it. When I feel the sharp jolt as her fangs pierce my skin, I suck in a breath. It should hurt, but it doesn’t. The sensation ripples straight to my groin, and yet again, I find myself wanting this woman.

*Focus!*

What happened last night was a mistake. She’d caught me off guard, and by the time I’d come to my senses, it was too late to back down. What man disappoints a woman who is begging for release?

*Dragh! You’re a fool!*

I thought it would be simple to track her and take her back, but everything's gone wrong from the start. And my behavior isn't helping things. It's going to get worse if she keeps this up. The little moans she makes as she swallows are going straight to my balls.

"No more." My voice is hoarse. I grit my teeth and clench my fist, then put my free hand on her shoulder. Reluctantly, she raises her head. Her pupils are blown so huge I can barely see the gold of her irises. There's a fine silver line encircling each one. The mark of the Curse. My Lady Aurora was the one who identified it – the sign that the affliction is surfacing.

I step away from her.

Her lips are parted. She gives a satisfied smile, then flicks her tongue out to catch a bead of blood. I'm transfixed by the small movement.

"Are you planning to 'soften' me again?" She tilts her head, observing me mockingly. The smudges under her eyes are already gone. In fact, she appears healthier than I've ever seen her. So damned lovely.

"Do I need to, Princess?"

*Of course, you do!*

At this rate, she'll be strong enough to create a portal on her own soon. Maybe she already can.

If she could, she would. I'm sure of it.

"I'll leave that for you to decide." Her voice has grown husky. We stand staring at each other for a moment before I turn on my heel and start walking again. Each time I feel her lips on me, something shifts inside me. I'm not sure I like it. Or perhaps I do...a little too much.

The landscape has begun to change as we've been walking. The barren stretches are beginning to be interrupted by more outcrops. Soon we're making our way up steep, rocky pathways that eventually lead into mountain crags.

“We can’t go up there!” Vespvr says as we stop at the foot of a cliff.

“Would you rather go back?” I look behind us to where a vast expanse of nothingness stretches for as far as the eye can see. As much as I’m not happy to be reaching our destination, I wouldn’t turn back now either. The flagon of water I brought has all but run dry, and soon, I’ll start to feel hunger. I may be stronger than most, but even I can’t go without food or drink indefinitely. Especially when I’m feeding her.

“You’ll have to help me.” She huffs a breath and jerks her head at the rocks. I’ve already spotted a way through the huge boulders towering above us. It’ll mean picking our way up like mountain goats, but that doesn’t bother me. Orcs were made for this kind of terrain.

Without warning, I lift her up and drape her over my shoulders like a shepherd carrying a lamb.

“Vidarok!” she shrieks, squirming as I get a grip on her thighs, and then link a hand around one of her arms.

“It’ll be easier this way. Just take care of the ax. Don’t want you losing a limb.” I start the climb before she can object further. Pretty soon, she settles into it, relaxing against me as I keep up the pace.

“You have pointy ears.” Vespvr’s voice drifts up from my shoulder. She traces the tip of one. “Like a Fae. But not.”

“Hmm.” I nod, because what is there to say? They’re a part of me.

“I prefer your ears.” There’s a pause. “Fucking Fae,” she says under her breath.

My jaw tightens. “You don’t like them.” It’s a statement. I’m still pissed at how she treated my Lady.

“They’ve been a thorn in my side,” she mutters darkly. “Endless trouble for our kind. If you only knew...”

“Knew what?” I’m wondering what would have convinced her that such gentle people are a threat. Even if they

do possess strange powers and abilities, they only ever use them for good. Especially Princess Aurora, who doesn't have a mean bone in her body.

"Nothing." Vespyr falls silent and clasps onto me more tightly as we continue our ascent. "She drove a wedge between Bartholomew and me," she says out of the blue.

"My Lady?"

She gives a snort. "You call her a lady. I call her devious. A spy. I was locked up for months because of her! She ruined my marriage plans to the Fae King, and then she convinced my brother that I was a threat."

"Because you *were* a threat," I remind her.

"But for good reason! And never a threat to him." She's stiffened against me. "Don't you see that? Our people need a strong leader. I wanted him to understand that. I wanted to rule at his side. I would have been fair, worthy."

"You chose a strange way to show it."

"Sometimes the end justifies the means."

"The means? You physically threatened the human who mated with the Fae King. You abducted my Lady Aurora —"

"The way you abducted me?"

"This is different. This is for your own good." She needs the cure. It's the only way to help her see things clearly again. And then, once she's healthy, she'll...

She'll what?

*Go on her way.*

*And you'll go back to being just a guard.*

I put the thought behind me. We come from different worlds.

We fall back into silence. And maybe it's better that way. Reaching the top of a crag, I take a moment to stand looking out at the world below us. Things are dramatically

different here. Rolling hills are dotted with patches of trees, and rivers snake through them like veins on an arm. The sun has begun its descent toward the horizon, creating an orange-pink sky that gives everything around us an ethereal glow. It's all shimmering behind a strange haze, indicating that we haven't crossed the divide yet.

“Oh!” She exhales. “Is this it?”

“That's where we're headed. The gateway is up ahead. Just need to climb past that cliff, and then over the rise, and —” I don't get much further, because the next thing I know, the earth thunders beneath my feet. There's a boulder the size of a house crashing toward us. It seems to defy the laws of gravity as it carries its own momentum through the air, smashing everything in its path. Shards of rock explode around us like shrapnel. Earth and crushed foliage fly through the air.

Vespyr screams.



Vespyr

My breath catches in my chest as I stare at the giant gray object crashing toward us. I bite down on my lip to stop myself from screaming again – that’s not who I am. I’ve never been the kind of woman who cowers in fear.

Except I’m afraid now.

“Hold on!” says Vidarok a moment before he dives sideways and flings us out of the way of the thundering rock.

We fall to the ground in a tangled pile of limbs, gasping. I’m still struggling to take in air when Vidarok jumps to his feet, scanning our surroundings for danger. His eyes meet mine for a brief moment before he looks away again, and I feel my heart stutter.

I sit up, wincing as sharp pain shoots through my ribs from where I landed on them. Taking deep breaths, I try to calm my racing heart.

“Are you okay?” Vidarok asks me quietly.

I nod silently before looking around us. The boulder lies half a mile down the path, and beaten trees litter the area around it like broken dolls. It’s obvious that it was only by sheer luck that we weren’t crushed beneath its weight.

Vidarok offers me his hand, helping me up from the ground.

“What was that?” I choke out. It’s a stupid question. Obviously, it’s a huge freaking rock. “How did it roll down like that?”

Vidarok frowns, narrowing his eyes on the path ahead. “Sometimes it happens. The earth beneath it may have shifted, and it broke loose.”

I swallow hard. If he hadn’t moved so quickly, we would have been crushed. I step closer to him for a moment.

“Maybe we should go before something else decides to drop from the sky,” I mutter.

He shakes his head, still scanning the area around us.

“Something wrong?” I squint in the direction he’s staring in. I can’t see a thing. Just more scrubby bushes and gray featureless rock.

“Stay behind me.” His voice is gravelly as he edges in front of me. I fight down a swirl of anxiety.

“What’s going on, Vidarok?” I wish my voice didn’t sound so reedy.

He doesn’t answer, which puts me on edge. Without thinking, I press against him, a hand on his broad back. He’s so strong and solid that my apprehension almost fades.

*I’m safe here.*

I’m wrong.

My eyes widen in horror as I turn around to see a massive landslide coming our way.

“Down!” he barks and forces me to the ground, just as another barrage of rocks falls around us. I can’t help myself; I scream again.

The air is filled with dust and chaos as hundreds of stones rain down on us, pelting our skin and clothing. My heart is pounding in my chest, and my breath comes in short gasps. Vidarok crouches over me protectively, his body acting like a barrier between me and the rocks.

And then I hear it – a deep drumming sound, accompanying a throaty roar. It takes me a moment to figure out what I’m hearing, but when I do, I struggle to believe it.

It sounds like a battle cry.

*It can't be!*

But when I see Vidarok's face, his expression confirms it. Grim determination etches every hard line. In one smooth move, he swings the ax from his back and swipes it in a huge circle at his side. It cuts through the air with a noise that makes my blood run cold.

"I need you to do as I say," he tells me. I nod. Now is not the time for defiance. A trumpet blares from up above us.

"By Blood!" I whisper. "What is it?"

"My kinsmen."

I shoot a glance at him. "Your kinsmen?" That can only mean one thing.

*Orcs!*

Vidarok's eyes are trained up ahead to the narrow path that separates us from our attackers. They haven't come into sight yet, but from the way that the sound is building, it won't be long. Boots clatter, and armor rattles.

*They're close!*

Adrenaline floods me.

"Get between those boulders." Vidarok jerks his head to the side, not taking his eyes from the path. "Don't come out until I tell you."

Nodding again quickly, I grab a handful of my skirt to pull it high and clamber over the rocks to get there.

The next few moments seem to pass in a blur. I clamp a hand over my mouth as a rough-hewn shape appears, followed by another. They're giants! The narrowness of the path works in our favor because they're too big to pass more than one at a time. But even that seems like impossible odds.

The first one reaches Vidarok in a rush, a huge mallet held over his head. Vidarok stands his ground, his ax swinging in one hand, his free hand clenched into a fist at his side.

There's a moment where they face off, and then the giant Orc gives a roar. Vidarok is a giant, but this

beast appears to be twice his size. A heavy brow lowers over deep-set eyes, and twin tusks protrude from a mouth that's like a slash across his green-tinged face. He's hideous.

With another roar, he hurtles forward. Vidarok snarls his own challenge and charges to meet him head-on. The clash of metal rings out as the two collide with such force that it shakes the ground beneath my feet.

*I can't look...I can't!*

I squeeze my eyes shut and then pry them open because as much as I'm afraid, I have to know what's happening. The sight in front of me is pure carnage. The first Orc is down, his head missing from his shoulders, while Vidarok swings his ax at the second rushing brute.

The clash of metal rings out, steel arcs through the air. Vidarok moves with a speed and grace that leaves me transfixed. His smaller size is actually an advantage because in the tightly cramped space, he can duck and spin with more ease than our attackers.

A third monster goes down, only to be replaced by another, who rushes straight over his fallen comrade's body. Vidarok slams his bloodied ax head straight into his chest, grabs the dagger from the male's hand, and plunges it into the throat of the next Orc who rushes in.

It's like watching a force of nature, slashing and smashing without showing a sign of tiring. I lose track of how many he faces, but by now, the earth is soaked with blood. The surrounding rocks are splattered with it. Still, he doesn't flinch or falter; he stands his ground without a shred of fear, tawny skin streaked with dirt and gore, gleaming with sweat.

*By Blood, he's magnificent.*

If it wasn't for our situation, I'd be filled with awe. But as the attack continues, I realize that it's only a matter of time before he's overpowered.

*What are you doing, Vespyr?*

Nothing, that's what. Hiding like a pathetic coward. I'm filled with shame.

Gathering my wits, I focus my attention on the horde pouring down toward us. I can do something. I may not be able to fight, but I can make a difference.

I have power. Not much yet, but I can do something.

I can get into their heads.

It takes several long seconds to pool my skills, and I find myself wading through a jumble of images and thoughts belonging to the creatures above us. They hit me in a flood of violence that leaves me breathless.

*Cut! Kill! Maim! Die!*

They're single-minded in their need to overcome us. Not just that. They want to pulverize us. Crush our bones and drink from our skulls.

I'll never let that happen.

I feel my brow furrow as I concentrate on isolating each one. Besides the ones who have fallen, I count eight others. Vidarok may not be showing any signs of flagging, but I can't see how he's going to keep going long enough to fight off all of them.

*Do something!*

Reaching out with my thoughts, I start tugging and pulling at their big, ugly minds.

*'Turn around! Run!'*

I repeat the words over and over, squeezing them into their heads with all the power I can muster.

*'Danger! Run!'*

I grit my teeth and hold my breath as I wait for something to happen. Vidarok is still fighting, oblivious to what I'm doing.

*Please!*

I don't know if I'm strong enough to make this happen. It worked on Vidarok a couple of nights ago, but he was just one, and he was right beside me.

I try again...

*'Danger! Run! Run now!'*

Suddenly, I notice a slight lull in the clanging. From above, there's a hoarse cry that sounds like terror. My lips curl up as I feel hope rush through me.

*'You're afraid! Very afraid.'*

More voices ring out, guttural and bestial. "Go!" someone screams. "Go now...run!"

I almost sag with relief as I hear the clunking of heavy boots receding. Within minutes, the crashes and roars have died down to nothing. Then silence hangs over us. Vidarok turns to look at me, surprise in his eyes.

"You?" He's breathless. He sweeps a bloody arm across his dirt-streaked brow.

I nod, then smile triumphantly. "You looked like you might need some help."

"I thought I told you not to move until I came for you, Princess." He huffs a breath. "Impossible woman."

I don't think he's truly annoyed. I step toward him. For some strange reason, I'm filled with an almost irresistible urge to run forward and throw myself against his chest.

I almost do...except a sudden movement has him swinging his head. And then he's charging. All I see is a blur of movement as his huge body hurtles toward me. Behind him, one of the fallen Orcs has risen onto one knee. He's flung a short throwing spear directly at me. And then Vidarok throws himself right across its path.

"No!" I scream. But it's too late. The heavy metal barb goes into his back and pierces straight through his chest.

The Orc who threw it is glaring at me through eyes that are hazy but filled with hatred. "Witch!" he howls. Pink-tinted spittle flies from his lips.

Vidarok has fallen to his knees in front of me. He glances down at the bloody spear sticking through his

breastbone. He looks back up at me. There's a hint of confusion in his eyes, as if he's not quite sure what just happened.

"Witch!" the Orc rages again. He's trying to drag himself to his feet. He shakes his head, and a dozen gold hoops glitter in his sharply pointed ears. "Die, witch!" Sharp tusk-like teeth jut out from his lower lips, his jaw thick and heavy.

A wave of pure rage overwhelms me.

"You!" I scream at him, aiming a finger. The creature stops and then stares at me. "You!" I repeat, injecting every ounce of hatred into the word. The Orc claps a hand to the side of his head, then covers his eyes.

"Stop!" He shakes his head as if to clear it. "Stop!" Blood is trickling from beneath his hand from his eyes. It trickles from his nostrils, and then from his mouth, and his ears. "Stop it! Stop!" His guttural voice has raised into a high-pitched scream. "Please!"

It's the last thing he says before he coughs up a huge mouthful of blood, and then topples to the side. His eyes are lifeless.

I only get a moment of satisfaction before a choked sound brings my attention back to the man in front of me. Vidarok is gasping for air as he clutches at the thick steel piercing his chest. His breath rasps, and then he makes a bubbling coughing sound.

"Don't!" I half yell at him, grasping at his burly shoulder. "Don't you die!" But he's sagging, and he's too heavy for me to hold up. "Damn you, Orc! Don't you dare die!"

But there's nothing I can do. I watch in horror as his giant chest heaves once, and then he sinks onto his side.

He doesn't move.

Vidarok

I can't breathe in. No matter how hard I try to take air into my lungs, it feels like my heart's not beating hard enough. But beyond that is the pain. I can't decide which is worse – the agony, or the sense of suffocation.

The gurgling sound I hear is coming from my own throat as I fight for oxygen.

“Shhh...” The voice is soothing. “I'm here.”

I can feel that I'm slumped onto my side. There's a warm hand on my shoulder. It's hers. I recognize her touch.

“Princess...” My voice is a ragged croak.

“Don't speak. Just breathe. Not long now.”

*Not long?*

I can't dwell on the words because the searing heat in my chest is threatening to overwhelm me. I raise a hand to try to stop the pain but find my arm being guided gently to my side.

“This is going to hurt,” Vespvr says.

“What...?” I don't get an answer, but I hear her give a deep grunt, and then there's an almighty wrench.

“Dragh!” I choke out. It feels like my chest just collapsed. Feebly, I try to sit up, but I can't. Her hand is still on my shoulder, and I don't have the strength to fight her. There's another excruciating wrench and a loud sucking sound.



That's when I black out.



*'You're going to be okay.'*

My brow furrows as consciousness returns. The words surround me, but it's as if I'm not hearing them. They seem to be coming from inside my head. And they swirl in a warm comforting wave that almost makes me believe it. I'm going to be okay.

*'I've got you.'*

It's her. I know it's her. But I still can't breathe. I fight to get my eyes open. When I do, I see her hovering over me.

"Ves..." the sound hisses past my lips. Her features are a mask of concern.

*'I'm going to fix this.'*

My frown deepens. Despite the cushiony sense of floating on a cloud, everything in me is telling me that I'm in trouble. Deep trouble.

Spear.

I have a vague memory of the Orc flinging a spear straight toward her. And then it hit me... Almost went right through me.

Fire and fury! I'm strong enough to withstand most kinds of injury, but a spear through the chest is beyond even me.

I'm going to die.

Already, I can feel dark shadows fluttering on the edges of my vision. Blood loss. Oxygen starvation. It's all coming at me, and I can't fight it off.

"Dying," I choke the word. I'm fighting to keep my eyes open.

"You're not fucking dying, Orc!" Vespvr's voice is fierce, and it's not in my mind this time. I feel my head being

lifted, and I fight to focus on her. I watch in confusion as she raises her wrist, bites down on it, and then holds it to my lips.

“Drink!” she says. I’m still confused. Until the first coppery trickles of blood coat my tongue. My first reaction is to withdraw. But then the warmth starts to fill me.

“Good,” she says. “That’s it.”

I find myself gulping almost desperately. The pain recedes. I draw a breath in through my nose, finding myself lightheaded as I feel a rush of air filling my lungs. It’s like I’ve tapped into a source of pure, living energy, and it’s flooding me.

It’s only as this thought crosses my mind that it dawns on me. My blood has been sustaining her these last couple of days. There’s no way she’s strong enough to bring me back from the brink.

I stop swallowing.

“Drink,” she repeats. Her hand is stroking my hair. I find that I like it, but I shake my head.

“You can’t...” I manage to get the words out. “You. Too...weak,” I add.

“Don’t worry about me.” She presses her wrist more firmly against my lips. I resist at first, but then the temptation is too much to fight. It’s only when my breath is coming in a steady rhythm that she pulls her arm away. I gaze up at her, at the light surrounding her, turning her golden hair into a halo. It seems appropriate.

She just saved my life.

I hope. My chest still hurts like a motherfucker. But it’s tolerable now – especially since I’m able to draw breath.

“I have to find us someplace to shelter until you’re healed.” She rises, and I reach for her.

“Not. Safe.” At least I’m able to form coherent words now.

“I’ll be fine.” She waves a hand. “Your ‘friends’ are gone. And those who weren’t yet expired...well...” She licks her lips and gives a little smile. I don’t quite understand what she means until I watch her walk away. Nearby, an Orc lies, his lifeless eyes staring into empty space. His throat has been torn clean out.

*By the Maker!*

From the pasty pallor of his skin, she must have drained him completely dry.

She’s not coming back. I’m certain of it. Now that she’s drunk her fill, she’ll be able to travel to anywhere she wants.

I can’t hold it against her – it’s not as if she didn’t make it clear that was her intention from the start. And at least she dragged me from the jaws of death.

That’s if I survive this. A heavy lethargy is flooding me, turning my limbs to lead. Even though I fight it, my head drops back to the ground, and my eyes shut.

Darkness comes once more.



“Thirsty?” It’s her voice again. This time, when I open my eyes, it’s to the soft light of a firelit room.

*Where are we?*

Something’s pressing against my lips, and I recognize the neck of my water bottle. I take a sip and try not to cough.

“Slowly,” she says. Her hand is on my brow, and I realize I feel hot. I try to sit, but she pushes me back. I’m weak as a kitten. “You’ve had a fever, but it broke last night.”

“Fever?” I’m trying to make sense of it.

“My blood healed your wound, but whatever filth was on that spear had already flooded through your body.” She gives a disgusted snort. “Vile animal. Even his blood tasted like shit. At least he had a lot of it.”

I try to sit again. This time she can't stop me. My head spins. I'm on a cot that feels like it's sagging beneath my weight. It's Orc-sized, telling me something of the last occupant of the cabin, but it's certainly seen better days. It creaks as I shift my weight.

"Where are we?" I ask, taking a look around me. I'm in a small room, with a low ceiling and uneven walls. Cobwebs in the corners and a layer of dust reassure me that we don't need to expect anyone back in a hurry. A fire crackles in one corner, providing a warm, orange glow that reveals the dirt floor and old wooden furniture. The fire sizzles and pops as it burns, and I wonder if she started it.

"I found an abandoned cabin." She holds the bottle to my mouth again. My throat is dry, but I take another cautious mouthful. Part of me expects to see water pouring from my chest wound, but when I glance down, there's only an angry-looking scar.

*What the—?*

I trace my thumb over the red ridge. It's sensitive but not painful.

"I don't understand."

"Vampire blood has healing capabilities. Plus, I think you Orcs heal fast, anyway."

Sure. But not like this. I should have died.

"A cabin?" I ask the next question on my mind.

"I did a little exploring while you were out of it. Found that gate of yours. Pretty impressive. I didn't know the Orcs could create a door that stayed open indefinitely. Normally it takes at least a touch of magic."

"We're on the other side of the gateway?" I shake my head. I'd been dreading that moment since we set out, and now here I am, firmly planted in the land I'd vowed never to go back to...with no idea how I got here. "How...?"

"Magic." She puts a fingertip to her lips and winks at me.

“You teleported me?” I wish I could remember any of this.

“You weren’t strong enough. Still not, I’ll wager. Frankly, I wasn’t sure you’d make it through the gateway. I had to take a chance on that. And...” she splays her hands, “here we are.”

“But how?” I’m picturing her dragging or carrying me over the mountain, and the thought is too ridiculous to comprehend. She looks at me, tilts her head slightly, and then giggles. It’s a girlish sound.

“I didn’t drag you, Orc.” Her lips curl up. She’s in my head again, reading my thoughts; I’m sure of it. “I can fly.”

“You can fly?” I narrow my eyes on her.

She nods her head. “That, and a little bit of help from my *Gift*,” she emphasizes the word, “made it pretty easy to move you.”

“You can fly,” I say again like a fool. “And teleport.”

She nods again.

“How long have we been here?” I raise a shaking hand and rub it over my face.

“Two days.”

My eyes bug out. “Two days... And you’re strong enough to get away from here? From me? Why?”

“Because if I’d left you, you would have died.” She reaches for a washcloth that I notice on a small stool beside the cot. She smooths it over my brow. It’s cool against my skin. I’m still burning up. Am I hallucinating all of this?

“You did this to save me? Gave up your freedom?” I can’t comprehend this. Everything I’ve seen of this female has told me she’s self-serving. Selfish, even.

“You saved me.” She shrugs. “I owe you a debt.”

I don’t say that she wouldn’t have been in danger if it wasn’t for me.

In more ways than one.

“Those Orcs...” She frowns at me. “Why did they attack us? Were they guarding the gate? I’m guessing we’ve stepped into Orc territory.”

“Earomond.” I nod.

“Your world?”

I nod again.

“Didn’t seem like much of a warm welcome. Do all of your kinsmen greet returning countrymen like that?”

“We are a warlike people.” It’s not a lie. But I’m pretty certain my presence here raised warning bells.

Warning bells that must be clanging throughout the realm of my birth. A warning that will rouse every Orc within my stepmother’s warrior league. It’s a chance I took when I made the decision to come here. It may have been a mistake. I’d hope to avoid a confrontation for long enough to reach another gateway out of here.

“You wage war against your own?”

“Isn’t it what you did?” I remind her.

She seems sheepish for a moment. “I had good reason.”

“Perhaps they do too.” At least, I imagine they think they do. I never considered myself a threat.

If only everyone in my world felt that way.

Vespyr

He's strong, I'll give him that, and tough, too. I won't tell him as much, but I wasn't sure that he'd make it.

I stroke the damp cloth over his forehead again. There's still a slight glitter to his eyes, though by now, the fever should have abated.

"There's something on your mind?" I look at him. "Something you want to tell me about your people?"

He shrugs and then grimaces as the puckered skin pulls tautly across his chest. "If you wanted to know, you could probably get into my head, right?"

"No. I wouldn't do that." I could. But for some reason, I won't. I don't want to intrude into his private thoughts. Now that he's conscious, it occurs to me that I don't need to communicate with him that way. It feels like it would be wrong. When I find myself picking up an image flitting through his mind, I stop myself and trail the cloth down the line of his cheek.

His face is so different from the creatures who attacked us. They were rough, barbaric. While Vidarok's features are strong and rough-hewn, there's a beauty to them that I can't deny. When he's silent for a while, I realize he's watching me. Watching my face as I explore the contours of his with my fingertips.

When did I drop the washcloth?

"So, will you tell me?" My voice is husky.

He presses his lips together. I get the feeling he's trying to decide how much he wants to share with me. Because I have no doubt that there is a story to tell here. Or maybe he's trying to decide if he should ask me to stop touching his face. I don't want to.

"I have a history in this place. It's not a good one. It's why I left. Why I became a guard for the Fae royals."

"I see." I don't really. There are huge pieces missing from this picture. "What kind of history?"

"It's not important." His voice is husky too. He licks his lips, and I watch the movement against his full bottom lip. He has a really nice mouth. A strange little part of me wants to lean in and nip it. I cup his cheek with my palm and stare into his eyes for a second. His hand comes up and curls around my wrist. If he pulls my hand away, it's going to sadden me. I don't know why.

But he doesn't. Instead, he turns his face and presses his lips into my palm. Rough stubble grazes my skin as he does it, and a wave of tingles ripples through me.

When he turns his face back, his eyes are deep, the green of them pulling me in like ocean water.

"You saved me." He's said it before, but it's as if he's still trying to process it.

I want to shrug and brush it off. I try. "I told you; I owed you a debt."

"You didn't have to stay. You could have brought me here and left me. Taken your chance and escaped. Why didn't you do that?" His thumb is stroking along my forearm in little sweeping waves.

"Orc, I could still do it if I wished," I scoff. The mocking tone is wasted because I'm melting into his emerald stare.

"So do it." There's a strange challenge in his words.

I shake my head. "You're not strong enough."



“No?” Both his hands are on my arms now, and somehow, I’ve stepped closer, bracketed by his knees. I’m almost leaning against him. When he slides a hand behind my neck and draws my face closer to his, I don’t resist. My lips meet his like a whisper.

The kiss isn’t what I expect it to be. It’s gentle and searching, an exploration of our mouths as if we’re both trying to memorize the feeling of each other. My hands come up around him, threading into the hair at the nape of his neck and holding him close to me as our mouths move together.

We stay that way for long moments until, all too soon, it comes to an end. He pulls back from me and gazes deep into my eyes – as if searching for something.

He moves his hand from behind my neck to cup my chin delicately between his thumb and forefinger and leans forward until our noses are touching lightly.

His eyes never leave mine as he speaks again softly, “I am the one who is in debt now.”

“Maybe we’re even.”

“Maybe we are.” He kisses me again, slow and sweet. I moan softly, feeling my blood heat. When he deepens the kiss, I press closer, my breasts flattening against his chest. He’s so huge that even sitting, he’s as tall as me at full height. There’s a strange comfort in his size, as if he could keep the dangers of the world at bay. Which is an odd thought because, for these past days, that’s been the role that I have played.

*Why didn’t you go, Vespyn?*

It’s a question I can’t answer. Especially when he’s reached for the laces at the back of my dress that hold it closed. As he tugs at the ribbon, the neckline falls loose and slips down my shoulders.

“Your skin is like ivory.” He says the words against me as he slides his lips over the curve of my shoulder. I watch him do it, seeing the contrast between us. Even now, while he’s healing, he’s golden against me, rich and tawny.

He brings his hands up to cup my waist, drawing me closer into him until his breath is warm against my neck. He kisses there and then along my jawline until I'm trembling.

I moan softly, arching closer into his touch.

*What are you doing, woman?*

I can't help myself, though. I've already fought off so many heated thoughts as I've tended to him through the fever that raged. When I set my hands on his shoulders, the shape of them is familiar to me. Except it's different now. Now, I'm not watching him for signs of weakness. Though I should be.

"You should be resting."

"I've rested enough." He moves away from my neck only to explore further down, following the line of my collarbone and dipping lower still to cup a breast with gentle fingers. I shut my eyes as his mouth follows suit, tracing along the neckline of my dress, and suddenly sparks are flying everywhere, like a million tiny stars behind my eyelids.

"Ohhh..." I exhale the sound. My fingers dig into his skin, nails raking slightly. He shudders, his movements growing more urgent, and he makes a sound deep in his throat. It ripples through me like a touch.

"I want you, Princess."

My breath hitches, and then I gasp as he starts peeling away layers of clothing. The heavy fabric of my dress slips to the floor and pools at my feet. For long moments, his eyes move over me hotly as I stand there. I raise my chin, feeling him taking me in.

"You're beautiful."

My lips twitch up. I've never been self-conscious before, nor have I ever worried that I might fall short of expectations, but somehow, I find myself eager for his approval. And he approves. I can see it in the heat of his eyes and the slight flush that sits high on his cheekbones that has nothing to do with fever. When I slide my hands down his chest, his nipples pebble beneath my light touch. But I don't

dwell there. I have other things in mind. When I reach the top of his pants, his breath hisses.

“Don’t stop.” His words are a whisper in my ear as his tongue traces the delicate shell. I shouldn’t listen to him. I should stop this right now and save myself from the complications I’m weaving myself into. I can’t.

He lifts his hips when I unfasten his pants and pull them down. Soon they’re on the floor beside my dress, and there is nothing between us but air and heat and electricity crackling around us like a live current.

I look down the length of his body. “By Blood!” I choke. His cock juts out, hard, thickly veined...and I’ve never seen anything like it.

“I will make it good for you, Princess,” he rumbles, trailing a fingertip down my belly. “You are tiny, but it...it will be good.”

Tiny? I’m tall by vampire standards, and we are not a small race. But this man dwarfs me, and now I’m more than a little intimidated by the sheer size of his shaft. The thought of him filling me leaves me trembling with both excitement and trepidation.

Leaning forward, he takes my nipple into his mouth as his hand explores lower. I jolt like I’ve been touched by electricity when his hand cups my mound. His fingers seek out my heat as I arch against him in pleasure. He is gentle but firm as he strokes and teases my clit until I have to cling to his shoulder to stop my knees from sagging.

“You’re really good at that,” I manage to get out. I’m panting. He gives a low chuckle, his fingers still stroking, sliding, dipping into me. I take one inside, and then a second. When he pushes in a third, I know he’s working to stretch my entrance to accommodate him. The thought of it has my chest heaving and my cheeks flushing with need. I spread my thighs wider to give him access.

Fuck! I suddenly want this so badly.

He takes my hand in his own and guides it to grip around the base of his shaft. My fingertips don't meet, and that makes me even more needy.

Still holding my hand, we stroke his cock in a slow rhythm that leaves me familiar with the contours of it. I roll my palm over the thick head, where it's sticky with precum. I use it to coat the length while he keeps working my pussy.

"Oh, God...just like that," I groan. My thighs are sticky with the juices that are dripping from me. I don't know if it's his skillful touch or the sheer anticipation of what's coming next.

I'm throbbing with want by the time I straddle his heavy thighs. Hovering above his hips, I keep my hand around the base of his shaft, our eyes locking as I guide his knob along my slit.

"Princess..." he moans. The sound deepens as I lower myself onto him.

"Fuck...oh, fuck!" My eyes are already watering before I'm halfway down. He nuzzles his lips against my throat, one hand cupping my breast and stroking my nipple. The other dips between us, sliding through the strip of hair that covers my pussy and finding my clit. My core clenches around him, though my walls are stretched so far, I can barely control them. I only realize that my nails have carved grooves into his flesh when he jerks up and groans. I yelp as he shoves another thick inch into me. It's almost too much, but I was never one to turn down a challenge. By the time I settle onto his lap and engulf him completely, I feel like I can't breathe. I rest there for a moment, getting used to the sensation. It's good.

So, fucking good.

"You're big, Orc," I say into the curve of his neck. His mighty chest is heaving against me, and I know he's holding himself back.

"You're okay?"

I nod. My eyes are still tearing as the burn between my thighs turns into a warm tingle that floods me. I could hit my

climax now, just like this, without moving a muscle. Already there are hot little jolts that have my belly twitching. Each tiny jerk has him shuddering against me, taking small panting breaths as he fights to restrain himself. And I'm shuddering, too, as his thick finger keeps stroking circles on my clit.

"I want to drink from you," I say quickly as instinct kicks in. It's not unusual. I've told him how we feed this way. But now the urge is almost all-consuming. If he says no, I might try to compel him.

*No! You can't!*

When he tilts his head to the side, exposing the pulsing vein, I'm flooded with relief. I flick my tongue against his neck once and then sink my fangs in.

"Dragh!" he barks out, surging into me with such force I have to fight down a small scream. It's only the sweet-salty tang of his blood that keeps me seated. I let my body go limp, willing my muscles to stay loose as he starts pumping into me in time to my deep swallows. He grips my hip with one fist while his fingers keep dancing over my clit, and it's more than I can take.

When the first wave of pleasure hits, my eyes roll back in my head. I release my hold on his throat, drop my head back, and let out a throaty wail that surprises even me.

"Yes!" His voice is deep and gravelly. "Come for me..." He's still working his hips in slow, pulsing thrusts that make my brain want to shut down with the pleasure of it. I can't think clearly...until I catch a glimpse of his face and see the pallor of his skin.

*Fuck! What were you thinking?*

I never should have taken from him, knowing how weak he's been. His grip on my hip isn't as firm as before. Even his movements have grown sluggish.

Pulling his face into the crook of my neck, I thread my hands into his thick hair to hold him firmly. "Take from me," I tell him. I feel him take a breath, mouth moving over my skin, exploring. His teeth are not as sharp as mine – I've always

opened my veins for him – now I feel a sharp pinch as he bites down. The feeling is new. As a princess, I’ve always taken, and chosen when to give. How to give. I’ve never felt this before. Especially when I move, and he grasps me more firmly, holding my head in place as he begins to drink hungrily.

“Yessss...” I hiss. “Yes...yes...yes!” Sweet ecstasy fills me. I can’t tell if it’s coming from where his mouth is on my skin or from deep in my core. All I know is that it fills me. There’s no discomfort now when he rocks his thick cock deep inside me. It’s all just so fucking good.

When he lifts his head and captures my eyes, there’s a strange expression of wonder in them.

“So good...” he echoes my thoughts, then pulls my face down for a kiss. I taste my blood on his lips a moment before another shattering wave knocks the breath from me. It comes back in a rush that he catches with his mouth. Our desperate moans mingle, and then I know he’s coming too because I can feel every inch of him as he pulses and spurts inside me.

I’m panting like a marathon runner by the time his jerking movements slow to a halt.

“Vespyr...” He says my name like a prayer, staring at me. I gaze back at him through a glowing haze of lust and something else. Something I’ve heard of but never experienced. Something every one of my kind yearns for. The expression in his eyes answers mine, connecting, linking, binding. He pulls me hard against his chest and buries his face into my neck, inhaling as if trying to pull my scent into his pores. The gesture stirs something deep in my chest, catching at my heart. There’s a wonder in the sensation that rushes through me. Understanding begins to dawn.

*By Blood...*

We just forged a bond.

Vidarok

“I like you naked,” I tell her as I watch her move about the small room, her silken skin touched by the glow of the fire. I’m resting back on the small cot, still mildly surprised that it survived the force of our passion.

I don’t quite understand what just happened. All I know is that I never want to let go of this feeling inside me. It’s warm in my chest. Coiling into the steady beat of my heart like a pulse that was always meant to be there.

She aims a small look over her shoulder at me. It’s teamed with a little smile that speaks volumes.

By the Maker, she’s lovely. The curve of her cheek. The elegant line of her neck. The sweep of her chest from her collarbone to the tip of her nipple. She’s perfection.

“Is it always like this with your kind?” I ask. She presses her lips together, giving a tiny shake of her head. She hasn’t said anything since she slid from my body; a feeling that had pulled like a physical pain. I want to be inside her again.

*Fire and fury, Orc! Pull yourself together.*

“You should be resting.” She hasn’t addressed any of my questions, and that leaves me with more. “That was too much for you. I shouldn’t have—”

“I’ve never felt better.” It’s true. I feel like I’ve been touched by the sun. The only reason I’m still lying down is that my limbs have been filled with a delicious languor.

She's busy with something as she hovers near the fire, and I realize there's a rich aroma filling the small space.

"You're cooking." I'm surprised. "Where did you find food?"

"You had some provisions in your pack. The vegetables weren't very fresh, but they'll be fine in a stew." She stirs a battered pot that's hanging over the fire.

My nostrils flare. "Is that...?"

"Rabbit." She keeps stirring.

"How the hell did you bag a rabbit?" I'm still admiring the gentle curves of her body.

"I climbed into his head and told him to kill himself."

I choke. "You what?"

"No, you fool! I'm joking. One of your kinsmen had a bow. A full quiver, too." She stirs some more. "It was a clean shot. He never knew what hit him."

"You know archery?" I'm impressed.

"I'm a princess. We learn these skills. I can ride a horse, too; I rode a lot as a girl. And you should see me with a sword." She's unearthed some bowls and is ladling stew into one of them. She's familiarized herself with this place while I've been languishing.

*Hardly languishing. You were dying.*

Not anymore. I feel so alive. When she turns to come back and sits beside me, I light up.

"Come closer," I tell her, reaching for her arm.

She makes a tutting sound. "You need to eat." There's rich stew in the spoon she's aiming at my mouth.

"Pfft! I don't need food. I've already eaten." I stare at her neck, where my teeth have left their mark. It's already beginning to heal, which makes me frown.

A swirl of possessiveness builds.

I marked her. She's mine.



*Mine.*

The thought makes something inexplicable tighten inside me.

“Is something wrong?” She cocks her head as she stares at me. How do I tell her that it feels like the opposite? Everything feels right. The way she looks, the scent of her. How it makes me feel to have her close.

“I’m fine,” I say instead.

*What is going on with you, Orc?*

It’s not like I’ve never had sex before. Yet I’m acting like a love-struck pup. When she presses the spoon to my lips, I open them obediently.

*Fucking ridiculous!*

“You need nourishment.” She watches as I swallow. “My blood will help heal you, but you still need to eat food to build your strength.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“You had a spear through your chest!” Her lovely eyes are huge. “I thought I was going to lose... I thought you were going to die.”

“Takes more than a piece of steel to get rid of me,” I scoff.

“I’m not taking any risks.” She scoops up another spoonful. Her full breasts jiggle, the tips like ripe berries. I think I could get used to being an invalid if it was always like this. “You need to be well if we’re going to get out of here.”

“But you could go anytime.” Why she hasn’t left yet is still an enigma to me.

But instead of answering, she scoops up more stew and fills my mouth with it. We continue like this until the bowl is empty while I watch her in silence.

Eventually, she gets up abruptly. “You need to sleep.”

“I told you, there’s nothing wrong with me. I can get up.”

“You’re a terrible patient, you know that?” She waves the spoon at me. “I didn’t just spend the last two days worrying about you just to have you drop dead because you’re too stubborn to do as I say.” She’s tapping her toe on the floor, one hand on her hip...still stark naked. I try not to laugh. She’s fucking adorable. “Now lie back and close your eyes.”

I do as she says, fighting back a smile.

“Sleep!” she says firmly.

And I do.



The light is different when I awaken again. Stretching my arms over my head, I yawn deeply. Then sit up straight. I’m alone. Setting my feet on the rough floor, I rise and pad across the room. The cabin is basic. Just one room that serves as a kitchen, living area, and sleeping quarters. There’s nowhere else for her to be.

“Princess?” I frown as I look around. I’m answered with silence. She’s not nearby.

Pulling on my pants, which have been folded over a nearby chair, I go to the door and peer out.

Mountain crags tower overhead, and a lush green valley sprawls before me. The wooded slopes that cradle the cabin are littered with giant shards of shale and rock that seem to have tumbled down from above, scattered carelessly.

Orc territory.

The sight brings a pang to my chest. There was a time when I loved this world.

I still do. Even though I’m not wanted here.

Stepping out of the cabin, across the small porch, and onto the soft earth beyond, I walk a short distance away.

“Vespyr?” I call. There’s no answering call, and I walk farther. Instinctively, I keep an eye on my surroundings. There had been no warning when we were attacked before, and there’s no telling if it might happen again.

They know I’m here. I have no doubt about it. It’s odd to me that we’ve been left alone this long without incident.

“Vespyr?” I call again. The sound of running water catches my attention, and I’m drawn to it. It isn’t long before I find myself on the banks of a winding river. It’s cut a track through the valley, probably from its source in the mountains. When I get there, I stop short at the sight before me.

The princess is waist-deep in the gentle current. Her hair is wet, streaming down her back, the platinum of it darkened to dark gold by the water. I watch as she runs her hands down her arms and over her body. As bathing goes, it’s probably not very effective, but it definitely has my attention. My cock responds, too, straining at the front of my pants as I keep watching her. Yet again, I’m dumbstruck by how perfect she is. My chest tightens, and my breath hitches. When she turns around and catches me watching, I feel like I’ve been caught in the midst of a guilty pleasure.

“Hello, Orc.” She smiles, giving no sign of self-consciousness as she wades naked toward me. “Want to join me?”

*Oh, fuck yes!*

I nod and make my way to the water’s edge. I’m out of my pants in a flash and striding forward to meet her. She runs her eyes over me. A flash of something in them tells me she likes what she sees...and that pleases me more than I could have expected.

“You’re lovely,” she husks out as I reach her. Our bodies move together beneath the water, warm in contrast with the cool rush of it.

“Males aren’t lovely.” I shake my head. “*You* are lovely.” I graze her lips with mine. “Males are big ugly brutes.”

“You’re *my* big ugly brute.”

I laugh because that makes me happy. “You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“I’m not alone, I’m with you.” When she smiles, I see that she has dimples. I hadn’t noticed before. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, though.” Her breath is warm against my mouth. “I put a shield up.”

“Shield?” I’m kissing her again. I think I could do this for a lifetime.

“Yes.” She tilts her head away a little to answer. “Like the one I used to hide from you that day.”

“I remember that day,” I tell her. It feels like a lifetime ago. How much has happened since then. My heart was destroyed...and then she healed it. It feels like she owns it now somehow.

“I remember it too. You hunted me down.”

“Aren’t you glad that I did?” I slide my arms around her waist. The water bobs her against me, her skin smooth and warm against mine. If my cock was hard before, it’s like tempered steel now.

“I feel you,” she murmurs into my ear.

I chuckle. “Kind of hard to miss.”

“You don’t say.” She hooks her legs around my waist and slides her pussy along my length. Hot. Slick. I shudder. I shudder harder when she rakes her nails down my back.

“Do you like that?” she purrs into my ear.

I nod. “We do...my kind... Pleasure and pain are woven for us.”

“Like this?” There’s a glint of fang before she slides her mouth along the line of my shoulder, leaving a thin red line in its wake.

“Fuck!” I grunt, my hips thrusting forward. I grind against her mound, and she tilts her pelvis, angling it to rub her clit against me. I cup her ass in my palms, the water

making her weightless when I lift her. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I'm filled with a need that makes my head spin. I need to claim her. Own her. Make her mine.

"Mine!" I hadn't meant to say it out loud, but I don't care that I did. She doesn't seem to either. Her hand has slid between us, fingers curling around my shaft.

"Good..." I groan. My teeth meet her throat at the same time as she slides herself onto me. Faster this time, as if she knows what to expect and is eager for it. And I can't stand the fact that the previous mark I left on her skin is fading. My skin sings with the heat of her as her blood fills my mouth. She throws her head back and lets out a throaty cry. Our coupling is fast. Frantic. I can't get enough of her.

"Oooohhhh..." she keens as grinds herself against me, taking her pleasure as if it's hers by right. It is. I'll do anything to get her over the edge right now. Grasping a handful of her hair, I draw her face down to my shoulder and then hold my breath as I wait for the now-familiar sting.

"Fire!" I groan because that's how it feels. My blood boils with the lust that's built in me. My balls pull tight, and then I explode inside her with a roar that echoes around the cliffs that surround us.

"Vidarok!" she screams my name as her ecstasy meets mine halfway. I hold her so close I'm afraid I'll crush her, but she doesn't seem to mind.

"By Blood," she groans when she gets her breath back. I'm pressing kisses to her forehead, her eyelids, her lips. And then I gather her against me and rest my cheek against the top of her head.

She's bewitched me.

"Will you go now?" I ask, realizing there's nothing keeping her here anymore.

"Not without you." She glances away quickly as soon as she says it, and the silence hangs heavy between us. I tip her chin up with my thumb and finger.

“What’s going on here, Vespvr?” Whatever it is, it’s out of my control.

She shakes her head. “You won’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“I drank from you.” She looks at me. I nod. “And then you drank from me.”

“Yes.”

“And then we...” She drops her eyes to where we’re still joined beneath the water. “We’re bonded.”

“I know that.” My lips twitch.

“No, Vidarok. I mean, we are bonded. Mated.”

I frown. “Mated?” Understanding is beginning to sink in.

Could it be?

“You’re my mate, Orc.” Her eyes are fierce. “I’ve taken you as mine.”

“Mine,” I echo.

*By the Maker!*

“Yes,” she says. Our eyes are still locked. “We’re one now, Vidarok. There’s no leaving. No going anywhere without you. I’d have to be ripped away to make that happen.”

I’m speechless. My head reeling. Because as much as this should shock me, horrify me even...it feels so fucking right.

## Tariq

The sky is beautiful as I glide in sweeping arcs above the mountains. It's like looking through crystal waters, just a shimmering haze above the slate-gray crags.

This may not be my world, but I was born for this. Taking flight on the current, soaring with eagles.

I've been up here for hours now, and still, I'm not tiring. My wings catch the updrafts, so it's not necessary to use much energy to stay up here. That doesn't stop me from giving the occasional wing beat to lift or dip, though. It's exhilarating swooping and diving, then shooting up toward the clouds again. They're dotted above me, puffy white cotton balls that break the clear blue around me.

I take a deep breath. Even from up here, I can catch the scents of the life beneath me. Grasses, wildflowers, the creatures that live here. Deer. Hare. The occasional predator. I saw a pack of wolves earlier.

A few times, I've caught the scent of a lumbering Orc. Before I left the outskirts of Earomond Court, I'd seen many of them. Dressed in armor and wielding weapons, going through their paces on the training grounds. Males readying for battle.

Even though Earomond has no war looming, their troops stay in a state of readiness. It's the nature of these people to want to fight. Their soldiers are hardened. I respect that. It's the doctrine that I live by.

Some had looked up as my shadow flitted over them, the giant horned head, the powerful body, a wingspan the width of a small house. Not many are accustomed to interacting with dragons. Although their queen seemed quite comfortable with me. I hope she'll have educated them to our ways by the time she honors her pact with me. Once I've completed my mission, I'll breathe easy again, knowing I've secured her help.

Help to save my world.

The mountains of Earomond are lovely, but nothing like the Steel Cliffs of Morgameau. And until the threat is removed from there, I won't believe our land is safe. Many of my kind may not see tomorrow.

I fly farther into the mountains, a wall of obsidian rock standing defiantly against the bright blue sky. Even from a distance, I can see where the rock faces are pitted. Giant gouges show where the Orcs have mined them for steel, for ore, for the gems within them. They've left them scarred and damaged, which troubles me. It seems strange to destroy the source of your wealth; who knows what other treasures may lie within them? Although at home, our treasures are above the surface. Morgameau is rich with gold – its rivers glitter with it. It's the reason we're fighting for our lives now. The greed of our invaders. And I have no interest in it all. What good does gold do when your existence is threatened?

*None. No good at all...*

It makes my jaw clench. My grinding teeth make a sound that can probably be heard for miles. There's thunder in my wings. Lightning in the fire I can exhale. I am a force of nature.

It's why she picked me.

Bagrak. The Orc Queen. I sense she's wily beneath her veil of diplomacy. And the male who hovers behind her certainly is. Orok. The manchild who will be king now that his father has died. I wouldn't be my first choice, to be sure. But this isn't my world. Not my politics. That's for the Orcs to work out for themselves. But they're our best chance right



now. If it takes this small mission to save Morgameau, I'll be happy to do it.

*Seek out the witch. Get rid of her.*

I've faced tougher adversaries. And with the protection spell the Orc Queen cloaked me with, it should be a simple matter.

I pass snow-capped peaks, taking in the crisp air, letting it chill me. I zig-zag over gullies and crevasses; I doubt I'll find much here, but it doesn't hurt to be too careful.

Perhaps I *should* be careful.

What if the spell doesn't last? I've seen what magic can do. The havoc it can wreak.

*Flame take it!*

I can't allow fear to cloud my judgment; it will only slow me down. I have to focus on finding her trail, on seeking out anything strange or out of place.

Eventually, I find it. A faint sparkle in the air that shimmers at the edges of my vision.

Swooping low over the green valley that snakes between a pair of rocky ranges, I keep my eyes on the land beneath me, following the course of a river. And then I notice it.

*No shadow.*

Swinging back, I pay attention to the dark form that I leave on the earth below. There...there...there I see it.

And then it's gone.

*Well, hello...*

When I fly over this particular patch of ground, my shadow disappears. There's a glamor here. Queen Bagrak had warned me that I might encounter such a thing.

Paying closer attention, my nostrils twitch as I sniff the air. I pick up the nature smells, and something else. Like the air after a bolt of lightning has torn through it.

Now I sense it. A broad shield that forms a dome over a stretch of the greenery. I fly down and then stop above it. Hovering in the air, I dip slightly, extending my foot until my claws sink through what feels like a spongy membrane.

There's initial resistance, that I focus on getting past, and then my foot disappears.

*Hmmm...*

Sinking further down, I have to fight the urge to suck in a breath as I drop through it.

*The spell will hold. It will hold.*

Instinctively, I shut my eyes, but I force myself to open them again. The picture I see is identical to what I was looking down on before. Except now, there's a small cabin in the distance, a curl of smoke wafting from its chimney.

Clever.

On silent wings, I soar in diminishing circles, until I spot what I'm looking for.

*Ahh... There you are.*

I know it's her. The shimmer of magic around her is unmistakable. Although it helps to have the third vision that dragons are blessed with.

She's not alone, though. She's walking up from the river, hand in hand with a hulking form that I try to identify. Orc. But not. It must be the male that they told me about. I pay him no attention and home in on the woman. He's not my target. They made that very clear.

Years of practice have made my descent silent. When I swoop in, they don't notice me until the very last second. The male spins his head and gives a roar, swinging a huge fist at me as I shoot down.

It's no use.

Pausing for just a fraction of a second, my talons close around her waist. I take care not to apply too much pressure as I lift her. And then I swoop back into the air.

She screams.

And we're gone.

## Vidarok

“No!” I roar the word with so much force that the mountains reverberate. My own voice rings back at me in ever-diminishing echoes.

*No...no...no...no...*

The sound mocks me.

The shadow rushing along the ground grows smaller as I feel Vespyr being ripped from my grasp. I leap into the air, but it’s useless. It’s already too high.

*By the Maker, what was that? What the fuck was it?*

“Vidarok!” she screams. I squint against the glare of the sun, struggling to make out the details of the shape above me. It takes a while to focus, but when I do, my blood runs cold. The creature flying off with her is huge. Scaled. Giant talons have her in its grasp.

*Dragon!*

It’s been years since I saw one. I’ve never really interacted with them. All I know is that they’re not to be messed with.

I’ll mess with this one if I have to. If I get the chance, that is.

I reach for a heavy boulder nearby and fling it into the air, hoping to hit it.

“Dragh!” It’s pointless. The thing is oblivious to me. I may as well be an ant on the earth beneath it.

“Vidarok! Help me!” Vespvr’s frantic cries rip my heart into a million pieces as my helplessness begins to sink in. Her voice is growing more faint as the distance between us increases.

“Vespvr!” I shout back. I’m running now, as fast as my legs will take me. It’s not fast enough. By the time I crest the top of the hill nearby, the thing is vanishing toward the horizon; just a dark shape in the sky. So far out of reach that even in my desperate, enraged state, I know there’s no point in screaming.

Turning quickly, I race back to the cabin. It’s filled with the ghosts of our time here together. Holding her. Touching her. Loving her, even... I think. I can’t identify the emotion. All I know is that it hurts. More than anything I’ve ever felt before. My chest screams with it. The breath seems to have left my lungs, leaving me hollow with the need for air. For her.

I can’t breathe without her.

I throw on my clothes, then reach for my pack, sling my battle ax over my shoulder, and fasten it securely. Then I race for the door, kick it open, and rush outside, not caring whether it closes behind me. I’m not coming back.

The sky is empty when I scan it. But I know the direction it went, and I head off after it. Setting a steady pace, I cover the ground away from the cabin in a lope. Foolishly futile as it may seem, I’m going after it.

It took her. It took my mate.

And I will move heaven and earth to find her.

I start running.

Vespyr

I twist and writhe and twist some more against the huge claws that are fastened firmly around me.

“Vidarok!” I put every ounce of strength into the word. “Vidarok, help me!”

His eyes are tortured as he runs after us. But I can see there’s no hope. He’s becoming a speck in the distance as the beast flies off with me. I keep screaming until my throat is hoarse, my voice a pathetic rasp. And then I start lashing out at it, my fists flailing at its giant scaled legs. I rake at the talons holding me with my nails. I don’t leave so much as a scratch. Its skin – if you could call it that – is impervious.

By the time I look back again, Vidarok and our little haven are long gone. How? How did it find us? I’d put up a spell that should have hidden us, kept us safe. Yet it seemed to know exactly where I was.

The wind whips around me as I am being carried higher and higher away. I hate crying, but now tears stream down my face, and I can’t help but feel a deep sense of despair. The longer we are flying, the more distant Vidarok becomes.

*Pull yourself together, Vespyr!*

There’s no sense in losing my wits now. I can’t let panic take me. I have to think, to focus my thoughts upon the creature that carries me away. I take in the sight of it carefully, trying to remember any details that may prove useful later on.

It's enormous, its scales golden against the blue sky, its talons sharp – although it hasn't harmed me. I take some small comfort from that. Wings like giant sails stretch out from its body, flapping rapidly as they carry us forward. Its tail sweeps around behind us, guiding us like a giant rudder as we soar.

*Vidarok...*

My heart aches. My throat is tight. The bond is fresh, but already it's strong. Being torn from him feels like losing a limb. Sudden hate floods me as I turn my attention back to the dragon.

“Put me down!” I scream. “Put me down now, you fucking animal!” I beat its legs with my fists again, putting every ounce of my energy into it. It's like hitting a tree trunk. I'm panting, my knuckles are bloody, yet the thing doesn't even give a sign of acknowledging me. I may as well not even be there. Though it certainly knows that I am; it had to have taken me for a reason.

“Why are you doing this?” I yell. Maybe I can reason with it. Maybe I can get into its head.

Reaching out with my mind, I try to penetrate its thoughts with my own. I get a sense of something above me. Something that shifts and seethes, but beyond that, there's nothing aside from what feels like a dark wall.

Is it sentient? Can it think?

It has to. Every living creature can think. And that means I should be able to reach out to it. But this thing is impenetrable. Like pushing against an envelope of dark foam. I keep trying, my head eventually aching with the force of it.

My efforts are useless. It continues flying, the landscape beneath us rushing by in a blur.

I keep fighting until I have no strength left to struggle, and then I go limp, dangling from its giant claws.

Tears come again then, though I hate them. They're tears of anger. Tears of frustration. Tears of loss.

*Gone.*

It's all gone. The life I knew, with all that came with it. The throne I'd hoped to rule from.

But most of all, the mate I thought I'd found. Gone before I'd even had a chance to explore what it meant.

The fight goes out of me as my situation sinks in.

*Is it going to kill me?*

I don't understand this land or the things that live in it. For all I know, I've been picked up by some giant predator intent on eating me. The thought makes me shudder with horror.

But it seems impossible. The shield I'd put up should have kept out anything with malevolent intentions. We were supposed to be safe. Safe in our little bubble of bliss... pretending the world outside didn't exist.

*You're a fool, Vespyn.*

Of course, it exists. And every stupid choice I've made has led me to this point.

The plot against Bart. The insane alliance with Magnis.

*What were you thinking?*

I want to rage against it all, but I feel too defeated. I'm going to die here, on this foreign soil, I'm sure of it. Far away from my people, my family...my mate. It doesn't matter that it has only been days. He's woven into me. A bond forged in blood. To my kind, that holds weight.

When the beast begins to descend, I barely register it, until it drops without warning and my stomach lurches. The earth is rushing toward us so quickly that I squeeze my eyes shut. I half expect to feel myself smashing into the ground. But I don't. The creature sets me down carefully and then glides a few feet away, its huge feet touching down. In spite of its size, it's surprisingly silent.

I take a moment to orientate myself, finding my balance and looking around quickly. We've landed on the summit of a tall peak, a stretch of flat, scrubby rock that drops



off on all sides. I don't have to see over the edge to know that I'll be looking down a sheer drop onto ragged rocks.

I take in the animal that took me. It's as big as a house, covered in gleaming gold scales. As it turns on its haunches to face me, huge slitted eyes glitter from a giant horned head. I see a keen intelligence in the oddly blue depths. They glow a little, the color of the sky. Its face ends in a stubby snout with flared nostrils over a mouth large enough to swallow me whole. Thin lips curl back to expose jagged teeth. I shrink back as it folds its wings in onto itself and stalks toward me.

"G-Get away!" I snap stupidly because, obviously, there's nothing I can say or do to influence it. It keeps walking, its head snaking down as it gets closer. My eyes are glued to its rows of razor-sharp teeth.

"I said get away!" I repeat, my voice quavering. It takes another step forward and I turn and bolt. Summoning up my strength, I imagine myself as light as air, and then I'm floating several feet off the floor. I soar for a second, and then something shoots past me, hot...searing. A flame licks by me, stopping me short. I spin around to see smoke unfurling from the thing's nostrils. I try again, back into the air, then spin wildly as a ball of fire hurtles into the sky above me. It won't let me fly. I'll be burned to a crisp if I try, I know it.

*Run!*

I know there's no place to go, but I run anyway. I hurtle toward one edge, then stop short abruptly, my arms windmilling as I stare down, down, down into what seems like miles of nothing. I run in the opposite direction and meet the same scene there. There's no way off this mountain. Nowhere to run.

I turn to face the creature. It cocks its head to look at me as I dash around in a frenzy. Again, I get the sense of intelligence in those eyes, although this time, there's something else there.

Amusement.

The thing finds this funny. And that makes me spitting mad.

*Use your powers, you idiot!*

Straightening, I stand tall and glare at it, my hands on my hips, as if daring it to face me. I'm strong enough to form a shield around me, so I do, feeling the force around me gathering. That should hold it off...I hope.

Now that I'm less panicked, I take a moment to pay more attention to it. It's a dragon. I've never seen one, but I know that they exist. I've seen paintings in our palaces and in pictures in the books in our libraries. I never thought I'd see one in the flesh. And if I had, this isn't the way I would have hoped it would play out.

“What do you want from me?” I demand, my hands still on my hips.

It comes toward me again, so vast it only needs to take a couple of strides to close the distance between us. The ground shakes beneath my feet. It stops when it's close enough for me to feel its breath on my face; the breeze it makes is strong enough to blow my hair around. It snorts softly, and I cringe. I shouldn't be feeling anything through the protection shield, but I do. Just like I can't get into its mind, my magic isn't working on it. I'm defenseless.

*Don't eat me. By Blood, please don't eat me!*

My legs are shaking as I imagine those teeth ripping into my flesh.

Instead, it sniffs me, nostrils flaring as its warm breath huffs over me. The sound reminds me of the noise my horse used to make after a wild ride. It smells me from my head to my toes and then back up to my face. I'd imagined it would stink like rotting meat or some similar stench, but it doesn't. It smells like fire. Smoky and warm. It makes me shiver a little as the soft air grazes my skin.

My bare skin.

I'm still naked!

It hadn't even occurred to me till now. But then, why would it? I've just been snatched into the air and flown countless miles through the sky.

It bumps me with its snout, and I stumble back a step, curling my arm around my chest and covering my sex with my hand. I'm not normally shy, but now I feel vulnerable.

"What do you want?" I croak out.

There's no response...and why would there be? Do dragons even speak? I doubt it – even though I'm now convinced that this one is intelligent.

I stand trembling for what feels like a lifetime, still covering myself, waiting to die. And then it rises onto its hind legs. It towers over me to a monstrous height, its neck snaking, its head thrown back.

*This is it!*

I duck my head and shut my eyes, waiting for those teeth to close around me. I wait and wait and wait some more, trying to ignore the spine-chilling sounds of grinding and crunching that convince me it's preparing to devour me. When nothing happens after a while, I build up the courage to open my eyes again.

What I see has my mouth dropping open.

The dragon is gone, and what stands before me is a man. A very, very naked man.

Tariq

Interesting.

The queen hadn't told me much about the woman I had to take, apart from the fact that she's a powerful witch who plans to cause trouble for the realm. But now that I've given her a proper once over, what I'm picking up is vampire.

And Orc.

She must have been fucking the male who was with her when I took her earlier. That explains why he wasn't impressed.

"What? Where...?" She jerks her head around, looking about us. "There was a dragon!"

"Yes." I nod.

"You!" she snaps. "Who are you? What do you want with me?" She's trying desperately to cover her breasts and pussy and doing a very bad job of it. Those mounds are lush.

"Don't bother trying to fly again. My firepower isn't restricted to my dragon form. If you cooperate, you will be safe."

"Safe? Up here? With you..." she scoffs. "Why did you take me?" Now that she's overcome her initial fear, she's outraged. It's rolling off her in waves. She glares at me, and I get another of those strange prickling feelings behind my eyes. It's been happening since I took her. I suspect it's the magic Bagrak warned me of. I'm not sure what she's capable of, but

I'm glad of the spell. I imagine she's trying to get into my mind.

*Not on my watch.*

"It was my mission to collect you," I tell her. I don't owe her any explanations, but it seems churlish to be rude.

"*Collect me?* That's what you call it? I'm not furniture! You *stole* me!" She scowls at me. "Take me back. I want to go back!" She half yells the words.

I lift an eyebrow. "I don't think you're in any position to be making demands, do you?"

"Demands? These are my rights! Take me back, or you will be sorry."

"Really now?" I fight down a grin. She's funny. "And why would I do that after I just got you here?"

"Because...because..." she splutters. "Because I am a *princess!*"

"That so?" I fold my arms over my chest and run an eye over her. It's hard to tell what she is with her being stark naked and more than a little filthy. Though that's probably my fault. At least the filthy part is since I pretty much dropped her in the dirt. The naked thing is all on her.

"Do you have any idea who I am?" She gets right up in my face.

"Not a clue." My arms are still folded, so when she prods me in the chest, she has to get past my forearms. A nail pokes into me.

"I am Vespyn Lynede Bellingham, Crown Princess, sister to the Grand Overlord Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham, and I am next in line to the throne of Ryacyn!" She lifts her chin, her expression haughty. It's quite a feat since her breasts heave beneath her arm as she says it. I glance down. They're very nice breasts. She tightens her grip. When I peer up at her again, her eyes have narrowed.

"Princess, huh?" I don't bother fighting my grin now. "You don't look like a princess. You look like a naked

woman.”

“That’s rich!” She glares at me. “You don’t have a stitch of clothing on yourself.”

“I had to shift. What’s your excuse? Not everyone I *steal* runs around naked without reason.”

She appears sheepish for a moment – just a moment, though – before her expression turns haughty again. “You steal a lot of women, then?”

“Only when necessary.”

I run a fingertip down her bare arm. Her skin is like satin. Not that it matters. I don’t intend to touch her much. Just enough to get her out of here to someplace...

Someplace where? I hadn’t planned this far. I realize I’m still tracing her skin when she rips her arm away. “I was with my mate. And if he knows you’d laid a hand on me, he’d rip your throat out!”

I peer around us and then back at her. “When he gets here, I’ll start worrying about it.”

She tosses her head, and golden curls tumble over her shoulders to cover her chest.

*Pity.*

When I raise my hand, she snaps at me. Sharp fangs glitter. Definitely vampire. I wonder what she’s doing here in Earomond.

“Don’t you dare get any ideas!” she hisses.

“What ideas would those be, Princess Vespvr Lynede Bellingham of Ryacyn?” I take a wave of her hair and arrange it to cover her exposed breast. The golden strands feel like silk between my fingers.

Her brow furrows. “Don’t think you can get away with sullyng my honor!”

“Sullyng your honor?” I chuckle. “It seems to me that your halfling did a decent job of that already.” I take in a deep breath, my nostrils flaring. “You smell of Orc cum.”

Her cheeks flush – with rage, I imagine, but probably embarrassment, too. “He earned that right! He fought for it!”

“Did he fight you?” I cock my head.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but what are you talking about?” Her frown deepens. She adjusts her hands to cover herself better. It would be nice if she didn’t. I’m enjoying the view. But that’s not what I’m here for.

“Your Orc...did you fight him before you fucked?”

Her eyes flare. They’re the color of the sun. Quite beautiful, if I’m honest with myself.

“We are mated!” she snaps.

“Fine. Did you fight him before you *mated*?”

“What is it to you?”

“It’s an Orcish ritual. The females fight the males until one of them submits. It drives them mad with lust. Then they fuck.”

“I told you it was—”

“Sure. Then they ‘mate.’” I make air quotes with my hands. “The males find it irresistible. If you were fighting him like that, then he’d be horny as a young drake in rutting season.” I turn from her and stroll across the plateau. I look over the edge. It was a handy place to land while I figured out what to do with her. No one will bother us here, Orc or otherwise.

“Hah!” she snorts. “You-you...”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her, “it’ll wear off after a while.”

“Wear off?” she squawks.

I chuckle again. She’s definitely funny. “You didn’t know that?” I ask over my shoulder. “Trust me, Princess, you may have won his cock, but that’s no guarantee that you won his heart.”

“You disgust me!” Her voice drips with venom. “I don’t see how you could know a thing about it. You’re clearly

not an Orc.”

“I know because...” I start. Then I wave a hand. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

“It *is* important!” She stomps her foot. “Mainly because you’re wrong! It won’t wear off. He’s coming for me, and then you’ll be sorry. No, you won’t be sorry. You’ll be dead!”

“You tell yourself whatever you need to. It makes no difference to me.”

There’s a long silence as she takes that in. And then something in her expression shifts. She turns away and stares out past me to a spot that seems empty. Her eyes go blank. Something crackles. A blue haze forms at the point where she’s staring. I smell...rain on wet earth...and—

*She’s opening a fucking portal!*

“Oh, no, you don’t!” I bark, grabbing her shoulder a second before the air splits open beside me. “You’re staying right here with me.”

“Argh!” she yells at me in frustration, trying to twist away from me. Her chest is heaving. “You can’t keep me with you!”

“I can, and I will.” Although, where that will be is still a dilemma. *Flames take it!* Why didn’t I figure out what to do with her? She may be amusing, but she’s going to be a nuisance. And I have to get back. I’ve already been gone too long.

“You’re an idiot if you think you can simply tell me what to do. You can’t keep your eyes on me every minute of the day. As soon as you turn your back, I’m out of here.”

She makes a relevant point. Which is probably why the queen made me memorize a series of incantations when she gifted me with the protection spell that’s shielding me right now.

Muttering a string of Orcish grunts, I trace a series of symbols in the air in front of her. “By the binding of the witch,



I seal away your powers against me,” I end off.

I hope it works.

She gawks at me. “What was that?”

“A suppression spell,” I say. She gathers herself, and I feel that prickling in my head. “It’s not going to work. You can’t control me. And no more portals.”

She looks about in agitation. I can’t see anything, but I can feel a swirl of something in the air...and then she gives a furious little growl. Whatever she’s doing isn’t working.

“See. I told you. Now stop messing around. I have things to do.” My brow is furrowed as I ponder how to get around this issue.

*‘Dispose of her as you wish,’* the queen had said. I have a feeling that meant Bagrak wanted her dead.

I move her way again. She’s shooting daggers at me with her eyes. I have no doubt that she’d shove me off this cliff if she had the chance.

But there’s no way I plan to harm her. It wouldn’t be right. There is honor in my line...we don’t kill innocents.

I run an eye over her and purse my lips. ‘Innocent’ may be the wrong word to describe her. Still, we are not in battle, and she doesn’t appear to be a warrior to me.

Nope. I can’t set her free because if word gets back to Bagrak that she’s wandering around at will, the alliance deal will be off. I have to take her someplace she’ll be unlikely to be a problem. And from the looks of her, that might be a challenge.

“What are you staring at?” She juts her jaw out at me. There’s fire in her eyes. A tilt to her chin.

*Princess...*

Yes. I’ll buy that. Even naked, she’s just about arrogant enough to fit into a royal court.

Which gives me an idea.

I think I know where I could take her, where she'll not only be out of Bagrak's range but also under my control...at least for now.

I face her. "Right," I say firmly. "Let's go."

The Princess scowls at me. "Go where?" she demands.

I don't answer. Already, I'm gathering myself to start shifting. Her eyes fly wide as the transformation begins. Within seconds, I tower over her again. Though, to be honest, I was towering over her before. But now, in my dragon form, she's tiny beneath me.

"You can't just—" she starts to yell. Her words are cut off when I curl my talons around her waist and grasp her firmly. With a giant flap of my wings, I take to the sky.

She won't be able to cause trouble where we're going.

I hope.

There's only one way to find out.

Vespyr

I hate flying. I truly do. Well...not when it's under my own steam, but definitely when I'm dangling from beneath a filthy, stinking dragon.

Except he doesn't stink. And he's not filthy.

It doesn't matter, though.

It doesn't matter that beneath the rough skin, he's as golden as his scales...lean and strong and well-muscled. Nor does it matter that his eyes are as blue as the sky we're sailing through.

He is still a dragon, and I still hate him. He's an asshole. But I must admit, it's hard to deny the strength of his powerful body.

*By Blood! Must you think that way?*

We soar up higher until I can barely make out the ground below. There's nothing but sky around us and the sound of the wind whipping by. It's calming in a way, which I need now. My mind is racing.

I can't make him do what I want. I can't create a portal out of this place. And I can't escape his relentless grip.

The farther we go, the more twists and turns we make...and the less chance there is of Vidarok finding us.

*Vidarok.*

My heart aches. Pain twists and pounds in my chest like a living thing. I sink into the sensation, using it to fuel me.

I refuse to give in to fear, and the rage only fogs my head. But the pain... This pain will move me.

I stare down, taking in the changing scenery. There are mountains, of course. We've been flying over them for hours. But they're changing. Before, they looked like dark, jagged teeth piercing the sky, layered with snow and frosted in white, trees clinging to their sides in stripes of gray and brown.

Now, the mountains stretch out around us, blanketed in deep greens and blues, snow still touching the highest peaks. Below us, lakes and rivers sparkle in the sunlight, a patchwork quilt of colors. The air is crisp and clean, the scent of pine mixed with the distant aroma of wet earth.

I'm not really in the mood to admit it, but it's beautiful.

The dragon's wings beat a steady rhythm as we soar, occasionally gliding effortlessly as we catch updrafts. The wind whistles past me; at first, it was unnerving, but now I've grown used to it. Though my skin feels like it's been touched by ice.

As unlikely as it seems, I manage to doze fitfully, jerking awake whenever the dragon dips or swoops. It's during one of my waking moments that I spot a shape in the sky and realize that there's something heading across our path. It moves quickly, soon taking form. I recognize it immediately.

Another dragon.

I wonder if he's an asshole too. Maybe it's a characteristic of the species.

Moments later, yet another one swoops by, and then several more. Soon, the sky seems to be littered with them. When I peer about, I spot tall towers that the huge creatures are taking off from or sinking onto. The towers become more plentiful, and soon, we appear to be flying through a forest of them, soaring up into the sky, almost obscuring my view of the sun as we weave through them. Dragons fly in and out, and I can see people on rooftops – probably more like the asshole who is carrying me. Dragon-men, I guess.

As we go farther, I can make out a building that seems like a castle, surrounded by a massive stone wall topped with crenelations. Every few dozen yards or so, there's a guard tower with watchmen scanning the area below. More dragons strut along the wall, massive heads swinging from side to side as they keep watch over the lands surrounding the castle.

My dragon – *not* my dragon, but the beast who stole me – eventually slows down and starts to circle the structure, and I get my first good look at it. It's made from blocks of light stone that glint in the sunlight. Turrets jut into the sky while balconies set outside every window display colorful flowers spilling out of pots hung from the corners of them.

We alight in a central courtyard, and again, the asshole puts me down gently, hovering a little to give me a chance to find my feet before sinking onto the paving stones himself. This time, he's shifting into his human form as he touches down. Thick trunk-like legs transform into lean muscular thighs as he strides forward purposefully. Thighs that lead up to a beefy ass and broad back.

I watch, fascinated, as the rest of him changes, too, until the entire dragon has morphed into the shape of the man who infuriated me so much. All that remains of the creature is a light sheen of golden scales on his skin, which vanish as I watch them. There's a trail of ink that loops over his hip and upward – a tattoo of a tail that leads to the full body of a dragon sprawled up his back to his shoulders.

I stop myself abruptly because I realize that I'm staring. Once more, he's very naked. And again, so am I.

At the sound of hurried footsteps, I try to cover up quickly as a small group of men appear. It seems like a wasted effort since most of me is on full display, anyway.

“Sire!” One of them runs up to my captor, dipping low onto one knee and then rising. “We have been awaiting your return, my Lord. You bring good news, I hope.”

*Sire?*

I try not to let my mouth hang open. Two more men have arrived and are hovering nearby. Both stare at me with open curiosity, although the first one is focused on the asshole.

Sire...

*What the fuck?*

“Yes, good news, Grier,” he replies. He hasn’t looked at me since he landed, but he turns to me now. “But before we get into that, a robe for our...guest.”

Guest? Is he for real?

I lock eyes with the one called Grier, who finally acknowledges my existence. His expression shifts from indifference to appreciation as he takes me in, keen hazel eyes fixing on me.

Great. Another asshole. Maybe I was right about them. But something is different about this one. When I focus my attention on him, I realize he doesn’t have the same dark magic wall around him that I wasn’t able to penetrate with the asshole. I can pick up his thoughts as clearly as if they are my own.

He likes what he’s seeing – I don’t have to read his mind to know it, but I can see clearly that he’d love to run his fingers through my hair. He wonders if it smells like sunflowers.

*Excellent.*

I let my lips curl into a smile. And then I focus...I focus hard, visualizing exactly what I want. I may not be able to take on the asshole myself, but that doesn’t mean I can’t get someone else to do it.

Grier’s eyes go blank for a second, and then, without warning, he spins with a roar and charges. Fists raised, he crashes into the asshole’s chest, knocking him several steps back before he realizes what’s happening.

“Die! Die, you bastard!” Grier screams.

“Grier! What the fuck—?” He staggers away from him, fending off a flurry of savage blows. Grier keeps up the attack,

lashing out, trying to get his hands around the other man's throat.

Sadly – for me – he's no match. Within a minute, Grier's arm is twisted behind his back, and then he's face-down on the floor. He squirms and fights, but it's no use. Then the other two step in, grab his arms, and restrain him.

*Blood take them!*

I scowl.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the asshole yells. Grier goes still for a second and then stares back, horrified.

“My Lord Tariq...I...I...” He's shaking his head, searching for words. “I don't understand.” He seems dumbstruck.

The asshole – Tariq – turns to glare at me. “I'm guessing that was your doing? You got into his head and made him do it?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“By the Flames!” He runs his hands through his hair and then glowers at me again. “I think this was a mistake,” he mutters under his breath.

I snort derisively.

“Don't try that again.” He scowls at me.

“Sure. Next time, I won't *try*. Next time, I'll get it right.” I take in the other two men, sizing them up. They don't have the dark shield around them, either. One of them is pretty big; he might put up a better fight.

Meanwhile, Grier, still flat on the floor, appears crestfallen. “Lord Tariq, I don't know what to say. I just—”

Tariq holds up a hand, aiming a filthy stare at me. “It's not you. It's her.”

The other men eye me with trepidation. I smile back smugly.

“What...?” Grier frowns.

“Witch.” Tariq huffs out an exasperated breath. “I should have known this was a bad idea.”

“Witch?” Grier parrots. The other two exchange glances and then release him, probably realizing that their comrade was being influenced by me. Grier slowly gets to his feet.

“Witch!” I add. I can hear the contempt in my own voice. “I am *not* a witch.” What would give him such an idea?

“Right. You’re a princess.” He rolls his eyes.

“Princess?” It’s Grier again. He stares at Tariq and then back at me.

I dip my head in a gesture that’s as regal as I can make it, given that I’m still trying to cover my nakedness.

Just because I’m being forced to endure this indignity doesn’t mean I should lose my composure.

“Allow me to introduce Vespyr Lynede Bellingham, Crown Princess, sister to the Grand Overlord Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham; she is next in line to the throne of Ryacyn,” Tariq says drily, sarcasm dripping. He waves his hand in a mocking little twirl.

Grier’s mouth drops open.

“Don’t just stand there gawping, man!” Tariq snaps. “Give her your coat.”

Grier nods quickly, shucking out of his coat, stepping forward, and quickly covering my shoulders with it.

“My apologies, Your Highness. I had no idea.”

I incline my head in acknowledgment, pulling it around me. While Grier may not be as large as Tariq, I’m still swamped by the garment. It’s a relief to finally feel like I’m not on display. Not that Tariq seems to care either way. Nor does he seem aware of his own nudity since it seems like he doesn’t plan to cover up.

I really wish he would because now that I’ve finished taking inventory of his hard lean lines, my eyes keep drifting



to the neat golden triangle that frames his massive cock.

*By Blood!*

It's not as big as Vidarok's by any means, but still impressively sized. And it's a thing of beauty.

*Stop looking, dammit!*

Besides, cocks are seldom pretty. Except this one is! Perfectly proportioned, symmetrical, not angled oddly to either side. It rests between his thighs as if lying in wait.

*Vespyr! Really?*

I turn away, but not before he catches me staring. The asshole smirks.

"I think it's best if you stay in my quarters," he tells me.

"I'm not staying anywhere with you!" I snap.

"You don't have a choice," he replies. "Unless you want to just stroll through the castle dressed like that? It might not be safe."

I snort, but he has a point. I'm not stupid enough to believe him when he says it's for my own safety. It's clear that he doesn't trust me – I wouldn't either. I wish him ill.

"I don't care," I say belligerently, even though I doubt it'll get me anywhere. "I'm not staying anywhere near you. Let me go!"

"It's not up to you," he says, and there's something in his voice that tells me this negotiation is over. "You'll stay in my quarters until I say otherwise, and that's final!"

"I'd rather die!" I stomp my foot.

"That could be arranged."

I narrow my eyes on him. "Hah! If you were planning to kill me, you would have already done it by now."

"Don't try me. My good nature only stretches so far. And you are pushing the limits of it right now."

"Good!"

“By the Flames, woman! You are trying my patience!”

“My Lord...if I may interrupt?” Grier’s voice is hesitant. We both turn to him. I realize that the three of them have been following our conversation, heads bobbing from me to Tariq and then back again.

“By all means, your suggestions are welcome.” Tariq sets his jaw.

“I’d be happy to chaperone the princess – if she’ll promise not to er...you know...” Grier seems hesitant.

“Put a hex on you?” Tariq seems amused.

“Yes. That.” Grier is sheepish.

“I’m not making any such promises!” I toss my head.

“You don’t need to,” says Tariq. “I’m blocking all of your magic. It was stupid of me not to think of it.”

Before I can argue, he’s waving his hand in those odd little patterns again. “By the binding of the witch, I seal away your powers against *everyone!*” He lifts an eyebrow at me.

“That’s not going to work.”

“It worked for me.” He turns to Grier. “Take her to my chambers. Get one of the women to bring her some clothing. And don’t take your eyes off of her.”

Grier grins. “It would be my pleasure.” Now that his jacket is off, I notice he’s also lean and broad-shouldered. Rich mahogany hair brushes the collar of his loose-fitting white shirt. I imagine he has a lot of luck with the ladies.

He’d better not be getting any ideas.

I miss my mate.

I fight down the self-pity and open my mouth, about to tell Tariq where he can get off, when I realize he’s already walking away. I watch as he prowls off, the muscles of his broad back flexing. He doesn’t look back, and his message is quite clear.

I’ve been dismissed.

*Asshole!*

## Tariq

The circle of stones has stood for centuries beneath the old oaks. It's where we meet now, my senior council and I. When I arrive, each elder is standing beside one of the six giant granite chairs that surround the open space in the center. I step into the circle and wait for silence.

“We welcome King Tariq Firestarter,” our court secretary announces. “Welcome also to Timmir of the Dark. Welcome, Aidurn, Lord of the Marsh. Welcome, Zyduus the Quiet. Welcome, Bridrod Gentleheart. Welcome Nirem the Powerful.” He runs through the names of each elder in turn, waiting as each nods their head in acknowledgment. When he is done, he turns to face me as they all take their seats.

“I greet you, Elders,” I go through the ritual that has been repeated by countless generations before me.

“We greet you, King Tariq,” their voices answer me as one.

My traditional red cloak swirls around my legs as I look around at them; I'm never comfortable in clothing – even this – but sometimes it's necessary, particularly here in the Circle of Six. I dip my head, then address them. “I thank you for giving me leave to complete my tasks. I know that the threat on the frontline grows by the day. But I am pleased to report that talks with the Orc Queen went well. She has agreed to provide military support against our enemy.”

There is a murmur of approval.

“How much support can we expect, Lord Tariq?” Nirem asks.

“A full battalion will be at our disposal.” I glance over at her. “But there will be four more companies standing at the ready if we wish it.”

Nirem presses her lips together, but I know that she’s pleased. It’s more than we’d hoped for.

“Very good, my Lord. You have served us well.” Bridrod smiles at me. I can’t help smiling back. While Nirem is warlike, Bridrod is as gentle as her name.

Another voice breaks in – it’s Aidurn now. “And will they be able to get here in time? You were gone for almost a week, yet the Orc court is barely a two-day march. Has Queen Bagrak moved the headquarters of her army?”

“Nothing has changed. I was given a task in exchange for her allegiance.”

“A task?” Timmir asks. He’s leaning back against his seat, his hands clasped on his lap over a belly that’s grown a little round. It might be time for our Lord Timmir to join the fighting ranks again.

“The queen had a small problem she needed attending to that required some discretion.” I’m not sure how to phrase this because Bagrak hadn’t given me much detail herself. “They had business with a traveler on their borders whose companion was a threat that needed to be...removed.”

“Removed? But why would they need that?” Aidurn’s brow furrows.

“It wasn’t my place to ask.” I shrug. “It was a simple task, and it cemented the alliance, so I did it.”

“And where is this...companion you ‘removed’?” Bridrod seems troubled.

“She’s fine, my Lady. In my quarters as we speak,” I reassure her, thankful I can answer this honestly. There has been more than one moment when I would have quite happily abandoned the woman.

“Your quarters?” Aidurn raises an eyebrow at me. “What’s wrong with the guest wing?”

I turn to face him. The flagstones beneath my feet are well-worn from movements precisely like this. “It’s safer that way.” What do I tell them? “She’s a witch.”

“A witch?” Nirem’s voice is sharp.

“That’s according to Queen Bagrak. The woman claims to be a princess, but that is yet to be determined.” I feel my lips turn down at the thought of the female who has become a thorn in my side. “Vespyr Bellingham of Ryacyn, or so she says.”

“Princess Vespyr Bellingham?” It’s Zydus. We all turn our attention to him. The man seldom speaks, but when he does, it’s important.

“You know of her?”

“Her brother, Bartholomew Bellingham, seeks her. Quite anxiously, I’ve heard. There is a reward for her. A significant one. The vampires of Ryacyn are a strong nation with tremendous resources.” Zydus stops talking. It’s the most I’ve heard him say all year.

“A reward...” I repeat.

“You’re not thinking of claiming it, my Lord!” Nirem is unimpressed. “We have untold riches. It’s why the Horde continues its efforts to invade us.”

“I’m not interested in their wealth.” I rub my jaw. Perhaps the “princess” could be useful after all. “If he’s offering a rich reward, maybe he’ll—”

“My Lords! Sire!” a wild-eyed courtier interrupts me. We all spin to face him. “Forgive the intrusion. I am Daggert of the Wilds. I’ve been sent as a messenger to tell you that there’s been an attack. The Horde...” He stops for a second, catching his breath. “They’ve breached the outer boundary of the Eastern Front!”

“That’s not possible!” Nirem has shot to her feet. “I sent a squad there just yesterday. A team of my best warriors.”

The male turns tormented eyes to her. “Gone.” He shakes his head. “All gone. And Bellefont – the town there – razed to the ground.”

Nirem slumps into her seat, scrubbing a hand over her face. She’s bereft. I’m not used to seeing her like this. I turn away to give her some time to process this.

“Where are they now? The attackers?” I ask him.

“They’ve taken over what’s left of Bellefont.” He’s still breathless.

“And the residents?”

“Taken.” He lowers his eyes. “Those who survived are being held captive.

Dread swirls inside me. I stride in a circle, oblivious to the dappled shade of the green-leafed oaks. My cloak whirls with each movement.

“Then they’re as good as dead,” Timmir interjects.

I narrow my eyes at him. “We don’t say that until we know for certain.”

“And how do you plan to do that, Sire?” Timmir has definitely been spending too little time on the training grounds.

“We go in, Lord Timmir.” I raise an eyebrow when his eyes go wide. “The Horde has succeeded in taking too much of our territory already. It’s time to teach them a lesson.” I look around at the others. “We leave at once.”

Niren, who has composed herself, nods immediately. Bridrod and Aidurn exchange glances. “Yes,” Bridrod agrees, while Aiden pinches his lips and dips his chin.

“It pains me, but you’re right,” he says. “It’s been weeks since the last attack. We should have known they would be planning something. We can’t let them think we won’t retaliate.”

“You are right, Lord Aidurn.” Zydus is speaking again, which makes this meeting even more unusual. “We have to

stop this before it can escalate.”

I suspect it may be too late for that.

“But we can’t risk it! Not until we can alert Bagrak’s troops.” Timmir has paled. “If we send word, she can send her battalion. It’s the reason you went there, after all. So, we’d have support when the time came.”

“The time is now, Timmir. We won’t have the luxury of waiting. They may be feasting on the prisoners already.” It turns my stomach to say it, but I know that it’s true. The harpy-like creatures that plague us are flesh-eaters. And they’ve developed a taste for our kind.

“Please!” says Bridrod, looking horrified. “I can’t think about it.” She puts a hand over her mouth. I don’t blame her. I feel like gagging at the thought of what we’ll find.

“We need to gather our fighters. There’s no time to waste.” I’m leaving the Circle. The others rise as I do, falling in behind me. Aidurn and Niren are shoulder to shoulder. I can tell from the grim determination in her eyes that she wants vengeance. And Aidurn was born with a lust for battle. The others follow with less enthusiasm: Bridrod, who despises turmoil; Zydus, who approaches everything with caution; and Timmir, who’s simply a coward. If he wasn’t such a skilled tactician, I’d wonder why we had him in our Circle. I remind myself that everyone plays an important part. And now, my part is the most important one.

Repelling the enemy. Saving our people.

I’ve barely been back an hour, and already I’m going to battle.

It’s time to start some fires.



## Vespyr

“Well, look at you, all prettied up. You didn’t have to go to so much trouble just for little old me.” I’m seated on a sofa beside a window overlooking the central courtyard. There’s been a lot of activity down there, but I haven’t been able to make out what’s going on. There was a commotion several hours ago, with men and women rushing about, looking grim. Then, a few minutes ago, there was a roar overhead and then a flurry of wings, and the place was filled with dragons.

I hate dragons. Especially the asshole standing in the doorway right now. And make no mistake, king or not, the man is an asshole.

I smooth the fabric of my tunic over my knees. Grier found the simple white satin garment for me – it’s not fancy, but it will do.

“So, what’s the occasion?” I add. “Going somewhere special?” I rise to my feet but stay at the window. It’s clearly a man’s suite of rooms, dark-paneled with simple white accents; no feminine touches here.

“This is not the time, woman.” Tariq is smeared with mud and grime. He’s draped in a crimson cloak that’s charred and tattered. But beneath it, he’s naked – as usual – aside from the dirt...and what might be blood, though I could be mistaken. My nostrils twitch, and my mouth waters.

No. I’m definitely not mistaken. It’s blood. But not his own.

“Where have you been?” I don’t want to ask, but curiosity wins out.

He steps into the room and shrugs off his cloak, dropping the filthy red fabric unceremoniously on the floor. “We had an incident.” He’s terse, bristling with some sort of barely restrained emotion. His hands flex into fists, his muscles bunched.

I glance away, facing out toward the courtyard. I refuse to let him think I’m staring at him. I prefer the thickset beauty of Vidarok, anyhow. I miss my mate so badly it’s a physical pain. My chest aches yet again, but I won’t let the asshole see that I’m hurting.

“You’re not planning to tell me what it was about?” I aim the words over my shoulder.

He frowns at me briefly, then heads across the room to a doorway that I’ve learned leads to a large, well-appointed bathroom. A moment later, I hear water running.

“What are you doing?” I call after him, though I suppose it’s obvious. But what I want is for him to come back and tell me what the hell is going on.

The water keeps running. Steam wafts from the door that is cracked open, and along with it, a pine-fresh fragrance that reminds me of a forest.

It feels like an age before he re-enters the room, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. It’s more than what he normally has on, but somehow, the crisp white of it seems to accentuate every lean, hard line. Particularly the sculpted V that leads down from his hips. His chest is still damp from his shower, water glistening on his skin. Most notably, there’s a vicious-looking gash extending from his shoulder to his ribcage. More slashes mar his bicep and forearm.

“What happened to you? Are you hurt?” Not that it bothers me. He could drop dead for all I care. But again, I’m curious.

“There are matters at play in my realm that don’t concern you.”

“They do if...if you’re going to come in here and...and spread dirt everywhere,” I improvise. “You could be exposing me to germs!”

“What?” He’s looking at me as if I’m mad.

“I’m sensitive.” I inhale so deeply that my nostrils flare. “I am a princess!”

“So you keep saying,” he says drily. “Though I had no idea your kind were so frail. I’ll be sure not to bleed on you.”

“Good.” I purse my lips. “So why are you?”

“Why am I what?” He unwraps his towel from his hips and uses it to rub his hair dry.

*Not! Looking!*

“Bleeding?” I point at his chest. He looks down at it. The skin is torn raggedly. It’s not actually bleeding anymore, though. In fact, it seems as if it’s starting to heal.

He shrugs. “Got clawed.”

“I can see that. By what?”

“Something with claws.”

“By Blood!” I roll my eyes. “This conversation could be so much fucking easier!”

“Touchy, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t be if you’d just give me a straight answer.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “We had an attack on one of our borders. A town was targeted. Many of our people were slaughtered. We went to face the enemy. I got clawed. That’s it.” He shrugs again.

I stare at him. “Attack?”

“We are at war, Princess.” He turns from me and goes back to drying his hair. There are more slashes across his back, and now it’s clear to me that they are, indeed, claw marks.

“With whom?” I ask. I’m no stranger to battle, but I’m not one who revels in it – despite what my brother might think. It’s a means to an end when things become desperate. “Is your realm in trouble?”

“Yes,” he says simply. “It’s why you are here.”

“Me?” Now, my curiosity goes straight through the roof.

“You were part of the deal.”

“What deal?” I’m facing him now. Walking closer, no longer distracted by his lack of clothing. “What deal did you make that involved me?” My voice has grown strident. “Tell me!”

“The deal that means my people get Orc protection.” He flicks an eye at me and then walks away. I only realize that there’s been a knock at the door when he opens it, and Grier is standing there.

“Lord Tariq.” He nods. “You asked me to give you an hour to yourself.” He glances at me.

“Was that an hour?” Tariq raises an eyebrow, then looks at me too. “Somehow, it felt so much longer.”

*Oh, he’s so fucking funny.*

“Did she give you any trouble? While I was out?” He turns back to Grier, whose lips twitch.

“A little at first. But we came to an arrangement.” He looks at me again.

“Yes. I stayed in here, and you stood outside and left me in peace.” I glare at him sullenly. I have to admit, though, he did his best to be engaging.

Grier smiles. “I’m sure we’ll have other opportunities to get to know each other.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I mutter.

Tariq has narrowed his eyes on the other man. “Princess Vespvr is not here on a social visit, Lord Grier. You are to watch her, but that’s where your duties end.”

“Of course, Sire.” He gives a deep bow. “Are you ready to address the Circle?”

Tariq’s nod is curt. “I’ll meet you there,” he tells him. Grier gives another bow, smiles at me, and leaves. Tariq has reached into a large wardrobe and extracted another red cloak. I’m guessing he has a collection of them. But not much else. You’d think that a royal would have more decorum. And more clothing.

“But what about me?” I ask sharply. “You still haven’t told me what the deal was about. The one that gets you Orc protection.”

“That can wait. For now, you’ll stay here.”

“I’m sick of sitting around here! You can’t keep me locked up forever. I am—”

“A princess. I know.” He couldn’t be less impressed. “And you are now a princess who will stay right here for as long as it suits me.”

“Ugh! I hate you! You and your big, ugly dragon!” I fling my hands into the air.

“Oh, you’re breaking my heart.” He swirls the cloak and fastens it around his shoulders, tugging it to fit across the broad expanse.

“Take me to Vidarok, and all will be forgiven.” I clench my hands into fists – if I had my way, I’d be pummeling him with them. The man is infuriating.

“Why would I care about your forgiveness? And as for taking you back to your precious Orc... he scoffs. “Oh no, Princess. I’m taking you back to your brother.”

“Bartholomew?” I stare at him.

“Do you have another brother?” He’s heading for the door.

I run after him. “But you can’t do that!”

“Why not?” He throws over his shoulder at me. “I thought you’d be happy.”

Right. Like he cares.

“My brother wants to kill me!”

Something flickers in his eyes, then it's gone again. “I'm sure you're exaggerating. I've been told he's anxious to be reunited with you.”

“Because he wants to kill me!” How do I get this through to him? “He thinks...he thinks I'm sick. He wants to lock me up.” And give me a cure that will probably kill me. Certainly take away my powers. I can't have that.

“Sick?” Tariq frowns, pausing at the door. “You don't seem sick.”

“That's because I'm not!” Though, if I go too much longer without feeding, he'll probably have a very different opinion. “He's wrong. He's been bewitched by a Fae, and now he's lost his mind. Please! You can't take me back there.”

“I'm afraid you have no choice. Returning you will put us in favor with your king. Probably win us support. That's worth more to me than your family squabbles.”

“Why?”

“Because we need allies, and Ryacyn is powerful.”

“Hah!” I snort. “Good luck with that. It's not as powerful as it used to be.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means you'd have more luck turning to me for my powers.” An idea has just started to form.

“Your powers?”

“Yes. If you let me use them, I could help you.”

There's a moment – just a moment – when I think that he might actually be considering it. And then he starts to laugh. “Princess, you have no fucking idea what you're dealing with.”

He turns away, walks out of the room, and shuts the door behind him.

I can still hear him laughing as he walks away.

## Vidarok

Blood coats my hands as I stare down at the body of the fallen Orc warrior. His sightless eyes gaze upward at the slate gray sky, the last expression of surprise forever etched onto his face. My teeth grind as I look at him and then at the other two who had been with him when they attacked me. All scattered...dead. I'll leave them to rot where they lie.

“Dragh! Fire can take them!” I won't be grieving for this brute and his companions. I owe them nothing. They came to kill me. They failed.

Or, more accurately, Bagrak failed. But it won't be the last time she tries this. She won't rest until she ends me. I've always known that. It's why I left Earomond and why I didn't want to return here. That, and the dark memories this place brings.

I glance down at the dead Orcs again. It was stupid of them to cross me here. The mountains provided me with the advantage of higher ground as I spotted their approach. I made quick work of the hunting party. But that's no guarantee that the next one won't succeed. I should leave this place.

But I can't. Not while Vespyr remains lost to me.

*Vespyr!*

If I could get my hands on the winged devil that took her, I'd tear it apart.

By the Maker, it hurts. I realize that I've been rubbing my chest without thinking. The pain there bothers me more



than the gashes left by the Orcish swords. Those will be gone in a day, but this pain left by her loss is something deeper. I don't fully understand the bond that we forged, but it's part of me now. Something primal that burns in my veins, unfamiliar but undeniable.

*Mine!*

Her eyes, her scent, the way she feels against my fingertips... She is meant to be by my side; of this, I am certain. I must save her.

But I can't do that by traveling through Earomond. If I'm killed here, I'll never get to her. And I don't want to think about what that might mean.

She may be dead already.

*No!*

I won't allow myself to believe that. If the dragon wanted her dead, it would have done so. It had some other purpose for her, and I can only pray that it means she's being held somewhere.

I'm sure she is. Another reason that I haven't given up hope is that I can feel her. A pull that keeps me moving. But it's a pull that's taking me through dangerous territory.

I reach down, wipe the blood off my ax on the dead Orc's tunic, then turn away.

I survey the rocky slopes around me. If I continue on my path, I'm going to pass too close to the seat of Earomond's rule. Too close to Bagrak and certain death.

*Be smart, Orc.*

I know what I should be doing...what the wise thing would be. But I don't want to acknowledge it. The wise path is to go for help. There is a gateway from Earomond that leads back to Ryacyn. I have to go there and tell Lord Bellingham and Lady Aurora what has happened.

*Put your damn pride aside!*

There's no shame in it – we all knew it would be a dangerous task. My Lady will help me.

Or will she?

It's hard to forget that Vespyr tried to harm her. But she wasn't in her right mind. They know that. The Curse has affected my mate. Things will be better after she's cured. The king and queen will understand that.

*Yes, they'll help.*

Bartholomew wants her back. He cares for his sister. Her fears that he'd hurt her were driven by her madness. She doesn't have to suffer that fate anymore. There's a cure.

And their magic will help me pick up Vespyr's trail where my senses failed me.

With hope rising in my chest, I turn from my path and pick a new route toward the hidden portal that leads back into their world. Back to friends who may provide the key to finding my mate.

With allies at my side, I will scour every corner of this world and the next until Vespyr is safe in my arms once more.

The earth feels solid beneath my surefooted stride now that I have a firm plan. The blue sky, the soaring cliffs... somehow, they give me the sense that I'm doing the right thing.

*Hold on...I'm coming...*

Once I have my mate back safe, nothing will keep me away from her side again.

## Tariq

Once again, I'm facing the Circle of Six, and this time, they're more stony-faced than before as I survey them. Nirem is fierce as always, her angular features set in determination. While the others have washed off the filth of battle, as I have, Nirem remains dusty and bloody. She'd stayed behind after we'd left, her dragon hovering over the wreckage, seeking out survivors. It will be a long time before she recovers from the pain of the fighters she lost there. Who could blame her? She feels responsible. As leaders, we all do.

Gentle Bridrod offers an encouraging smile while Aidurn and Timmir regard me more warily. And Zydus, as usual, is unreadable.

"Let us discuss the events at Bellefont," I say grimly. I speak quickly and without emotion. I don't want to dwell on the devastation we found – homes charred, corpses littering the streets. The prisoners we managed to free told of women and children slaughtered without mercy. Burned alive or worse.

Eaten.

It makes me sick. Rage simmers inside me as I speak.

"I think we made our message clear." Nirem's lips twist into a humorless smile. We dealt the enemy a harsh blow in retaliation, driving them back for now. But it wasn't enough. It will never be enough to avenge the loss of all those lives.

When I finish speaking, the Elders are silent, digesting my report. Nirem's fists are clenched, her jaw tight.

Finally, Bridrod speaks up. "We grow more vulnerable by the day. This cannot continue."

Murmurs of agreement ripple around the circle. Now is the time to tell them of my plans for Vespvr.

"I may have a solution." I look around at them, seated in the shadows thrown by the mighty oaks in the moonlight. "The vampire princess being held in my quarters – she is the sister to Overlord Bartholomew Bellingham, ruler of the vampires of Ryacyn."

"Yes." Zydus nods. He was the one who told us, after all.

"I plan to return her. Not for the reward." I shoot a glance at Nirem. "I think that this will open diplomatic channels with the Vampire King. He's neutral in this war, but the safe return of his sister may win his favor.

"He could be a strong ally. The vampire forces would bolster our numbers considerably," Nirem remarks, looking thoughtful.

Zydus nods again. "And he brings a new force to play now that he has mated a Fae royal. Teamed with Lady Aurora's warriors, they could turn the tide for us."

The others voice their assent. Vespvr may prove useful after all.

"Then it's decided," I say. "Once we have cleared the threat and secured the Eastern Border, I will take her to Ryacyn."

"Can't we send her with an emissary?" Timmir asks. "You've only just returned, and as you can see, we need you here."

"I appreciate your faith in me. But this is a negotiation that must take place face-to-face." Frankly, I find the demands of my throne to be onerous. I'd rather be fighting. But being

firstborn leaves this weight on my shoulders. Even though I know there are others who'd gladly take over.

It's my duty to bear.

Bowing in farewell, I take my leave of the Circle and make my way back to my chambers, satisfied with their response. We cannot afford to turn away potential allies, no matter how far I have to go to secure them.

"Sire! I'm so glad you're back. I didn't want to interrupt you in the Circle." Grier's tone is tense when I find him waiting anxiously outside my door.

"What is it?" I'm exhausted. The only thing on my mind right now is sleep.

"Sire, the princess...she is unwell," he says worriedly.

I stride past him into the room. Vespyr is sitting listlessly by the window, her skin so pale it's nearly translucent. Her eyes are sunken, and her cheeks hollow. She rises unsteadily, wavering on her feet. Was she like this before? I was too distracted to notice.

"You look terrible." I frown.

She narrows her eyes. "How kind of you to notice."

"What's wrong with you?" I ask gruffly, ignoring her tone.

"What do you think?" In spite of her poor state, she's belligerent. Frankly, I think she'd have to be dead before her attitude adjusted.

"I'm not a mind reader. Spit it out."

"I'm weak. I haven't fed." Her words come out raspy.

Dammit. Am I supposed to think of everything in this place? I turn to Grier, annoyed. "Arrange for a meal to be sent up." He nods quickly, about to leave the room, but stops when she continues.

"That's not what I meant. I need blood." She's still belligerent.

Grier's eyes widen.

*Ah. Of course.*

I've never dealt closely with vampires before. It didn't occur to me that she would need sustenance of a different kind.

*Stupid.*

Grier steps forward eagerly. "My Lord, if I may... It would be an honor to offer myself to the princess. To let her feed..."

"What?" I can't understand what would make him volunteer to do this.

"I believe that..." He clears his throat. "I have been told that to have a vampire feed from you can be..." He doesn't look me in the eye. "Interesting."

*Interesting?*

What the fuck is he talking about?

His words spark an unexpected flare of irritation in me. "No. I will provide for her."

Before Grier can respond, I grasp Vespvr's arm and guide her toward the window seat. She collapses onto the cushion, glaring up at me defiantly. Her bravado doesn't disguise her frailty.

I extend my wrist to her pale lips. "Drink."

"No. Anyone but you." She pouts. But hunger flares in her golden eyes.

"Do it, you impossible female!" I hold my wrist closer. Even I can see the tracing of veins beneath the skin. Her throat works as she stares down at them.

"Fine." She takes my arm in both hands, lowers her head, and bites down. I grunt at the sharp sting. And then warmth blossoms inside me as she begins to swallow. She moves closer, grasping my hip, her fingers warm on my skin.

Pleasure winds through my veins, coiling hotly in my groin. I've never experienced a sensation like this. Unthinking, I slide my free hand into her silken hair, cradling her head as she feeds.

When she finally releases me, I'm breathing heavily. Our gazes lock.

*By the Flame, what just happened?*

I can't identify the feeling; all I know is that something powerful is passing between us. For a moment, I see past her prickly exterior. There's passion there. And an odd vulnerability that draws me.

Then she tosses her head. "Don't get any ideas. I have a mate."

I snap back to myself, dropping my hand from her hair. "Of course you do. Your halfling Orc who's coming to tear my throat out."

"He will do it when he finds out how you've pawed at me!"

"Pawed at you? As if I would ever desire you," I scoff.

She makes a derisive sound, her eyes narrowing. "You may try to deny it, but I know what I felt." She stands and takes a step away from me. "I'm not some silly plaything for you to toy with. You may have taken me against my will, but that doesn't mean you can treat me like your property."

"Actually, that's exactly what it means." I fight the urge to rub my thumb over the two puncture marks on my skin. They're still tingling. Suddenly, I'm glad I'm still wearing the cloak of the Circle. I use it to hide my stiffening cock.

*Flames! Enough!*

I'm not going to let her see how she's affected me. But something has shifted between us. I feel it in my core, even as I fight it.

"You're an asshole," she mutters.

“And I’m the asshole who will tell you what to do until I deliver you to your brother.”

“I told you that you can’t do that!” she blurts.

“What part of ‘I will tell you what to do’ is unclear to you?”

“The same part that’s unclear to *you*.” She huffs. “The part where I won’t do it.” She’s glaring at me balefully, and it occurs to me that the frailty that had been there before is completely gone now. Fire fills her golden eyes, her hair swirling about her shoulders as her chest heaves. She folds her arms against it, plumping up her breasts. I doubt that’s her intention, but I can’t take my eyes away.

*What the hell are you doing, man?*

“Excuse me!” She clears her throat, an exaggerated sound that’s designed to get my attention. I snatch my attention away from her beautiful tits.

“You’re going back to your brother, and that’s final.” I get back to the point. “Or the next time you get a drop out of me, you’ll be crawling on your knees begging.”

For a moment, the image of that distracts me.

I take a deep breath, trying to regain my sense of purpose. No beguiling vampire princess will sway me from that. I have a realm to protect, an enemy to defeat. I don’t have time for distractions.

“But—”

I take a step back and gesture for her to do the same.

“We can continue this discussion another time.” My voice is gruff. “There’s a second bedroom in my suite. You can sleep there for now. Just stay out of my way. I don’t have time for more of this.”

She makes a furious little sound, but I turn away from her, determinedly focusing on the task at hand.

The only thing that matters is defeating our enemy. Her only value to me is as a pawn to win her brother’s allegiance.



If I have to feed her to keep her alive until we can take her there, I'll grit my teeth and tolerate it.

*Tolerate it?*

I snatch my hand away from where I'm tracing the marks she left on my skin. At least now that I know what I'm dealing with, I'll keep her at arm's length when I have to do this again.

Ignoring her, I stride back to the bathroom and prepare for yet another shower. This time, when I turn on the faucet, I make sure that the water is ice-cold.

## Vespyr

The halls of the castle are growing familiar to me now. It's been a week, so it's hardly surprising.

The walls are made of solid stone blocks, interspersed with banners and tapestries depicting brave battles and epic victories – mainly featuring fire-breathing dragons. No surprise there. Intricately carved wooden doors lead to various areas of the castle, each displaying unique designs and detailing. Torch-lit sconces line the walls, providing a warm glow to the corridors. It's like something from hundreds of years ago – though these dragons seem a little archaic, in my opinion. I guess it has its own brand of charm. If you like that sort of thing.

“Would you like to take a walk in the gardens?” Grier asks. He's at my side. He's always at my side. It's become clear to me that he's not actually a companion. He's more like a chaperone – someone to make sure I toe the line.

“I've been to the gardens today.” I'm so sick of fucking flowers.

“How about the stables?”

I brighten at that. I had a horse as a girl. A wild beast of a thing who broke my arm at least once, but I loved him all the same. “Yes.” I nod, not resisting when Grier slips my arm through his as he falls into step beside me. Aside from that moment when he'd been keen to let me drink from him, he's been the soul of discretion. Perhaps because Tariq has made it very clear that he's taken on that role.

Every evening at sundown, he's in the room presenting his wrist. There's been no repeat of that first moment where he'd touched me. Now, it's all business.

Suits me fine. The man's still an asshole.

Which is why I'm surprised when I hear myself asking, "What's Tariq up to today?"

"Our king is leading a patrol along the frontlines," Grier says, taking measured steps as we head to the paved walkway that leads to the large stone barn at the end of the gardens. Already, I can smell the heady mix of hay and horseflesh that feels a little like home.

*Home.*

I have no home.

"He does that a lot." I focus my attention back on Grier to stop my mind from leading down a melancholy road.

"We're at war, Princess Vespyr. Sadly, it's necessary to keep an eye on these things."

"Yes. I've heard this being spoken of." Though only by Tariq. He doesn't let me interact with anyone other than Grier and some of the maids. I don't know why he's so paranoid. It's not like I can use my powers right now.

That doesn't mean I haven't tried. No luck. I'm stuck.

As we walk, I notice that the air is scented with lavender, and for a moment, I'm sorry I didn't appreciate our gardens back home more.

There's that word again. Home.

I miss my brother. The life I had.

Could I have been wrong about believing we had to fight to get our power back? It all seemed so clear back then. Now it doesn't.

But I miss Vidarok most of all, which still amazes me, considering how little time we spent together.

It's the bond. I want my mate back.

“Who are the dragons at war with?” I ask out of the blue. I have to distract myself from the thoughts that are threatening to bring me to tears. I’m not like that. I don’t cry over every little thing. Not since my parents left us.

*Died, Vespyn. They died.*

“The Horde.” Grier’s answer refocuses me.

“What’s the Horde?” I don’t turn to look at him as I ask it. We’ve just walked into the barn, its roof high and airy above us, supported by heavy wooden beams. A row of heads and ears turn in our direction. A soft nose with flaring nostrils extends to me. I stroke it.

“An army of winged beasts that descend like a flock of giant bats.” He grimaces. “Except with arms and clawed hands and misshapen legs. And their faces...” He shudders. “They look like they’re permanently screaming.”

“You mean like harpies?” I glance at him, then turn back to the velvety muzzle beneath my fingers. The horse seems curious about me.

“Yes. Just like harpies. That’s exactly what they are.” Grier nods.

I wrinkle my nose. “I’ve never seen one. Just read about them in our library. Pure evil.”

“That is accurate.”

“So why are they at war with you?” I move on to the next horse, smoothing its forelock away from its liquid brown eyes.

“Same reason as always. Land. Power. Wealth.” Grier shrugs.

“Wealth?”

“Precious stones. Gold. Untold wealth.” He steps up next to me. “Our world is rich with it. It spills out of our rivers.”

“Is that why they glitter?” I remember flying over them. There’d been something unusual about the landscape

beneath me.

“Yes.” Grier nods again, his lips pressed in a thin line. He has a concerned expression on his face, and it’s clear he doesn’t want to talk about this any further. But I’m curious, so I press on.

“What are they after? What do they want?”

He sighs. “The Horde wants domination, pure and simple. They’re power-hungry and ruthless.” He pauses for a moment before continuing, “They see our land as easy pickings, and they won’t stop until we are destroyed.”

“But I don’t understand. Your dragons...they’re huge. Strong. Can’t you fight them off?”

“There are not as many of us as there once were, Princess.” His expression darkens. “And even fewer now. The Horde descends in huge numbers, and they attack without mercy. Whole families. Children...” He trails off.

“That’s horrible.” I haven’t felt this way for another kind before. My priority has always been my own people, and now, it occurs to me that I’ve been narrow-minded.

“It’s not just that,” he goes on. “They don’t only kill their victims. They feed on them.”

I spin to gape at him. “Like vampires?”

“Like animals.” His lip curls. “They devour their flesh.”

“By Blood!” I’m sickened. As vampires, we take what we need, but wanton killing is unusual.

Except for those like Magnis.

And the rest of the Cursed. Except me. I’m not like that. I’m really not!

My hand pauses against the silken coat of a big chestnut horse, who nudges me. I continue stroking.

“I’m sorry, Princess. I can see that I’ve upset you.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that.”

Well, maybe it is. I may have threatened war, but murder...slaughter...

I could never.

Magnis wanted it; he dragged me into his insanity. God, what a fool I was.

I rub my eyes with one hand.

“Forgive me, my Lady.” Grier is still convinced that he’s the reason I’m upset. His hand is warm on my shoulder.

“Well, what have we here?”

I spin to face the new voice. “You!” Grier removes his hand quickly. Tariq is striding through the stables toward us. And I’m relieved to see that, for once, he’s fully clothed. “I thought you were out with a patrol team?”

Grier opens his mouth as if to say something, but I step past him.

“Not today,” the asshole responds. His golden hair brushes the top of a dark, collared shirt. It fits him snugly. He’s in breeches, which fit snugly, too. *Very* snugly. It’s impossible to miss the impressive bulge there. I drop my eyes quickly to knee-high riding boots, polished to a high shine.

By Blood, he looks good.

“Going for a ride?” I ask unnecessarily because, obviously, he is.

“Just got back, actually.” There’s a prancing black beast being led into a stall behind him. If it could breathe fire, it probably would...but then again, that’s what Tariq does.

“Smart thinking.” I try not to retreat as he prowls closer toward me. “You’ll be coming up to me soon.” The sun is beginning to sink below the horizon.

“Will I?” His lips curve up in a cheeky grin. “I think I’d like that.” His eyes twinkle.

*Well. This is...new.*

I cock my head and frown at him. “Really? I thought you hated it.” Frankly, it’s safer if he hates it.

He stops in front of me, and I have to tip my head back to look into his face. “I can’t imagine hating anything about such an enchanting creature.”

*What?*

I blink in confusion.

What happened to the asshole? Is this some sort of ploy? Whatever he’s trying to accomplish, I’m not buying it.

“Enchanting creature? What happened to ‘infuriating female’?”

He glances about. “I don’t see one around, do you?”

I’m suddenly aware of Grier stepping up closer. “My Lord Turin, allow me to introduce Princess Vespvr Bellingham of Ryacyn.” He gives a sweeping bow and then turns to me. “My Lady...His Highness Lord Turin, the Crown Prince of Morgameau.

My eyes bug out. I literally feel them do it. “I...I...”

“Mistook me for my brother.” Turin chuckles. “It happens a lot.”

“Brother?” My mouth is opening and closing so much that I feel like a fish out of water.

“Twins, actually. He beat me into the world by less than five minutes.” His lips twist a little. “Five minutes too late for me. It won him the throne.”

“I...um... I’m sorry?” I’m not sure what I’m apologizing for – the fact that I muddled them or that he didn’t get the throne.”

“It’s nothing.” He waves a hand, then reaches for mine, drawing it up to his lips. “It is a pleasure, my Lady.” His mouth is warm against my skin. He raises his head but doesn’t release my fingers.

“Princess Vespvr is a guest of King Tariq, my Lord.”

“Is that so?” His smile is wry. “Not surprising. He always gets the lucky breaks. How long will you be staying for, Princess Vespyr?”

“Not long, if I can help it,” I mutter, pulling my hand from his grasp. He cocks his head curiously. I’m not sure how to explain my situation. “Your brother has business that involves me but hasn’t seen fit to share the details.”

*Because he’s an asshole.*

“That figures.” Turin rolls his eyes, and I gather that he knows exactly what I’m talking about. “He can be...tricky.”

Tricky? “Fucking impossible” would be a better description.

“Yes,” I say instead. “So I might be here for some time.”

Not if I can help it, though.

“Then we may have more opportunities to spend time together.”

“We may.” I dip my head, even though I have no idea what tomorrow may hold.

“I will look forward to it, Princess.” His eyes gleam warmly. He’s so different from his brother that I can’t believe they share the same DNA. “But now, I must leave you.” He glances over his shoulder. “My horse must be seen to. He’s particular about who he allows to groom him.”

I find that quite charming. A man who’s not afraid to get his hands dirty. Not to mention that he’s fond of animals. And hot as hell. If he cooks, starts kissing babies, and does charitable deeds, then I’ll know he’s too good to be true.

Not that any of it matters to me. I have a mate. I won’t be content until I can get back to him.

“Well, goodbye then,” I say. “It was nice to meet you.” I’m surprised to realize that it actually was.

“Likewise. I eagerly anticipate our next encounter, my Lady.” He touches his fingertips to his temple in a joking



salute and then turns on his heel.

I watch him leave.

Prince Turin.

Tariq has a charming brother. Who probably wants the throne.

*Now that's interesting...*

## Vidarok

I bow my head and wait for the fallout. “I lost her, Sire,” I repeat. I’m on bended knee in front of them. There’s a long silence. I grit my teeth because I know I deserve some sort of sanction.

None comes.

“You look like you’ve been through hell, Vidarok.” Aurora has risen from her seat and is walking around the heavy oak table toward me. She rests her hand on my shoulder. “You need to rest.” She looks over at the king. “Don’t you think so too, Bartholomew?”

He nods. “A terrible ordeal.” But when he rubs his forehead, I can see that this is a blow to him. They had faith in me.

“I can find her again. I assure you of it, my Lady.” I raise my eyes to the queen. She squeezes my shoulder.

“I really think you should stand up, Vidarok.” Her smile is gentle. “You’re no good to us down there.”

“I’m no good to you anywhere,” I mutter. I can’t forgive myself for what happened. If only I’d been more vigilant. More watchful. But I was too consumed by lust to have eyes for anything other than Vespyr.

I can’t tell them that now. I don’t even know how they’d feel about it. With nothing but death waiting for me at Earomond, I’ll only ever be the captain of the Queen’s Guard. Not the royalty that Vespyr deserves.

I stand, but I know that my shoulders are slumped.

*You're pitiful, Orc.*

But I can't help it. I've failed my mission. I've disappointed my queen. And worst of all, I've lost my mate. This is not a day for celebrating.

"Vidarok!" Aurora's voice at my side is suddenly sharp. "You'd better not be moping!" Gold bracelets jangle as she gives me a firm shake. "We can find a way to fix this."

"Of course we can," Lord Bellingham adds. "My sister may be dangerous, but from the sound of things, that may be an advantage to her right now."

"Of course, Sire." I try to smile. I can't think of any advantages to this situation.

"You said a dragon took her?" Aurora walks around to lean against the table in front of me as she faces me.

I nod. "Large. Golden. I'd recognize him again if I saw him."

"Well, that's positive news – being able to describe him to others will help. Not to mention that dragons are peaceful... unless crossed, that is."

"You are right, my love," the king says. "Of course, knowing Vespyr, she's probably crossing them as we speak."

Aurora stifles a smile. "You're right. Holy hollyhocks, but your sister has a knack for ruffling feathers!"

I try not to growl, but a small sound breaks free.

"I'm so sorry, Vidarok." Aurora is immediately apologetic. "This is no time for joking. Whatever... disagreements Vespyr and I may have had in the past have no bearing here. She is family." She aims a tender look at her husband. His expression in response is equally tender. There is so much love here. It makes my heart hurt. And makes me all the more determined to get my mate back.

"The princess is not the same person, my Lady." I look up at my queen. "The madness has left its mark, of course, but

beneath it, she is good.” I watch as they exchange glances. I hope they’ll believe me. Especially after all that happened. There’s no denying the upheaval Vespvr caused. The threats of war...the threats in general. She tried to lead an uprising against Bartholomew.

“We have no intention of holding any of that against her, Vidarok,” the Overlord assures me. “We want her home safely. Once she’s been given the cure, she’ll be welcomed back with open arms.”

“And that will make her well again?” I’m still worried about what Vespvr had said. About how the cure could kill her. “She’s afraid that it will do her harm.”

“I have taken it myself, Orc. You know this.” Lord Bellingham fixes me with a firm stare. He seems none the worse for it. I’m sure Vespvr’s wrong.

“The only problem is...” Lady Aurora takes in a breath, her eyes clouding.

“Problem?” I press. If this is going to put Vespvr in danger, I won’t allow it. I don’t care about my allegiance to these people.

“The cure isn’t permanent.” Aurora has moved back around the table and is now standing beside Bartholomew. He glances up at her, and they share a searching look for a moment. I can almost feel the pain there. She slides an arm around his shoulders, presses close, and rests her cheek against his hair, her eyes shut tightly. “We’ll find a way, my love,” she whispers.

He squeezes her arm. “I’m not going anywhere, sweet woman.”

I stay silent, feeling like an intruder. When they pull apart, even my throat is clogged at the amount of pain I see there.

“So she won’t be cured?” I don’t want to think about getting her back only to lose her again.

“She’ll be well, Vidarok. For as long as she keeps taking it, she can hold off the madness,” Lord Bellingham

reassures me.

“And in the meantime, we will continue to search for a permanent solution,” Aurora adds. “I’ve been working tirelessly with Silverwing.”

“You’ve tried everything.” For a moment, Bellingham almost seems defeated.

“We have *not* tried everything!” Lady Aurora’s voice is firm. “We’ve just scratched the surface of what we can try in Ryacyn and Autumnburn. And if the answer isn’t there, we will scour the rest of the universe to work it out.”

“Of course you will.” Her mate aims a warm smile at her. “And I will be there at your side every step of the way.”

“Sweet petals, you have no option!” She laughs lightly before turning to me. “We’re going to figure this out, Vidarok. Just the way we worked on a way to turn back The Hunger in Autumnburn.”

I frown a little. “I thought that happened when the king and his mate came together, my Lady. When their child turned the tide.”

Lady Aurora gives a small shrug. “That’s true. But I was still able to hold off the scourge before that happened.” She gnaws on her lip. “But you’re right. It was only when their combined strength created something even stronger that we were able to force The Hunger back.”

“And now we have the Curse – which seems to work the same way?”

“Who knows how it works,” she huffs. “It’s just conjecture at this point. But yes, it seems to be connected.”

“It seems to me that there is something at work here that is targeting all of our realms, Lady Aurora. Perhaps if you get to the bottom of it, you’ll find the cure.”

“You could be right.” She taps a finger on her lip, lost in thought. “But right now, our priority is to save Vespyr.”

“I’ll speak to the elders, and we’ll put together a team,” the Overlord says. “I’ll put my best men on it.”

“I am the best man for this,” I growl. The words come out more sharply than I intended. They both stare at me in alarm. “Forgive me.” I dip my head. “This was my mistake. I should fix it.”

“But nobody is blaming you for this, Vidarok. You went beyond your duties to find her. And you succeeded! It’s not your fault that you were attacked. And by a dragon. Who could account for that?” Aurora’s expression is earnest. “Now you’ve earned your rest. Let Bartholomew’s team handle this.”

“No.” I shake my head. “If they go, I go. Even if you won’t allow me to lead them, at least let me be part of the team.” As I speak, I realize that my anxiety is beginning to show, but I don’t care. I can’t let this go. I have to get her back. I have to be there.

“Vidarok, I really think you should stay here. I’m becoming worried that your judgment is clouded. Exhaustion, perhaps?” Aurora is frowning at me.

“I said I will go!” I bark. Now, her eyes are wide. Bartholomew is hovering, half out of his seat. I sense that if I aim another harsh word at his woman, I will regret it.

I don’t fucking care.

She keeps her hand on his shoulder, and from the tightening of her fingers, I know that she’s quieting him. “There’s more to this than you’re telling us, my friend.”

“Even I can sense that, and I’m no sensitive Fae,” Bartholomew agrees.

I look from one to the other as I choose my next words. “I will not abandon her out there. And I won’t leave this in the hands of anyone else. This is my duty to her...to myself.” I take a deep breath, bracing myself for their shock. “Because Vespyr is my mate.”

Tariq

I need to slow down. Anyone watching me would think that I have an urgent assignment. Or that I'm eagerly heading to meet someone.

I'm not. I despise this.

I do.

Then why is my blood rushing at the very thought of arriving at my chambers where the princess will be waiting?

*Because you want to get this over with.*

It's a lie. A lie I've been telling myself each day that I've made this short trip. A lie that I deny as I push open the door to my rooms.

She's waiting in the window seat, just as she always does.

When she stands, I take care not to let my eyes rove over her. There's no sense in it; I know that she'll be beautiful. She's always beautiful.

But that's of no consequence. Beauty isn't important in the greater scheme of things. Especially when I have a war on my hands.

"Princess," I say as she walks toward me. She has on a knee-length dress that shows off her toned calves. It's buttercup yellow, and her skin is golden against the bright color.

*Why the fuck am I noticing this?*

“Lord Tariq.” She gives a mocking little curtsy. We eye each other for a moment. Normally, there’d be an exchange of sarcasm. Today, I don’t have time for it. Or maybe I’m hoping that if I get it over with quickly, I can put it out of my mind and pretend I hadn’t waited all day to get here.

“I met your brother today,” she says out of the blue.

Her words take me by surprise. “You what?” I stare at her. “How the hell did that happen?” I blurt out the words before I can stop myself.

“I was down at the stables. He came to speak to me. He’s quite charming.”

*Unlike you...*

She doesn’t have to say the words, but they hang in the air between us. I don’t give a fuck. I’m not running for a popularity title. She’s only here because she’s going to be useful to us when we send her back to her brother.

*And when will that be, you ass?*

I should have arranged the exchange days ago. But is it my fault if the Horde has kept us busy?

“Charming. Sure.” I turn my attention back to her. “Easy to be charming when your whole life is about planning trips and riding horses.”

“Ooh, hit a nerve, did I?” Her eyes are mocking.

“Of course not!” I snap. “My brother would quite happily take on the throne if he had half the chance. But he doesn’t know the first thing about the responsibilities it brings.” The diplomatic duties, the meetings, the endless administration. I’m almost grateful I’ve had to spend more time out with the border patrols. I’d far rather be flying.

“As a royal, that’s what you are born to, Lord Tariq.” She shrugs. “I knew it as a girl. I understand it even better as a woman.”

Oh, and what a woman.



I'd be lying to myself if I said that her appeal is based purely on her looks. Princess Vespvr has strength of character. Anyone can see it. I just wish she wasn't such a pain in the ass.

"It's harder to understand in times of war. My brother has never had to face the decisions I do."

"But has he fought?"

"Of course he has. Every able dragon has gone to battle. We need everyone available to hold the Horde at bay. And still, it's not enough to turn them back." I grit my teeth, hating how powerless I feel.

"So let me help," she says.

"Not this again."

"I'm serious, Tariq. I can help you." Her eyes are shining. "You don't have any idea of the power I have."

"I have a pretty good idea, actually. It's why I was given the spell to suppress it."

"Who gave you the spell?"

"It's not important."

"By Blood! Will you stop that? Surely, by now, you can stop playing your cards so close to your chest? What difference does it make?"

I frown at her for a moment. Queen Bagrak was adamant that her identity should remain hidden. And now, I wonder about that. What is she up to?

*Does it matter? We have her army behind us.*

Still, it would be foolish not to be aware that she's hiding something.

"So?" Vespvr pushes.

"The person behind it is not important. All that matters is that she shared some of her powers."

"Powers that you can use at your discretion, right?" Vespvr tilts her head.

“Yes.”

“So do that now. Let me show you that I can help. Just once. That’s all I need.” Her hand is on my arm. When I glance down at it, she tightens her fingers.

“Why?”

Her teeth press into her bottom lip. “Because if you see that I can be valuable to you, maybe...maybe you won’t need to send me back.”

“You’re that afraid to go back to your brother? Your home?”

“I have no home.” Her voice has grown husky. “What he plans for me...” She shakes her head. “I won’t do it.”

I gaze into huge golden eyes for a second. And dammit, she’s drawing me in.

“You need to feed,” I change the subject abruptly, raising my wrist. As distractions go, it’s not a good one. Just thinking of her lips on my skin has my stomach tightening.

She stares at me briefly, her lips turned down.

“Of course.” Without another word, she grasps my wrist, dips her head, and bites down. There’s anger in it because today, there’s more than a little pinch. It doesn’t matter. I still feel the now-familiar pull in my groin. My breath catches in my throat. I set my jaw and fix my eyes on a spot outside the window.

I’m grateful for the lightweight black pants I’ve taken to wearing around her. Not that being naked bothers me – it’s necessary for the sudden shifts I have to make when my dragon is needed. But when I’m near her... My cock tightens as I feel her plump lips against me.

When she finally raises her head, I know there’s a heat on my cheeks that she’ll probably notice. Her eyes glow. They always do after feeding. A glitter of gold surrounded by a band of silver. It’s less noticeable now, though.

Her eyes move over my face, and I notice a small smear of blood on her bottom lip. Without thinking, I reach

out and wipe it away with my thumb.

Time stands still as our eyes lock.

I don't move my hand. Rather, I stroke the pad of my thumb along her full bottom lip. Her mouth parts a little, and I feel its warmth against my skin. And suddenly, all I can think of is diving into that warmth. Sliding my hand around the back of her neck, I tilt her head up and lower my own. When my lips graze hers, she doesn't resist me.

At first, the kiss is fleeting, our mouths barely parting for each other's breath. But then she sighs against me, and it sparks something in me.

I pull her hard against me, my fingers tangling into her thick curls to hold her steady as I plunder her mouth. My tongue slides across her lip, asking for more, and she answers with a moan that reverberates through my chest. Her arms come up to twine around my neck as I deepen the kiss.

The taste of her is intoxicating; it makes me think of sunshine and flowers, which is odd to me because I'd always thought vampires were about darkness and death. There's nothing dark about this woman. She glows against me, setting every nerve ending alight, making me burn.

My free hand trails down her side until it finds the curve of her hip, which I pull closer into me. She's soft and pliant and so damn sweet in my arms. So...so...so...

*By the Flames!*

What the fuck am I doing? I pull back sharply and push her away. We stand silently, breathless, as we stare at each other. I can see that she's as surprised by it all as I am.

"I...I..." Her throat works when she swallows.

"I will speak to the Circle about your suggestion." My voice is ragged. "If they agree, I will remove the suppression spell temporarily, and you can come with us on our next excursion against the Horde."

*Tariq! This is madness.*

But is it any more mad than what I just did?

She gives a small nod. I can see that she's trying to compose herself. I'm trying, too. Both of us are still breathing heavily.

"Thank you." Her voice breaks.

I have to get out of here. I dip my head tersely and then back away. By the time I reach the door, she still hasn't moved.

When I walk quickly down the hallway, I try to tell myself that it's because I have urgent business to attend to.

I know that's not true.

What I'm really doing is fleeing.

Vespyr

“I believe you wish to go into battle with us.” The red-haired man facing me must be seven feet tall and just as broad – and that’s just a guess because he’s seated. But still, he’s looking down at me. I’m suddenly reminded of my Orc, and my heart tightens.

*And what of that kiss, Vespyr?*

Guilt surges. I push it away.

“Yes, my Lord Aidurn.” I hold his eyes. I’m in the center of a large circle, surrounded by towering stone chairs. A gathering of the dragon elders are seated on them. Tariq called it the Circle of Six. He’s seated too, his chair exactly the same as the others. There’s no grand throne here. They’re all equals in this circle.

“You are aware that these creatures will show you no mercy? This is a war that is not yours. You don’t have to fight, Princess.” The soft features of Lady Bridrod make it hard to believe that there’s a dragon beneath the surface. The same can’t be said of the woman beside her, who is ebony from her cropped dark hair to the muscled thighs that disappear into heavy black boots. “If she wishes to fight, let her fight,” she says, dark eyes running over me. “You don’t seem like much of a warrior.”

“I assure you that I am no stranger to the battlefield, Lady Nirem.” I turn to her. “I can use a sword and a bow, but that’s not how I can help you.”

“And just how can you help us? King Tariq spoke of powers but didn’t elaborate.” The hawk-faced man addressing me glances over at Tariq and then back at me.

“I thought that the princess would do a better job of representing herself, Lord Timmir,” Tariq responds to him. He’s been leaning back in his seat, watching silently as I’ve answered their questions. If he’s looking for a sign that I’m intimidated, he won’t see one. I’ve been in situations like this since I was a child.

“I have vampire strength and the ability to fly, Lord Timmir. But beyond that, I have a gift that has allowed me to do far more.”

“A gift?” The elder who’d been introduced as Zydus the Quiet sits forward in his seat. The oaks around us cast shadows on his already-brown skin, making his pale green eyes glitter with an odd intensity. I try not to squirm. “I have not heard of this gift.”

“You may have heard it called the Curse, my Lord.”

The intake of breath from Lord Timmir tells me that he’s no stranger to the term. “You have the Curse?”

“I have a *gift*.” I straighten my shoulders. I sense Tariq watching me closely. I haven’t explained my condition to him, but then again, he’s shown little interest in me, aside from the fact that my brother wants me back.

“The Curse,” Timmir mutters under his breath.

“And this gift brings you powers that you can use in battle?” Nirem asks, ignoring him.

I nod. “My vampire powers are enhanced. Plus, I have powers of...persuasion.” I look around at the others. “I can cast spells – protection shields, cloaking shields.” I shrug. “I haven’t fully explored it.”

“I have experience of this.” Tariq has straightened. “When I was tracking the princess, she had cloaked an entire valley.”

Aidurn’s brows raise. “Impressive.”

“So then, your protection shield could save you in battle?” Bridrod asks.

“I’m sure it could, my Lady.” I smile at her and am met by gentle blue eyes. I’m pretty sure that of all of them, she’s most concerned about my welfare.

“So you can use your vampire abilities to fight, as well as your...gift. And also to protect yourself if need be.” Tariq’s eyes are on me. I nod in response. “And how are we to believe that you won’t turn any of these powers on us?”

“Because that wouldn’t suit me.” I hold his stare, forcing myself not to dip down to his lips or think about how firm they were against mine. “I have no place to go, King Tariq. You think my brother wants to help me, but I know that he is hunting me down.”

“So you expect us to give you asylum when it might make an enemy of the Vampire King?” His brows pull together.

“What I can do for you will be worth it.” I hope that I can make good on my word, but right now, I need to play my cards right.

“And we are supposed to believe that one woman can offer as much as an entire army?” Lord Timmir is disbelieving.

“One woman can move mountains,” Nirem growls. Timmir shrinks back beneath her black glare. “The princess has my vote.”

“Mine too.” Aidurn has raised a hand. “I like her.” He winks at me. I grin back.

The remaining three are silent for a while. “Zydus?” Tariq fixes his eyes on the man, who observes me silently for a minute and then nods. “Timmir?” Tariq turns to the other lord.

Timmir heaves a sigh. “I think I’m outvoted anyway, so my opinion is irrelevant.”

“I’d still like to hear it,” says Tariq.

“I think there are pros and cons.” Timmir rubs his jaw. “On the one hand, the princess has many powers at her

disposal, and these could be valuable to us. On the other, there's no guarantee that she won't use them against us. Or that she even has control over them. This Curse— *Gift* may be unpredictable.”

As much as Timmir strikes me as the weakest of the six, I get the impression that his role in the group is to play Devil's Advocate. I turn to face him.

“I understand your concerns, Lord Timmir. And they're valid. So here's my proposal. King Tariq is quite capable of suppressing my abilities if necessary. He need only remove the suppression spell when we go into battle. As soon as the fight is over, he can suppress my powers again. Then, it will be up to you to decide if I've proven my worth or not. If you're not convinced, you can take me back to Bartholomew.”

Timmir purses his lips and stares down at where he's threaded his fingers together on his lap. The sound of footsteps ringing out has us all swiveling our heads. When Turin walks into the circle, I find it hard not to do a double-take. The resemblance between him and Tariq is uncanny. Except for the eyes. The sparkle in his is unmistakable.

“By Fire, let her fight, you miserable old bastard.” The grin he gives softens his words. Slightly.

“What are you doing here, Turin?” Tariq growls. “This meeting is for the Six.”

“Maybe it's time we made it seven, brother.” Turin aims a smile at me. “Let's not waste time on bickering.” He turns to Timmir. “What do you say? Yay or nay?”

It takes a minute or two before Timmir heaves a breath. “Yes,” he says.

“Then it's settled.” Nirem is on her feet. “The princess will accompany me.” Her tone tells me that she's not expecting an argument.

“Actually, I think I should escort the princess,” Turin says.

Tariq rises from his seat, a hand raised. “She'll come with me.” His voice is sharp.



Why would that surprise me? The man is pathologically contrary.

He and Turin lock eyes, and then Turin gives a nod and backs down. Tariq steps into the center of the circle beside me. “Now that we are in agreement, I think we’ve delayed things long enough.”

The others rise. I watch as they move away from their huge granite seats and spread out into the open space behind them. Cloaks are thrown aside. Clothing is shed. The air is filled with the sounds of limbs stretching and scales emerging. Wings spread out.

Within seconds, every one of them has transformed into something huge and scaled and towering. A low, rattling snarl comes from one of the dragons. Its gleaming black scales and glittering obsidian eyes make it quite obvious who I’m looking at. *Nirem*. Enormous black wings unfurl. The beast throws its head back and lets out an ear-shattering roar that almost blows my hair back.

*By Blood!*

Only Tariq remains, and already he’s flung his cloak from his shoulders.

“Now,” he says as he steps away from me. “Now, we fly.”

## Vespyr

Yet again, I'm feeling the wind whip and howl around me, but this time it's invigorating. And this time, I'm not being dangled in the air.

I'm perched between a giant pair of golden wings, my fingers curled beneath the heavy scales of the dragon's thick neck. I feel like a gnat on the back of an eagle. It's all I can do to cling on. But I love it. It's like the days of my childhood when I used to gallop through the fields – wild and free. This is probably the first time I don't hate the fact that I ever set eyes on Tariq.

Okay, maybe the second. But that kiss was a mistake.

We swoop and soar and dip over rolling hills and sky-high mountains. I have no idea where we're headed, but the dragons move in formation with purpose.

And then, I see it.

Black smoke billows into the air ahead of us. As I watch, a streak of fire shoots across the sky. There's a dragon in mid-air, shooting flames from its mouth. The roar it makes cuts the air in two. I fight not to clamp my hands over my ears. Then my eyes widen because that's not the most terrifying thing right now. Beyond the huge beast, there's something that looks like a seething black cloud. As we draw closer, I can make out the individual forms of what appear to be hundreds – no thousands of winged shapes. As fast as the dragon fire is charring those at the fore, they're being replaced by others. Wave upon wave of them.

I fight down a surge of horror as we swoop past, close enough for me to get a good look at them. Harpies. They must be. They look just like the images in the books I read as a child. Stringy black hair frames skull-like faces with beaks that could belong to a vulture. Except these beaks are filled with rows of teeth. Their bodies are almost skeletal but strong and wiry, with clawed hands and muscular arms. Soulless yellow eyes glow from contorted faces as they screech and caw like giant birds of prey. The sound makes me shudder.

I heave a deep breath as Tariq flies clear of the mass into an area out of the way of the carnage and settles onto the top of a gentle slope. I slide from his back and watch as he transforms into the man I've grown to recognize so well. His skin is still gleaming with the scales that cover his dragon. I'm assuming that he's not going to take the time to shift completely.

"I release you from the bond," he says to me, tracing a pattern onto my forehead. "I'm trusting you."

"I won't let you down."

"Be safe." He's barely said the words before he's streaking back into the air, huge and gleaming. I watch him fly off before turning back to the battle. Although there are people on the ground fighting off the winged demons with swords and battleaxes, most of the action is happening in the air. There must be close to a hundred dragons in the sky, but it's nowhere near enough to fight off the Horde. There are just too many of them.

I run my eyes from one cluster of fighting to another, picking out dragons I recognize. Nirem is unmistakable, her huge beast tearing through leathery bodies with snapping jaws and swishing tail. Flames billow from her mouth, setting dozens of them alight. She's leaving a trail of death in her path. Tariq is equally fearsome, a flash of gold amid the darkness.

I have to get in there. This is my moment. I have to show them that they need me. That I can fight for them. Then, I won't have to go back to face the fate Bartholomew has

planned for me. And maybe they'll let me bring my mate to be with me.

Vidarok.

The thought of him sends a surge of determination through me. If he was here, he'd fight side by side with me. We'd be such a force...

*Fight, woman!*

I lift myself into the air, reveling in the sense of freedom that's been denied to me since I got here. I turn my attention to where the Horde is concentrated and begin a slow ascent toward them, reaching out with my mind to identify each of them individually. It's not easy. There are just so many. And their minds are a mass of jumbled thoughts of rage and... hunger. They're voracious.

Taking in a breath, I focus on those closest to me. Several turn and look in my direction.

*'You are afraid,'* I say silently. *'You need to leave this place.'*

One of them locks eyes with me, blinking yellow, filled with malice. But that begins to change. There's a strange shriek, and then it begins to move back. The others around it begin to do the same.

*'Go!'* I send the word out. *'There is death here. You will all die! You are afraid of death!'*

More begin to turn, wings flapping and flailing as they crash into each other. Soon, as I move forward, I see a rolling wave of them moving backward away from me. In small clusters, they start breaking away from the Horde, the numbers quickly thinning as hundreds of them start to flee.

I'm breaking up the main attack. Diminishing the numbers. A thrill of victory starts to warm inside me. And then something streaks past me.

"Witch!" it screams as it circles me so quickly it's hard for me to get a good look at it.

The thing swoops in on me, a mouth full of shark-like teeth gnashing and snapping. It gets so close that I can smell the stink of its breath. It smells like death. It's bigger than the others. Its color is different, too; more silvery than the gray of the rest of them. When I try to connect with its mind, all I get is a rush of rage. It circles around me, closer and closer, almost making me giddy as I try to keep my eyes on it. When it stops abruptly in front of me, I suck in a breath. How did it get so close?

I concentrate on creating a shield around me, but it extends a clawed hand and slashes through the space between us, cutting through magic. It has its own powers, it would seem.

"You will die, little witch!" it hisses. It's a she...at least, I think it's female. Its features could be those of a woman if I use my imagination. Its voice – that sounds like something that just crawled out of a grave.

"You will die...and I will eat you. I will suck on the marrow of your bones." There's a rattling sound that might be laughter. And that makes me so fucking mad.

"I don't think so." I snap out a hand and curl it around the creature's neck. Her eyes go wide when my claws sink in. It's been a while since I took my vampire form, and from the creature's expression, I'm as fearsome as ever. "I eat things too..." I growl into her face. Fear flashes into her flat black eyes a second before I sink my fangs into her throat. The scream she makes is bloodcurdling, but it doesn't stop me from slashing into her jugular and sucking down on it. She tastes vile. Like tar mixed with earth. But I don't stop drinking until her arms go limp and she dangles lifelessly. I drop her like trash and float away. I spit out black muck and wipe the back of my hand over my mouth. When I turn, there is a group of them watching me, eyes filled with horror.

"Who's next?" The words are mine, but the voice isn't. It's always that way when I become like this. The other part of me. The part that is almost impossibly powerful.

There's an enraged scream, and one of them flies at me. I bat her away as easily as if she were an annoying insect. Her head flies off in the opposite direction. I'm almost drunk on the power of the other one's blood. She may have tasted terrible, but there was strength in her veins.

I don't bother sending my thoughts of fear into their minds now. I *want* them to come at me. I want to crush and maim and feel their bones shatter. More fly toward me, and they're met with the same fate as the first one. I slash some in two. Heads fly through the air. Others are disemboweled or shredded. I don't pay attention; all I can feel is the sheer euphoria of ending their miserable, stinking lives.

"Come!" I scream, my chest heaving – not with exhaustion, but with the thrill of it. "Come! Bring me more!" I'm drenched in their filthy black blood. It drips from my face and runs down my arms, streams down my legs. When I glance at the earth beneath where I'm hovering, it's soaked with it.

And still, I fight...until there is silence.

I hang in the air, panting.

They're gone.

*Where did they go?*

Turning in a slow circle, I take in the carnage beneath me. The air around me is clear. Except for the dragons. The dragons who are hanging back, giant wings holding them aloft...staring at me.

Staring at me with sheer shock.

## Tariq

“Did you see her eyes?” Nirem seems exultant. “Like liquid mercury! She was...magnificent!”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before.” Aidurn is shaking his head.

“I don’t think I like it.” Timmir has his chin propped on his fist, his elbow resting on one raised knee.

“At least she wasn’t harmed. There were so many of those creatures. So, so many!” Bridrod’s eyes are enormous. She brushes an unruly silver curl from her forehead.

“I think more harm came to those who faced her.” Turin chuckles. He’s sharing Bridrod’s seat, clearly convinced he can join the Circle whenever he wants now.

“I’ve never seen anyone move like that,” Zydus says quietly. “It was like she was dancing with the power of death itself.”

We all sit in silence for a moment, reflecting on what we just witnessed. Then Aidurn breaks it by speaking up.

“She could make a difference in this war, Lord Tariq.”

I haven’t shared my thoughts on this since we got back. The woman has returned to my quarters – I imagine she’ll want to wash up.

“What’s on your mind, brother?” Turin asks.

I need a moment to consider this. “She’s powerful,” I acknowledge. I had no idea of what she was capable of. “What

she did with the Horde...”

“She cut through them like the Grim Reaper!” Nirem’s clearly excited about all that we saw today. “They fell before her like corn before a scythe.”

“That was just bloodlust,” I mutter. “What caught my attention was the way she turned them back.”

“This could be her greatest strength,” says Zydus.

“Or the biggest threat she poses to us,” Timmir adds. “What if she decided to do that to us?”

“She’s safe for now,” I reassure him.

“Yes, but do you plan to keep switching her powers on and off whenever you need them?” Bridrod seems troubled.

“I don’t see why that should pose a problem.” Aidurn’s face is still streaked with soot and dirt. “I’m sure she’ll be fine with it if it means she can avoid going back to her brother.”

“That’s something else that still bothers me,” says Bridrod. “Why is she so afraid to go back there? Is he really going to harm her?”

It troubles me, too. But mainly because I’m wondering why the Vampire King would consider her such a threat. This Curse that seems to be worrying everyone is something I don’t fully understand. In fact, even she doesn’t seem to know what it could bring. It’s clear that the vampire side of her becomes more powerful in its grip – what we saw today...was beyond anything I’ve ever heard of before. Not simple blood drinking. It was like she wanted to bathe in it.

I stifle a shudder.

I can’t tell if the memory of it repulses me...or arouses me.

My dragon shifts and swirls impatiently. I can almost feel the scales moving smoothly beneath my skin.

He wants her. He wants this woman. This warrior woman.



“You are deep in thought, my Lord.” Zydus’s voice pulls me back to reality.

I give a guilty start. “There is a lot to think about. So many questions we don’t have the answers to. We don’t even know where to begin.” I rub my forehead. There’s a lot more involved here than simply what my dragon wants.

“Of course, we know where to begin. It’s staring right at you.” Turin leans back and crosses his feet at the ankle.

It pisses me the fuck off. “And where might that be?”

“The princess. Speak to her. Ask her these questions. And then go to her brother and ask him too. Between the two of them, you’ll get to the truth. Or at least some of it.”

“Lord Turin makes a good point.” Zydus looks at me.

“Ask the princess...” I run a hand through my hair. “It’s not as easy as that.”

“Really? Why? I can do it if it’s too much for you.” Turin smirks.

“No!” I surprise myself with the force of my response. “No,” I say more mildly. “I will do it.”

We can’t waste time with Turin sniffing around the woman. This is important business.

“And the Vampire King?” Nirem asks. “You will speak with him too?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I’ll leave in the morning at first light.”

“You spread yourself too thin, brother. If there’s an attack while you’re away, do you plan to magically appear to handle that, too?”

“I’ll manage just fine,” I mutter. “These are the duties of a king.”

“A king who should learn to delegate.”

“When you are on the throne, you can delegate to your heart’s content, Turin. Until then, you can watch me do the job right.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugs.

I stand, realizing that the others have been watching this exchange with interest. Do they think that he’s right? Am I trying too hard to handle everything myself?

*Fire take what they think!*

“If you’ll excuse me.” I bow my head. “I will go to speak with the princess now.”

There’s a murmur of farewells, and I leave the circle.



“The princess is taking some air.” Grier is standing at a balustrade overlooking the gardens. “She asked to be left alone.”

“I’ll be deciding when she gets to be alone.” Ignoring him, I jog down the stairs and stride along the path through the sprawling lawns. Instinctively, I head to the stables. She’d said she met Turin here. From what Grier has said, she likes to come down here.

As I draw closer, I inhale the comforting scent of warm animals and fresh-cut hay. The sun is sinking, casting long shadows across the path ahead of me. I pick up my pace, not wanting to waste any more time.

When I reach the end of the pathway, I find her lingering near the entrance, stroking the gleaming neck of a large black horse with its head over the door of its stall.

Her back is to me. She’s wearing a pale blue dress, her damp hair tied back in a braid that trails between her shoulder blades, reaching halfway down her back. I have the insane urge to unravel it and thread my fingers through the dense waves.

I don’t. Instead, I clear my throat. She spins around, taking in a sharp little breath.

“Lord Tariq!”

“I came looking for you. There’s a lot to talk about.”

She narrows her eyes suspiciously but doesn't turn away from me. "What do you want?"

"What happened back there?" I step closer. The move is meant to intimidate, but with her, it doesn't. Of course it doesn't. Then again, after what I saw her doing today, maybe I should be the one who's intimidated.

"Back where?" She folds her arms over her breasts. Her plump-as-fuck breasts.

"Don't test my patience, Princess. I've had a long day." And trying not to stare at her chest is making it feel even longer.

"That's interesting. So have I."

"Are you going to answer me? What were you doing out there today?" I take a step forward. If I take a couple more, we'll be touching.

*Do not touch her!*

"Fighting." She sticks her jaw out at me. "I thought that was the idea."

"There's fighting, and then there's...what you did. What the fuck was that?"

"Language, my Lord." She makes a tutting sound.

"Fine. What the fuck was that, *Princess?*"

"I told you I had powers. What did you expect? Exploding glitter balls?" she snaps. "I'm a vampire. I drink blood. I kill things."

I don't have a response to that because what else would I expect? I heave a breath and run a hand through my hair. "Okay. So was that it? Is that what you do?"

"You wanted more?" The horse behind her nudges her with its nose. She reaches out a hand to stroke it. I'm struck by how gentle that hand can be when it was ripping out throats just hours ago.

*You're one to judge.*

I did my share of killing, too. Just not as effectively. Or with such relish.

“You enjoyed it.” I step a little closer – against my better judgment. Who am I kidding? I have no judgment around this woman.

“Yes, I enjoyed it.” She doesn’t try to deny it.

“And that’s because of the Curse?”

“*Gift.*”

“Okay, your gift.”

She shrugs. “Maybe it is. Killing seems to come easier when I feel it.”

“And what does it feel like?” Somehow, I’ve closed the distance again.

“It feels like...” Her eyes slant up in thought for a moment. “It feels like immortality,” she exhales the word. “Like being plugged into lightning.”

I stare at her, finding myself drawn into those liquid gold eyes. The odd silver shimmer is gone, and now it’s like looking into the sun. “Lightning?”

She nods. “Yes.” Her breath flutters against my face, and I realize we’re pressed together. The slow furling and unfurling within me remind me that my beast is stirring. What is it about her that affects me like this?

Her hand lifts up and traces my cheek. I’m so lost in those eyes that I barely notice when our lips meet.

The sensation of her mouth against mine is like electricity.

*Lightning...*

An intense charge surges through my body, and I can feel the power her kiss contains. I abandon myself to it, completely and utterly, as if suddenly everything else fades away.

The moment passes, and we break apart. Her eyes hold mine for a few moments longer, and then I take a step forward, pushing her backward with the movement.

My hands are on the top of her dress, tugging the straps down over her shoulders. She stops short when she bumps up against the wall of the stall behind her. My lips rove along her jawline and down her neck as my hands push the top of her dress down, searching for the lush flesh that's been consuming my thoughts.

“Tariq...” she moans my name, her head dropping back as I graze my teeth along her throat.

*Mark her.*

I suck in a breath. But I don't pull away. Her hands are in my hair, her chest heaving as I cup a full breast in my palm. When I press a knee between her thighs, she grinds her mound against me and moans deeper. The air is rich with the scent of her lust...and mine, too.

The things she does to me are just so wrong. And yet, when I slide a hand beneath the skirt of her dress and move it up the soft skin of her thigh, my moan is as deep as hers is. She's naked beneath her dress, and my cock throbs in response.

“Fuck, Princess...” I whisper against her lips, her mouth parting in a gasp as my fingers explore the wetness between her legs.

The heat spiraling through my veins is too much to resist, and I can feel the beast inside me growling for more. When I find the tight nub of her clit, she jerks as if shocked, then spreads her thighs to allow me access.

“Oh...God...” she groans as my fingers circle and explore and learn the contours of her body. Her eyes are heavy-lidded with pleasure, her mouth hanging open. I slide a finger into her...so wet and receptive that it's all I can do to hold back when I bury my face into the curve of her neck.

*Mark. Her!*

I inhale deeply, taking in her sweet scent.

“So sweet,” I moan, the sound muffled against her.

If she stays, she could be mine. The thought comes out of nowhere. But somehow, it feels so perfectly natural. So perfectly right. I flick my tongue over her skin, taking in the taste of her. She shudders, her body jerking in time to my pumping fingers.

“Oh...God, yes! Fuck...Vidarok!” she cries out.

I freeze. So does she.

I step back abruptly, and her skirt drops back around her legs.

“I...” Her eyes are huge, her lips puffy from where she’s gnawed on them. “Tariq, I...”

I give a sharp shake of my head. “This was a mistake.”

“Tariq, I’m so sorry.”

I don’t respond. I’m already walking.

And I’ll keep fucking walking.

## Vidarok

I've been waiting for them to call me, but I'd expected to meet them in the council chambers. Today, we're walking in the gardens. It's beautiful here. The colorful blooms, the trees, the flowering shrubs that line the winding pathways – all scented with a dozen different fragrances. But there's still a black cloud hanging over my head.

“We've had word, Vidarok.” Aurora smiles at me. She and Lord Bellingham are walking arm in arm. They're seldom away from each other's side. And who could blame them when any moment together could be their last? This Curse could claim the king without warning. Just as it could take my mate. I want to share moments like this, too. It's killing me to be away from her.

“Word?” I say.

“The dragons of Morgameau. They have Vespyr.”

My pulse quickens. “They have her? Where? Is she safe? Why did they take her?”

Aurora pats my arm. I fight down impatience. She's my lady, after all, but I'm tired of biding my time here. The past couple of days have been torture, waiting for the vampire council to decide on a course of action.

“She is at the royal castle – the seat of their realm. We have been assured that she is safe. The king himself has come to update us.”

“But why couldn’t he bring her back to tell us herself?” I can’t keep the frustration from my voice.

“Patience, Vidarok. We’ll find out soon enough. We’re meeting him now. I thought you might like to be there to hear for yourself.”

“Thank you, my Lady.” I appreciate the gesture. There was shock when I told them that Vespyr and I were mated. There’s still an air of disbelief. I wait for the usual line of questioning. Of course, it comes.

“Are you sure that this is the path you wish to take, Vidarok?” the king says to me. “There is no obligation on your part to put yourself through this.

“You mean I have no obligation to my mate?” My jaw tightens.

“That’s not what I mean.” He’s walking as he talks. “The bond is still new. It’s not unbreakable. Are you even sure that you’ve fully mated?”

I take in a few breaths to steady myself. When we’d first discussed this, I’d been apprehensive. Afraid they wouldn’t believe me. They had – reluctantly. Now, I’m growing impatient of repeating the same line.

“We are mated, Lord Bellingham. It *is* unbreakable.” I keep my voice firm. “For days, she fed from me. Then, when we were attacked, she brought me back from death with her blood. My veins run with it; it fuels my heart – which would have stopped beating if she hadn’t healed me. And then we were...together.” I don’t have to spell out what I mean, but I do. “We fucked. Made love. Call it what you will. And we drank from each other while we did it. I haven’t felt the same since, and I never will.” I’ve lost track of how many times we were together, but the sensations are burned into me. Each night, I relive them in my dreams. I wake up aching for her. There’s a piece of me missing, and I know the ache won’t go until I have her back.

Lord Bellingham heaves a sigh.



Aurora presses closer to him. “He’s right, my love. We’ve traveled this road. Remember how hard you fought the Bond? And eventually, you knew there was no point in fighting it. We were fated. Let’s accept that Vidarok and your sister are too.”

“We are!” I insist. It’s a bond I’m not fighting. I’ve accepted it wholeheartedly. After a lifetime of looking for a place where I’m accepted...where I’m wanted...I’m not letting it go.

“I understand, sweetness.” He lifts her hand and brushes a kiss over her knuckles. “But he needs to understand the implications. Like me, she may never recover. And like you, he will have to accept that when she’s taken from him, he will be shattered.” He looks at me. “It would be better for you to turn your back on this and find your happiness elsewhere, Orc. It would be easier.”

“It would be *impossible!*” I bark.

“Of course it would,” Aurora agrees. “You must excuse Bartholomew. He fought me on this, too. Just understand it comes from a place of concern.” She gazes at him lovingly. “I’ll never regret my decision to choose the life we have, Bart. Every minute with you is precious, and I’ll remind you of that every day if I have to. Impossible man!”

“You don’t have to.” He chuckles. “But I can think of a few ways you can prove it to me.”

Aurora giggles, leans closer, and murmurs something into his ear. I look away. I feel like an intruder into their intimacy. And once again, I’m envious that they can have this.

I want it, too. I’ll fight for it if I have to.

“I think we’re making Vidarok uncomfortable, Bart.” Aurora’s voice is warm with laughter.

In spite of my dark mood, I find myself smiling. “At least you give me something to aspire to, my Lady.”

“That’s true. And I’ll make sure of that once your mate is back. Along with the fact that you once asked me these very same questions about my Heart Bond with Bart. Do you

remember that? You thought I set too much stock in the Heart Bond that tied us together. Now here you are...”

“Now here I am...” I give a sheepish shrug.

“And now here we all are.” The king gestures with his head in the direction of a cluster of seats that have been set out near the lake at the bottom of the gardens. “The Dragon King has asked if we can meet outdoors. His kind prefers to be out in the open.”

As he speaks, I note that the other elders have gathered. Mortas, Radella, Salem, and Luther are all standing around a towering figure. As we arrive, the tall visitor turns and eyes us. He’s wearing little more than a scarlet cloak and a pair of loose-fitting black pants. Piercing blue eyes flicker over Bartholomew and Aurora before landing on me. They narrow. Something primal and inexplicable tightens in my gut. I feel my fists clench.

“King Tariq Firestarter.” The Vampire King is striding into the group. “It is our honor to receive you.”

“Overlord.” The Dragon King dips his head. He glances over at Aurora. “And your lovely queen.” He gives a deep bow, and she responds with a dainty curtsy. This is all very genteel and *olde worlde*, but when it comes to dealing with royalty, old traditions hold fast.

“I’m so glad you’ve come to us, Lord Tariq,” Aurora says, then gestures to me. “Vidarok, the captain of my guard, will be in attendance.”

The dragon gives me a curt nod and then looks away as if dismissing me. I’m not fooled – he’s following my every move.

“Shall we be seated?” Lord Luther suggests, sweeping an arm out to indicate the chairs. As the others take their seats, I take my place behind the king and queen. Tariq Firestarter remains standing, too, facing them. The sun is warm on my face, the grass soft beneath my feet. And the dragon in our midst has everything within me bristling.

I don’t like this one fucking bit.

“So Princess Vespyr is at Morgameau castle,” the king gets straight to the point.

“Yes, Lord Bellingham. I assure you that she is quite safe.”

This should fill me with relief, but for some reason, it doesn't.

“And how did she come to be there?” Bellingham continues, still focused on the Dragon King.

“It's a long story that doesn't bear telling.”

*Really? I'd like to hear it.*

I remain impassive, feet astride, my hands clasped behind my back. But I'm looking at him.

“Perhaps you could give us the basics,” Aurora asks carefully.

Lord Tariq nods. “She arrived several days ago, seeking asylum.”

“Asylum?” I hear Luther murmur. The others exchange glances. Though I can't see the overlord's face, I sense him growing tense.

“Why would my sister feel that she needs...asylum?”

“She believes that you meant to harm her.” The Dragon King isn't showing quite as much care as Aurora or the king are. “She says she's being hunted.” He looks at me when he says it. I fight down a growl.

“Why would she believe that?” Bellingham's voice has gone soft.

“You tell me.”

The overlord heaves a deep sigh. “She is...mistaken,” he says. “My sister is afflicted. A dark Curse that has plagued our people. We want her to come home so that we can help her.”

“She has told me of this.” The dragon dips his head. “Although she calls it her gift.”

“Oh dear,” murmurs Aurora.

The Vampire King rubs his brow. “Yes. She has convinced herself of this.”

“Well, I’m inclined to believe her.” As the Dragon King speaks, the council members whisper among themselves.

“Would you believe her?” Mortas asks.

Tariq turns to address him. “I have seen her use her powers. She is remarkable.”

“More like deadly,” Salem interjects. “These creatures become blood-thirsty. Unthinking.” I’m not surprised that she feels this way. Lady Salem survived an attack from one of the Cursed – one of her own court members. I’m sure it will be a while before she recovers.

“Perhaps in the wrong circumstances, you might see her as blood-thirsty. On the battlefield, she is a force to be reckoned with.”

My muscles bunch as he says this. “You have taken her into battle?” I snap.

“The princess volunteered to join us.” He doesn’t look at me as he says it. It’s quite clear that he’s decided that I’m some worthless minion.

*By the Maker, I’ll show him!*

“Why would she do such a thing?” My voice is still sharp and insistent. If he doesn’t fucking look my way, I’ll get in his fucking face and force him to.

He turns to me. “She wanted to prove herself worthy of us.”

His expression is so smug I want to slap it off his face.

“Worthy of you?” I scoff. “She is more than worthy. You should be—”

“I think we’re going off track,” Lord Bellingham interrupts. His focus is on the Dragon King. “So, my sister has fought at your side and used her powers to help you. I am pleased it didn’t backfire.”

“Why would it backfire?” Tariq raises an eyebrow. “She seemed perfectly in control.”

“Did she really?” It’s Luther now. He’s seen more of the Cursed than most of us. He knows the signs. “Did she truly seem in control? Or did it simply seem appropriate that she was slaking her bloodlust against your enemy?”

The Dragon King remains silent for a while, and I’m willing to bet that this is exactly what happened. I’ve seen what this affliction can do. When I’d first tracked the princess, I could tell that she was always just seconds away from attacking me. She would have if she hadn’t been so weak.

I swallow hard as I think back to those days. I’d have them over again in an instant just to have her with me.

“The Horde is merciless. She would have been completely overwhelmed if she hadn’t responded as she did. I’ve never seen a warrior like her.” There’s something in his eyes that makes me want to kill him.

He wants my woman.

*Not a fuck!*

I only realize that I’ve taken a step forward when I feel Aurora’s hand on my arm. “Easy, Vidarok,” she says under her breath.

“Horde?” Lord Bellingham tilts his head.

“A force that plagues us.” Tariq’s expression shifts again. Something darker this time. “A fearsome enemy that seems to grow in number by the day.”

“And your dragons can’t control them.” Luther frowns.

“I thought you were invulnerable,” says Mortas.

“Nothing is invulnerable,” Lady Radella says.

“You are right, my Lady.” Tariq’s features are grim. “Our dragons are strong, but our numbers are shrinking. We’ve fought the Horde for years, and each year, fewer of us are able to fight. We have fewer young ones to enter the ranks.”

“Why is that?” Luther asks.

“The Horde targets our settlements. They come down like a swarm from above and attack them. Our females don’t shift while they are with child. Our young ones are too weak to fight in their early days. And as for the young drakes,” he splay his hands, “we’ve lost many simply because they are headstrong and undisciplined. The Horde targets them all.”

“You mean they kill your women and children?” Salem appears stricken.

“They don’t just kill them, my Lady.” Tariq pauses. Something flickers in his jaw. “They consume them.”

Luther seems confused. “Consume... They *eat* them?”

The Dragon King nods.

Salem sucks in a breath. “By Blood!” She puts a hand over her mouth.

Even I am sickened, and I don’t feel very charitable toward this man.

“It was part of what convinced your princess to help us, I believe.”

“Vespyr...” Bellingham exhales.

“She’s not totally lost to us, my love,” Aurora murmurs to him. “There’s still hope for her.”

“I’ll never give up hope,” the king says fiercely. He looks back at the Dragon King. “So she fought for you, and then afterward...?”

“She was herself again.” He shrugs.

“No sign of madness?” Luther presses. “No unusual behavior? Strange impulses?”

“None whatsoever, Lord Luther.” But as he says it, I see that strange expression flash across his face again.

“I don’t believe you,” I hear myself say. All eyes swivel toward me.

“You’re calling me a liar?” Tariq’s fists clench at his side.

“You are hiding something from us.” I feel myself bristling in response.

“Vidarok!” Aurora hisses at me. “Calm yourself.”

“He is not to be trusted, my Lady,” I growl back. “I can sense it. There is something he’s not saying about Vespyr and \_\_\_”

“That is *Princess Vespyr* to you, Orc!” the dragon growls. “Know your place.”

“I’ll show you my place!” My hand is already on the handle of my battle ax.

“Enough!” The Vampire King has risen to his feet and is standing between us. He glares at me. It takes me a moment to feel my blood begin to cool. It doesn’t cool completely.

“My apologies, my Lord,” I mutter, aiming a baleful glare at the dragon, who glares back.

“You will pardon our captain, Lord Tariq,” Aurora says. “He has invested a great deal in returning Princess Vespyr. He is as anxious as we all are to bring her back safely.”

More anxious than anyone.

“For the cure,” Tariq says.

“Absolutely.” Bellingham is firm.

“And you truly believe that she needs it, even though it will leave her without powers?”

“Without it, she will die.” The overlord nods. “Her powers will be irrelevant then.”

The Dragon King’s eyes narrow. “Die?”

“Most certainly,” says Lord Bellingham. “Sadly, one of the symptoms of the Curse is progressive madness. While she has unlimited resources of blood, she will appear to thrive. But

she'll need more of it. Every day, her hunger will increase until the lust for it consumes her. And then she'll burn up."

I fight down a shudder.

There's silence after he speaks. I see that Aurora has taken his hand and is holding it tightly.

"And there is no other way?" Tariq looks from one to the other.

"Not that we know of. And believe me, we have tried everything."

The Dragon King takes in a deep breath and then lets it out slowly. "There is much to think about."

"There is nothing to think about. Bring her back!" I snap. I am absolutely certain that if she could come back to me, she would. Everything is wrong with what he's saying. She's being held against her will.

"All in good time," Tariq says maddeningly. "I will speak with the princess on my return."

"You will fucking bring her back to me, or so help me \_\_\_"

"Silence, Orc!" King Bellingham barks. "This is your final warning!" We lock eyes for a second, and then I deflate. Without their help, there's nothing I can do. Going up against an army of dragons would be madness.

*Bide your time.*

The dragon is watching me with interest, one eyebrow raised. I don't bother looking his way. I know I've lost this battle. It doesn't mean that I've given up, though.

"King Tariq, I hope that you will see reason and return my sister to us soon."

"I will be sure to tell her what you have said here today. After that..." He shrugs. "We shall see."

Fire and fury, but it takes everything inside me to hold myself back.



“We thank you for your time, Lord Tariq.” Aurora moves to stand beside Bartholomew. “I trust we will see you soon.”

He gives a small bow. “I am grateful for the audience you have given me.” He looks around at the others. There are murmurs in response. I can tell that everyone has been unsettled by all of this. Yet again, I take several long, deep breaths to calm myself.

Meanwhile, Tariq Firestarter has moved off to the edge of the lake, leaving his cloak and pants in his wake as his limbs begin to change. Scales appear, and then he’s stretching, growing, expanding into the form of a huge golden dragon. A huge golden dragon that I recognize instantly.

“Vidarok! What—?” Aurora blurts.

But I’m not listening. I start running as his vast wings spread out, and then he takes to the sky. By the time I reach the water’s edge, he’s far out of reach. I spin around to face Aurora and Bartholomew.

“It’s him!” I choke out, rage and frustration surging within me. “It’s him. He’s the one...he’s the one who took her from me.”

Vespyr

“Where did you go?” I ask. I never saw Tariq yesterday, and he came in late today – he hasn’t missed one of my feeding sessions since I arrived here. He’s been gone. Living in his damn sleeping quarters makes that painfully obvious. He hasn’t come to his bed.

*It’s because of what happened.*

I have to stop thinking about that. He was right; it was a mistake.

He doesn’t bother with a greeting. Just barges into the room and glares at me. I try not to step back, but it’s not easy in the face of his glowering intensity.

“I met your Orc,” he says, his voice throaty.

“Vidarok?” I say sharply, my heart in my throat. “Where is he? Is he here?”

I knew he would fight to come back to me. I knew it. I clutch a hand to my chest.

“Don’t get yourself all worked up. He didn’t come here.” Tariq gives a shrug. “I went to Ryacyn to see the Vampire King and his queen. I met the man when I went to discuss your fate with them.”

“My fate?” I scoff. “So you’re the one who gets to determine my fate now?”

“Do you doubt it?”

I don't answer him. I'll fight him with fang and claw if I get the chance. Not that I'll get the chance easily. He rules me with an iron fist.

"So, do you want to know what he had to say?"

"I know what he'd say. He'd fight for me."

Tariq snorts but doesn't respond further.

"Are you telling me that he didn't?"

"Don't you want to know what your *king* said?" He lifts an eyebrow. He's folded his arms over his chest. It draws my attention to how broad it is. To the size of his biceps as they bulge where he's crossed his arms.

"That's easily answered. He wants me to go back. For the *cure*," I sneer.

"He believes you need it. He truly believes that."

"So what? He's wrong. I'm fine." I turn away from him, walking into the room. It's become as familiar to me now as my own. I stalk to a wide brown leather sofa and sink into it, glaring up at him.

"You sure you're fine?" He's moved along with me, and now he's standing over where I'm sitting, looking down at me.

"Don't I look fine?" I sweep a hand over the length of my body. His eyes follow the gesture, and I'm suddenly aware that the skirt of my dress has ridden high on my thighs. His gaze is hot on my flesh. When he tears his eyes upward, his pupils are blown.

"You look more than fine." His voice has dropped to a low growl. It makes my skin tingle.

I draw in a breath and let it out in a huff. "What do you want, Tariq? Did you come here just to rub my nose in the fact that you have power over me?"

"I came to ask if you want to go back there." There's something in his expression that I can't identify.

"To my brother?"

“To your...mate.”

I swallow hard because he's making it sound like the two go hand in hand. “Is that what he said? Did Vidarok say that I had to go back there if I wanted to be with him?” My heart is in my throat.

“What do you think?”

I shake my head. “I don't know.” I'm filled with doubt. The bond feels so strong, but we had so little time together. Did I dream it all? Was it just my foolish heart reaching out for some sort of connection? If we were truly bonded, why do I keep reacting to this impossibly annoying man in front of me?

“I told your brother that I would discuss this with you. So here I am.” His mouth presses into a tight line. “Do you wish to stay and fight with us, or do you want to go back to your Orc?”

“Back to my brother, you mean?” I lean back into the sofa, feeling the warm support of it behind me. Right now, it feels like all the support I'm going to get. Everything in my world seems so damned unstable.

“Call it what you want.”

“I can't answer right now. You're pushing me into a corner.”

“I'll push all I want. You're a grown woman, Princess. Make a fucking choice!”

“How am I supposed to make a decision like this when I can't even think straight? Damn you!” My head is spinning, and it occurs to me that it's been two days since I went up against his Horde. I haven't fed since then. When I look down at my hands, the bones of my wrists are protruding.

*By Blood, I'm thirsty.*

“For fuck's sake!” he mutters. He reaches his arm toward me. But when he extends his hand, he doesn't let me take his wrist. Instead, he grasps mine. His fingers are firm when they tighten, almost too firm. He pulls me up abruptly, and I fall against his chest.

“What are you doing?” I snap. I’m staring into the pale blue of his eyes, the dark pits of his pupils. There’s something seething inside him, and I still don’t understand it.

“Drink,” he says, tilting his head to the side. I stare at the strong golden column of his throat. If I lift up onto my toes, I’ll be able to brush my lips along the throbbing veins beneath his skin there. There’s a small sound, and I realize that I’ve just growled deep in my throat.

“Drink!” he repeats. His hand closes around the back of my neck, pulling my face closer toward him. My nose touches him, and I pull in a deep breath of his scent. Forest and flames and the rich rush of blood that’s pumping beneath his skin.

I groan again.

*Why is he doing this to me?*

But the pull of it is irresistible. My thirst makes me weak. Maybe they’re right. Maybe I can’t control this thing inside me. My fangs extend, and I bite down. Tariq hisses, and then he moans when my mouth closes on him.

“Yesssss…” He draws the word on his breath. His hand is still firm against the back of my neck, cupping my head now, his fingers tangled into my hair. I squeeze my eyes shut and taste him. It’s familiar now, the hot flavor of him. He’s fire, like his dragon. It courses through me, heating my skin. My nipples tighten, and I slide an arm around his waist to pull closer to him. Our bodies are pressed together, and there’s no mistaking his need, either. His cock is hard against me, a thick ridge against my belly.

*By Blood, how I want him!*

It shouldn’t be this way. It shouldn’t.

But it is.

With my mouth still on his throat, I hitch my knee up over his hip and grind my mound against his shaft. He lowers his hand to grasp my ass and pushes harder against me. It’s mind-numbing – the rush of pleasure that comes when I slide myself against him. My clit throbs, hot and aching. It’s an ache

that's been there since that moment in the barn. I'd been so close then. So close to taking what I needed.

*That's all this is, Vespyn. Just slaking a need.*

I tell myself that. I wallow in the lie as I tug at the top of his pants until his cock springs free. He's pulled my skirt up over my hips, and my bare slit slides along the length of him when I ride against him now.

"By the Flames!" His voice is guttural. "I love that you don't wear panties."

I don't answer. I'm too focused on the sweet heat in my mouth and the clenching in my core as I chase a sensation that feels just out of reach.

When he pulls my mouth from his skin and drags my face away from him, I whimper.

"Enough." His eyes are glazed, his cheeks flushed. I want to fight for more. But I won't.

*Control it!*

Still, I'm dazed when I stare back at him. Too dazed to do anything more than yelp when he spins me around and pushes me face down over the sofa. He flips my skirt up over my back, and then I feel his bare chest slide down the back of my legs.

"What—?" I start to say, then give a short cry when he buries his face between my thighs. "Oh! God!" I blurt when his tongue slides along my slit, dipping into my aching pussy.

"Ummm..." he moans. "So sweet..."

I don't get a chance to reply because he's spreading my legs to wedge his shoulders between them, and his mouth closes over my clit.

"Fuck!" I half yell. The shock of it leaves me reeling. "Yes! Fuck!" Gripping my ass cheeks with one hand to spread me open, he burrows his face into my wetness, and I swear he's coating his skin with my juices. But there's no time to think about it before he drills a finger deep into my pussy. When he latches onto my clit again, I come undone, my eyes

rolling back and my knees buckling as the orgasm hits me. My words don't make sense anymore.

"You taste like sunshine," he murmurs when I'm finally able to focus again.

I lower my head until my forehead is resting on the back of the sofa. I'm panting like a racehorse galloping down the home stretch. Except I realize it's not the home stretch when he stands up behind me, and I feel the firm nudge of his cockhead against my slit.

"Fuck!" I shriek when he thrusts into me with enough force to knock the sofa back several inches. I grip the backrest with both hands as he pounds into me, his breath rasping hard. He may not be as big as Vidarok, but it's still enough to make my eyes tear as I try to catch my breath and find his rhythm.

"Yes...yes, like that," he growls when the walls of my pussy clasp around him. One hand grips my hip, holding me steady, while the other twists into my hair. He pulls it firmly, bowing my back and arching me closer.

I cry out as his thrusts become more urgent, faster, harder, and deeper. I can feel every inch of him inside me, and with each stroke, he seems to touch a new spot inside me that makes me shiver in pleasure.

It's only when he folds over my back, his face burying into the curve of my neck and then moving down to my shoulder, that I realize what he's about to do. Strong teeth bury into my skin, and I scream with the shock of it. He doesn't drink but doesn't let go, and I'm too close to another blinding orgasm to object at all. In fact, it feels like a second surge of ecstasy is building from where his mouth has clamped down. Twin fires flood through me, meeting in my center and exploding in a shower of fireworks. I'm sure I scream again, but I'm too blinded by pleasure to know for sure.

"Come...come hard, Princess," he growls into my ear. The sound is deep, more animal than man, and I'm certain that if I look into his face right now, his eyes won't be human. And, perversely, it turns me on even more. I grind back against

him like a cat in heat, and it sets him off. He comes with one final deep plunge, then stills, his breathing ragged.

I go still, too, my arms shaking as I try to hold myself up. It's a losing battle – for him, too, and he collapses onto me. I sink onto the sofa in a boneless heap, his weight pressing me down. My body is spent from the intensity of what just happened, but I can't help but feel satisfied at the same time. When he pulls out reluctantly, my thighs are sticky with the amount of cum that gushes from me.

*By Blood...was that what I think it was?*

I don't ask. I don't speak at all. It's impossible for me to think that the dragon in him just claimed me.

*It can't happen! I'm already mated!*

So why am I feeling like I want to purr like a kitten?

“Off!” I mumble, my face pressed against the leather of the sofa. “Off! Get off me.”

“No.” He pulls me closer against his chest and nuzzles his face into my hair. And God help me, I give a happy little sigh.

*Not happy, Vespvr! What the fuck?*

I want to cover my face with my hands, but I can't. He's slid onto the sofa behind me and pulls me into the curve of his body. Hot skin presses against me, from my bare shoulder blades to the exposed skin of my thighs. A muscular arm hooks over mine, and I'm locked against him. I'm still trying to get my breath back, still trying to clear my head, but it's hard to think when he's wrapped around me.

“Tariq...”

“Quiet,” he says. He nuzzles in closer, and something rumbles deep in his chest. I don't know what the sound means, but for some reason, I feel the fight go out of me. My limbs turn to jelly, and everything within me goes soft and dreamy.

It's a spell. It has to be. He's enchanted me.

But it's not that. I know magic. This is something else.



Something that makes me feel warm and happy. So happy that I want to stay exactly like this. Forever. So I don't move. I lie there listening to his breath as it flutters against my neck. I listen as it grows deep and restful. And then I listen to him sleep.

## Vidarok

Morgameau. There's a way to get there from here. I know it. I may not have wings, but that's never stopped me before.

There'll be a portal. Every realm has them. And knowing the royals, there will be one near the castle. That dragon fucker didn't fly from one realm to another on his own steam.

Time is rushing by, and every minute feels like it's tearing a hole in my chest. It's been an hour since he left, and the king and queen have spent that entire time in the Council chamber "deliberating" with the others.

"Dragh!" I spit out. What's there to deliberate over?

*"I assure you, she is quite safe. She arrived seeking asylum."* I mimic the words the bastard dragon had said.

*Bull-fucking-shit!*

She didn't arrive anywhere. She was taken! By *him!*

I've told Lady Aurora and Lord Bellingham of this. I told the whole damn Council how that fucker snatched her into the air and flew off with her...I heard her screams, and they're burned into me. *He* did it. The motherfucking Dragon King of Morgameau. I have no idea why, but I'm going to find out.

I haven't left the spot where we'd met him. I've stayed here pacing since they left. Now, there's a muddy trough in the earth where my feet have churned into it. Waiting. Too much waiting. Waiting since I got here all those days ago. Waiting for them to figure out what the fuck to do next.

The time for waiting is over.

I have to do something.

The Council might be discussing the situation, but that's not going to get me any closer to rescuing my mate. I need to find the portal and get myself to Morgameau as soon as possible.

My feet have already started moving before my brain catches up with them. I run to my quarters, gather my things, check that my ax is secured, and then charge out of the building in the direction the dragon took. I'll feel it when the portal is near. I always do. I just can't fucking make one. My lack of magic has never felt like more of a weakness.

*No time for self-pity, Orc. Do what you do best!*

And what I do best is smash. Right now, I know exactly what I want to smash. A smug fucking dragon's face. I keep that image in my mind as I set forward at a steady jog, my breath smooth and rhythmic. The smooth lawns surrounding the royal residence of Ryacyn are easy to move over. Once I get beyond the outskirts, I'm traveling over more rugged terrain. The occasional road. But I know it won't be far. There's always a way to travel from realm to realm here – it'll be close but not close enough to prove a threat. I just have to pray that I find the right one.

*He went this way. It'll be this way.*

I focus on feeling the first twinges of magic that will mark the portal. They'll prickle at my senses. I'm almost there. I can feel it in my bones. And soon enough, it happens. The ground beneath me starts vibrating, and a gust of wind blows through my hair, a sure sign that I've found the right spot.

My heart rate increases as I steel myself for the fight ahead of me. But I don't hesitate; I don't think twice about what might happen when I go through it. He may be lying in wait on the other side, expecting me to step through. Perhaps it's a trap. A trick. A way to get rid of me because he knows that I'm bound to her, and he wants her for himself.

Somehow, I have no doubt of that.

*But does she want him too?*

I shake my head. I can't obsess about that now. All that matters is getting to Vespyr as quickly as possible.

Taking a cautious step forward, I reach out to where the air is shimmering in front of me. I press against something that feels like a spongy membrane, and then my hand disappears. There's a familiar lurch in my gut as I step in after it.

I emerge in darkness. It's night here. I stand, waiting for my eyes to adjust. I've arrived on a hill, looking out over a settlement. Lights twinkle. In the distance – but not too far off – a large structure looms. It's lit up brightly, beams of light shining up tall walls topped with parapets.

Morgameau Castle. I'm certain of it.

I make my way down the hill and head down past the town at the foot of the castle. I skirt the brighter lights, moving through shadows and staying out of sight. There aren't many people out, so I'm guessing it's very late, but I stick out like a sore thumb over here, and there's no telling what will happen if someone catches sight of me.

*Quietly, Orc...*

I tread lightly. I know I move silently for someone of my size. But as I reach the foot of the hill that houses the castle, I feel like a thundering oaf.

*Oaf.*

That makes me smile a little. The searing names she called me feel like tender endearments now. She can call me anything she likes when I reach her. As long as I can get to call her my own. Shaking myself slightly to focus on the job at hand, I take in my surroundings.

There's a moat around the base of the hill. I take a deep breath and drop down into it, barely making a ripple on the dark surface. There's nothing to hear but the occasional splash of a fish in the murky depths. The water is cold, and it envelops me like a blanket, wrapping around my body and shielding me from view. I open my eyes, letting them adjust to

the near-darkness beneath the surface, and swim forward as quietly as I can.

Pulling myself out on the other side, I wait again, listening for any signs of life – dragon or other. But there's nothing. The castle is silent in the darkness. No guards patrolling below or flyers swooping down from above.

I imagine that their guards will be concentrating on the skies overhead, considering that their king told us that their enemy attacks from above. That gives me some encouragement; if they're looking up above, then maybe they won't be looking down here where Vespyr needs me most.

Taking that as a sign of good fortune, I creep up to the walls of Morgameau Castle and make my way around them, clambering over the ragged rocks that circle them until I come to another sign of good fortune. There's a metal ladder affixed to the heavy stone blocks leading up to the parapets. Perhaps some sort of emergency access point or something for service staff. I don't waste time on what its purpose might be because right now, its purpose is getting me to the top. It doesn't take me long, though it feels that way, exposed on the side of the wall. I wait a few minutes before swinging my leg over the top, half-expecting a dragon to swoop down and blast me. Nothing happens. It almost seems too easy. But then again, I have no doubt that Tariq Fucking Firestarter completely underestimated me.

Getting my bearings, I run an eye over the structures within the safe confines of the castle wall. The interior space is huge. There are gardens and outbuildings and staff quarters. But what draws my attention is the main castle residence. The seat of the throne. The place where dragons have my woman.

My body hums with anticipation as I look around for any signs leading me to where my mate might be located.

Close. I can sense that she's been here. Not right now, but not long ago, either. I take in a deep breath, imagining that she might have breathed in this very air.

It won't be long now.

*I'm coming, Vespyn.*

I climb down the wall and creep toward the lights of the building.

Vespyr

The moonlight is streaming into the room, and I'm still in the same spot. I haven't slept, but I haven't truly been awake either. It all feels like a blur. The wild passion that had consumed me...us. The confusion that overwhelmed me afterward. And then the sound of his breath like a soft lullaby.

He sleeps silently, which surprises me. I don't know what I expected. That he'd snore? Hardly. That would be something uncontrolled and out of character. Everything about this man is rigidly controlled. It's probably why he's such an asshole.

Not an asshole now.

Not when his arm is wrapped around me so protectively, and his breath stirs my hair as it escapes his lips in sleepy sounds of contentment.

I stroke my fingertips along the muscles of his forearm and marvel at how different I feel in this moment.

It feels good.

It feels like home. Not this room I've been locked in, but here, in his arms. With his scent coating my skin. I can pick up my own scent rolling from him, and I remember how he'd delved into my juices. It makes something tighten inside me. A twinge of the lust that had rushed through me from before.

This is madness.

*I have a mate!*

My head feels like it's filled with too many thoughts. Suddenly, I feel trapped by them. And by the arm that's around me. My chest constricts. My breath begins to grow faster.

*Have to get out!*

I'm wound tight as a spring as I carefully grasp his wrist and try to lift it. When he tightens and pulls me closer, my sense of claustrophobia grows.

*Don't panic!*

Filling my lungs, I let the air filter into me, and then I try again. I stroke his arm first, waiting for him to relax his hold.

"Mine," he murmurs, then sighs softly. I frown a little because it shouldn't feel so right to hear that. Not when I'm freaking out inside. Again, I lift his arm, and this time he doesn't pull me back. I carefully sit up and then move to my feet. My dress is crumpled up around my hips, the straps hanging down over my shoulders. I straighten it as best I can, grateful I still have clothing on. I need to leave the room. I need to get out into the air. I need the moon to touch my skin.

Tiptoeing barefoot, I cross the room, then silently open the door. I freeze when I hear him move, waiting at any moment for him to call my name.

And then what? Then what will we do? Talk about what just happened? What is there to say?

*So much. So damn much.*

And nothing at all.

I turn and stare at him for a moment. His face is peaceful in sleep, not marred by the hard lines and angles I've grown so used to from him. He's lovely in the soft light that highlights the strong planes of his face.

I shake my head.

I'm not helping things. If I'm going to think, I can't do it like this. Slipping out of the door, I shut it behind me and step into the hallway. It's silent here too.



I make my way quickly down the hall, no longer feeling the need to creep, and a few moments later, I'm standing at the large double doors that lead to the stairs that will take me down to the gardens. I know the path well – I've walked daily with Grier. But for some reason, a chill runs through me, which is odd for me. When it all boils down to it, I'm a creature of the night. And that makes me wonder why both Tariq and Vidarok described me like the sun.

*Blond hair, Vespyn. Don't read too much into it.*

Taking in a breath, I walk down the stairs and to the path that leads to the barn. I've found comfort in that place, even though it's where Tariq and I had one of our encounters... Another of our encounters. I rub a hand over my face, wishing I didn't feel so damned confused. I'd wanted him so badly then...and yet it had been Vidarok's name on my lips.

I ache for him now, even though my body still hums from the pleasure Tariq gave me.

*By Blood, what's wrong with me?*

A shadow flits over me, a cloud over the moon. I shudder again and wish I'd brought something warm to put on. And that's strange, too. I've just fed and had sex; for a vampire, I should be humming like a powerhouse of energy. I should be generating my own heat right now.

Is this what it feels like to give your heart away? This confusion and hollowness?

I hear the soft sounds of horses moving in the silence of the night and speed up my pace. Things will feel better once I'm there. I'll stroke a soft nose and unburden my sorrows to some creature who won't understand a word that I'm saying but instinctively will know my pain.

What pain?

Dammit, I'm not in pain! I'm confused, that's all. The biggest dilemma in my world right now isn't the dragon I left sleeping back there. It's getting back to my mate without being

caught by my brother. The brother whom Vidarok and Tariq are both convinced is just trying to help me.

They're wrong. Bartholomew is afraid of my power. They all are. It's why Vidarok kept me weak. And why Tariq has taken my magic. I'm barely strong as a vampire anymore.

*That's how he'll keep you.*

I pause midstride. It's dawning on me that even though he came to me, fed me, touched me, and asked me if I'd stay...there was never a mention that he'd return my power.

He won't.

He'll be just like Bart...afraid and controlling. Unable to accept what he doesn't understand.

I'm not mad.

I am not fucking mad!

Again, there's a shadow that cools my skin as the moon disappears. Although, this time, it doesn't shine again. Instinctively, I look up...and recoil in shock. A dark mass of black wings and gnarled bodies is circling directly overhead. They're as silent as smoke, no shrieking or cawing the way they'd done when I faced them before. This is something different. They're not here to battle the dragons. They're here for something else.

I spin around, looking for signs of one of the guards... anyone. But down here, where the gardens end, we're out of sight of the patrols who man the towers.

It's just me...and the Horde.

And there's no doubt in my mind that they've come for me. I can see it in the focus of their eyes and the malice that oozes from them. It's directed at me.

I take a step away as the cloud begins to descend. It doesn't reach the ground but hovers above it while one of them sinks quietly to her feet in front of me.

"Hello, little witch," she hisses. The gray skin of her face is stretched taut across her skull, her nose barely more

than nostrils over the sharp beak of her mouth. Her stench makes bile rise in my throat...like decaying flesh and burned hair.

“What do you want?” It’s a stupid question. Obviously, they want me. I have no idea why, though I guess I’m about to find out.

“So the dragons think they’ve found a secret weapon, eh?” She drags out the words in a string of sibilant sounds that grate over my nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I snap. I clench my hands, feeling my nails sharpening into claws. My teeth sharpen into fangs. But even flush with Tariq’s blood, it’s not enough. His spell has left me with barely a shred of my strength. The creature steps forward until we’re inches apart. I’m about to step backward when I realize that there’s a wall of them behind me.

She sniffs at me, a snorting sound that seems to rattle through her skull. “Funny...I don’t smell any magic on you now.” She chuckles, yellow eyes glowing in the shadows. It makes my blood curdle.

“I have more than enough,” I bluff.

“I don’t think so.” She gives another of those chuckles that sounds more like the tail of a rattlesnake clattering. And then her hand snaps out and wraps around my throat.

“Tariq!” I try to scream, but a filthy palm clamps over my mouth from behind me. The vile taste of it turns my stomach. I can’t believe I was bathing in their disgusting blood just days ago. I flail. I kick out. I try to fight. But it’s no use. There are just too many of them. And then I’m being lifted, and the ground starts to disappear into the distance. I fight some more. I keep fighting. I’ll keep fighting to the death.

But as we speed away into the darkness of the night, I’m afraid that’s exactly what’s about to happen.

I’m going to die.

## Tariq

Sleep is something I've learned to value. Being at war will do that to you. Which is why my first reaction is outrage when I find myself rudely awakened from a very deep, very satisfied slumber.

“Where the fuck is she?” The bellowing voice doesn't wake me as much as the strong hand on my shoulder. The hand gives me a rough shake, hard enough to rattle my teeth. And then the hand tightens forcefully and lifts me. Not just into a sitting position but straight into the air.

“Flames!” I snarl. Whoever this is will be getting a taste of my wrath as soon as I can clear the sleep from my brain. Normally, it doesn't take me this long to wake up, but after what happened...

“Where!?” the voice comes again, louder this time.

I shake my head; things are pulling into focus. I'm staring into the enraged face of an angry Orc.

Vidarok. The captain of the queen's guard.

And Vespvr's would-be mate.

*How the fuck did he get in here?*

“This is the last time I'm asking nicely, fucker. Next time, you'll be swallowing your own teeth!” He's pissed as fuck.

I smirk. He's a scary sight when he's this angry, but his threats are hollow.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.” I’ll mess with him if I want.

“You know damn well who I’m talking about,” Vidarok roars into my face. “Vespyr! Where is she?” His demand echoes around the room.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” I grin at him, which infuriates the man. And then his nostrils flare, and his eyes narrow. He shoves his face closer to mine and inhales. I know exactly what he’s catching a scent of. Vespyr. Her juices are all over me. I may as well have bathed in her.

“You...!” he snarls, his grip tightening almost painfully. “What did you do?” I sense his fist swinging up rather than see it. I dip my head to the side, feeling the air displace as it narrowly misses me. “What?” he repeats.

“I’ll give you one guess!” Without thinking, I lift my knees up sharply and smash them into his chest. The force of it flings him back several strides, and he releases me abruptly. I land lightly on my feet, calves flexed, hands fisted, preparing to launch myself. But he barrels forward before I get the chance. The man is a mountain. In my dragon form, he’d be no match for me, but there’s no space to shift in the confines of the room. And in my human form, I’ll be flattened if he hits me. I step aside nimbly, using my size to my advantage as I duck away from him. But if I think his size will make him a lumbering ox, I’m wrong.

The Orc moves with surprising speed and agility. I dodge him once, twice, but he manages to land a blow that sends me staggering back. The force rocks me, and I stumble, barely keeping my feet.

My vision swims for a moment, and I take a deep breath to clear it. He takes advantage of my disorientation and leaps forward, swinging both fists. I duck beneath his wild swings and slip around his right side, grabbing onto his arm. Wood splinters and shards of it fly as we smash through a coffee table, knocking a chair over. His momentum sends us both flying towards the wall, and we crash into it with a loud thud.

But I don't let go of him as we fall to the ground in a tangle of limbs. My grip is like steel as I press my forearm into his throat while using my other hand to push off from the wall behind us. By the time he realizes what's happening, it's too late; he's pinned beneath me, struggling to free himself but unable to break loose from my iron grip.

"Where is she?!" Vidarok demands again, only this time, his words are muffled because of the pressure on his throat.

"I don't know," I snarl back at him, pressing down harder until he stops struggling against me. As I say it, I realize that it's true. I don't feel her in the room with us. She hasn't run in to tear us apart – and I know without a doubt that she'd do something like that.

Releasing him abruptly, I get to my feet. He staggers onto his own, his eyes filled with hatred.

"Stop!" I raise my hand when I see him gathering himself to launch at me again. "She was here. She was with me. But she's gone."

"What do you mean, she's gone?" He looks around the room as if he needs proof that I'm telling the truth. Turning from me, he storms across the chaos we've left in the wake of our fight, flinging open the doors that lead to the other areas of the suite. A minute later, he's back, staring at me wild-eyed. "She's not here."

"That's what I just fucking told you."

"Where did she go?" He's stalking toward me again.

*Fuck, but he's huge!*

"If I knew that, do you think I'd tell you?"

"No. You wouldn't." His hand glides back, and I see his fingers curl around the handle of something that's protruding past his shoulders. When he swings it back, a huge metal blade cuts through the air with the promise of death. "But maybe I can convince you."

“Flames take you!” I dodge as the ax head slices past me. He swings it so deftly it might as well be a child’s toy. A psychotic child. With muscles upon muscles. Who wants to kill me. “I told you she was here, but now she’s not.”

He lifts his head and sniffs at the air. “You fucked her.”

“So what?” I shrug.

“She’s my fucking mate, you dick!”

“That so?” I lift an eyebrow. Although I’ll admit, it’s not easy to remain nonchalant with a freaking ax swinging inches away from my face. “I think that’s something you should be discussing with her.”

His breath hisses out. “I plan to. Just as soon as you take me to her.”

“I just told you she’s gone!” I’m growing concerned about this. Why would she leave? When we’d slipped into sleep, I could feel her contentment. There was confusion, too, but she was happy in my arms. I’d planned to speak to her when we woke to discuss what happened between us, but I’d been too spent to think clearly. And this was a conversation that needed a clear head. I needed to make sense of it all. I’ve been with women before, but never like this. There’s never been a moment when my dragon had surged to the fore like that.

*You bit her.*

The Orc interrupts my thoughts. “Well, she’s not here now.”

I glare at him. “I don’t know where she’s gone.”

He snorts. “Maybe she would have stuck around if she’d been impressed with your performance.”

“I could say the same for you, Orc.” My lip curls.

He gives a growl. “She didn’t leave me. You *stole* her, you fuck!”

“And yet she could have gone back to you, and she didn’t.” I slip past the swinging ax and stroll away from him as

casually as I'm able. I will not let him think that he's getting to me.

"She was afraid of Bartholomew. Afraid of what he was planning."

"From the sounds of it, he only wants to help her." I turn back to him. "You were there. You heard him. Or didn't you believe any of it?"

He shrugs, not looking at me. "Maybe I do."

Understanding begins to sink in. "She told me she was hunted. That was you, wasn't it? You were sent by Bellingham to bring her back. That's how you ended up together."

"It's not important."

"Not important?" My voice is incredulous. "Hah! Of course, it's important. You hunted her down and planned to drag her back to face whatever he had planned for her. You really think she's your mate?"

"I know what I know, dragon!" he growls. "Now stop fucking around and take me to her."

"Your skull really must be as thick as it looks, Orc. I told you I don't know where she is."

"Well, you'd better find out in a hurry." The ax swings in my direction again. "Or things are going to get messy."

I snort. "Put that thing away. You're not scaring me with it." Not much. "I'll look for her, but not because you're asking me to." I'm getting worried.

Turning around, I see that all the windows are firmly shut. Though it's not likely that she'd climb out of one. The Orc's nostrils are flaring again, and then he backs away from me. He stops at the door and takes in a deep breath before pushing it open.

"What are you doing?" I ask. He lifts a hand to silence me while he keeps inhaling deeply, dipping closer to the floor.

"She went this way." He jerks his head in the direction of the hallway ahead of us. Not waiting for me to reply, he



starts moving ahead, pausing occasionally to take in the air. We stop when we reach the doors to the gardens. Although “stop” may not be the right word; we pause briefly as he kicks them open, tearing them from their hinges. Long muscular legs consume so much ground that I have to jog to keep up as he marches out down the walkway.

“She’s probably down at the barn,” I say under my breath, feeling a brief twinge of relief as it occurs to me. A strange sense of dread has been building, but I keep telling myself that it’s my imagination.

“The barn?” He glances over his shoulder at me.

“She likes the horses.”

“I know,” he mutters. “She rode as a girl.”

“I didn’t know that.” I don’t know why I admit that.

“Of course you don’t,” he sneers. “You’re not her mate.”

“I—” I stop. What was I about to say? That I am?

*No...*

My scales slide beneath my skin, and deep inside, the dragon unfurls. He wants more than I’m willing to comprehend.

“What she did as a girl is irrelevant. It’s what she does now that matters.”

“If you truly cared, all of it would matter.” His eyes lock with mine.

“We’re wasting time. If you want to get this over with, get your ass to the barn.”

“Fine.” He keeps walking. And then he stops.

“The stables are up ahead,” I tell him. I don’t need his freakish sense of smell to keep us going in the right direction.

He shakes his head. Heavy shoulder muscles roll as he flexes them.

“What are you doing?” I frown.

“Something’s wrong.” He lifts his chin and takes a deep breath.

“I told you the stables are that way.” I’m about to point them out again when I stop, too. My nostrils twitch, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

The stink of decay lingers in the air.

“Something died here,” he says.

*Please God, no...*

But I know he’s wrong. “You smell rot,” I say.

“Yes. Rotting flesh. And Vespyr, too.”

“It’s the Horde.” My chest tightens. “Fuck!” I turn in a circle, almost waiting for them to descend. Nothing happens. If they were here, they aren’t anymore.

“She was here.” He sinks to one knee and strokes his hand over the earth. “And more. Of them. The ones who bring rot.”

“The Horde. Here.” My voice is hoarse. How the fuck could this happen?

He straightens quickly, looking around. “Her scent stops here. She didn’t go further.” He stares up into the air. “She’s been taken.” He glares at me. “She’s been taken from *your* care.”

I don’t say anything because I know it’s true.

“Where are your guards?” He’s still looking around. “Why didn’t they sound the alarm?”

“We... We don’t expect attacks on the castle. It’s never happened.” I’m having a hard time looking him in the eye. “Our boundaries are more vulnerable, so we assign the bulk of our forces out there.”

“You have no fucking guards here?”

“Just a few. On the most vulnerable points.” Fuck, all of this sounds so damned incompetent.

“Which was probably why I just walked right in,” he mutters. He shakes his head. “Unfuckingbelievable.” He stalks away and begins moving toward one of the stairways that leads to the top of the closest parapet. He breaks into a jog halfway, and then he’s running up the stairs. I run up after him; that sense of dread is now out in full force.

He jogs along the length of the wall, looking out over the town below us. When he reaches the end, he spins around and runs back.

“Gone...” he mutters under his breath. “Fucking gone.” He glares at me as he passes me. When he comes to a halt on the other side, he fixes me with so much hatred in his eyes that I can imagine it burning my skin. “Dragh! She’s gone! And it’s your fault!” He raises a shaking hand.

“We’ll find her,” I say, though even I can hear the lie in my words. They’ve taken her, and there’s no way of knowing where. We have no idea where the Horde is based. They just swoop in and attack. When they disperse, it’s like trying to catch mist. “We’ll find her,” I say again, turning to look out at the night sky. Maybe if I try hard enough, I’ll be able to make out the shadow of them. With any luck, they haven’t gone too far. She could still be close.

I’m standing on the wall, staring out into the darkness, when I hear the roar from behind me.

“You fucking idiot!” Vidarok rages at me. His eyes glow with fury as he begins to charge toward me.

I should shift and take my dragon form and face him head-on, but I don’t. He’s too fast. I’m too shocked. And if I’m honest with myself, I’m still too shattered by what has happened.

*What have I done?*

I said she’d be safe here.

When his fist catches my jaw, I feel bones crunch. Part of me feels like I deserve it, but another part knows to fight back. I catch him in the side with a blow meant to shatter. I

think it does because his breath comes out in a rush as I feel his ribs break. But it doesn't stop him coming.

He's a force of pure rage when he aims a flurry of brutal punches at me. Some miss, some land...hard. I feel my nose flatten, but not before I land a fist to his throat that has him claspng at it and wheezing. Yet still, he keeps coming. It's like being faced by a bull charging a red flag. Even without air in his lungs, he directs another charge at me.

"Motherfucker!" he bellows.

I barely get a chance to choke out a curse before his arms close around me, his weight flinging us both backward. I stagger, an arm flailing behind me, as I feel something hit the back of my legs. I lose my balance, and then I'm toppling. We both are. Crashing straight over the edge of the parapet.

"No!" It's all I manage to shout out before we start falling.

Tumbling.

Plummeting straight down toward the rocks far below us.

***"Forged: Becoming the Orc Queen"* is on pre-order now. Add it to your wish list, or order a copy today to follow Vespyr, Vidarok, and Tariq's story and find out what happens next!**



**Read on below to get a taste of "Cursed," Book 1 in the "Becoming the Demon Queen" series. Quinn's story is where it all began.**

# Cursed 1

Quinn

“Come on, Barry, just hop on down. You can do it,” I croon, extending a hand and trying to look encouraging. Beady eyes stare at the gauntlet I’m wearing – the heavy leather glove will be vital if his intimidating talons were to wrap around my wrist. I suspect that’s not about to happen any time soon. His eyes are filled with suspicion, and he won’t come anywhere near me. I edge closer, rising onto my toes and getting a grip on a branch just below the huge bird. His eyes flicker. Vast wings flap once, and he’s suddenly three branches higher.

*Darn it!*

“Please, Barry,” I coax. “Just hop on down to me.” *Ugh!* If I don’t get the stupid bird back in his cage before my boss gets back, she’s going to be upset. I make soft kissing noises. He normally likes those. I make the same sounds whenever it’s feeding time – mainly to stop him removing one of my fingers when I hand over the chunks of meat.

I’ve been working with the injured Turkey Buzzard since he came in several weeks ago after flying into a power line. Now his wing is almost fully healed. A fact I’m learning the hard way, because he took the first chance he had to fly away when I brought him out into the aviary. The zoo where I work as a junior zookeeper is known for its spectacular raptor enclosure. Which isn’t helping me right now, because it’s huge, and Barry the buzzard has flown up one of the tallest trees. When he shouldn’t even be out of the vet area yet. But I

couldn't help myself. He's been getting so much better, and every day, it's like I can see the frustration in his eyes. He's been longing to flap those giant wings and soar. He's wild, after all. How am I going to get him back in his usual cage?

*Smart move, Quinn.*

He soared away the minute I walked in and he's not due to be let out for at least another week. My boss Emma's a great head zookeeper, and also a good friend, but as the birds of prey specialist and onsite vet, she's strict about treatment protocols. And I've pretty much broken all of them by bringing Barry out now.

"Come on, Barry," I beg. "I'm your buddy, remember? The one who brings you all the treats...nom nom nom? Please come down? Please?"

I clamber higher, trying to ignore the sound of voices from nearby. I don't want Barry spooked. Or myself, either. I'm not great in the spotlight. But the voices are getting louder. The excited banter and babble of little kids. I shove my eyeglasses up the bridge of my nose and sneak a look over my shoulder. It looks like an entire busload of preschoolers has just trooped up to the edge of the enclosure.

*Great...just great!*

I grit my teeth and turn my attention back to the bird. He's going to listen. It's all going to be okay.

"Barry, I want you to come back here right now!" I say firmly. Barry cocks his head, eyeing me. I see him ease slightly forward. "Yes...good boy! You can do it! I'll give you an extra mouse if you'll come back."

Barry cocks his head again, then flaps once more and suddenly he's at the top of the tree.

"Barry! Darn it, you silly bird!" I blurt.

Below me, the chatter has grown more animated.

"What's that lady doing, Miss Aintree?" a small voice pipes up. I can feel dozens of little eyes on my back now. It

makes me want to twitch, almost burning between my shoulder blades.

“I’m sure she’s busy with something important, Sam,” the schoolteacher replies. “Maybe some maintenance on the cage or something.” She doesn’t sound too sure. As if I would actually choose to be up here. I’m a little scared of heights.

*Not looking down!*

*Not looking!*

I try to ignore them, still scrambling after the bird. I’m halfway up the tree now, my thick boots scrabbling for purchase. There’s silence as the kids keep watching.

“I wanna see the monkeys!” a kid says. There’s a babble of voices as other kids chime in. I hear feet moving as the group starts to dissipate.

I guess a chubby woman climbing a tree doesn’t rank high on their list of fascinating viewing. Thank heavens.

*Yes, go see the monkeys!*

“Barry, come down here!” I hiss. That full-of-nonsense bird is staring at me again. I swear, I’ll throttle him if I get my hands on him. Actually, I don’t mean that, and he probably knows it too. That’s why he’s staying right where he is. I hear a slight rustle as he collects himself, and then his wings spread wide and he’s swooping straight over my head.

“No!” I yell. Without thinking, I twist and snap out a hand, leaping as I grasp at the feathers overhead. Barry flaps his wings and aims up towards the top of the cage. My arms strain as I narrowly miss the plumage of his underbelly.

*Close...so close...!*

If I just reach a little higher, I’ll get him, I’m sure of it.

*Come on...come on...*

“She’s flying!” a voice says sharply beneath me.

I snap a glance down to where a couple of kids are still standing below...far below. One is pointing up at me, the other

has an ice-cream stuck in his mouth while he stares up at me, wide-eyed. The ice-cream falls.

Something bumps against the top of my head, and I twist to look up at it, grimacing as my eyeglasses are pushed askew. I've just hit the top of the bird enclosure...my face mashed up against the bars. I shriek and grab onto them with both hands.

"Oh, my word!" I push out. I'm dangling from the roof of the aviary, the floor two stories beneath me. Yet I can't feel my weight as I cling to the bars. What's going on? How did I...? What...? My face is smooshed up against the bars, I can't turn my head. It's like someone is pushing me from below... but that's absurd.

"Miss Aintree!" the kid calls out again. "She's flying! Come see!"

All thoughts of Barry are dashed away as I frantically pull myself along the bars of the roof, trying to reach some place that I can climb down. My grip is slipping, though. It's not made easier by the fact that one hand is encased in the leather gauntlet, and the other is slippery with sweat. Terror surges through me. And then I lose my grasp and plummet. I shriek and windmill my arms...legs too. From this height, I'll break every bone in my body when I hit the ground.

But I don't hit the ground. I'm...I'm hanging. From *nothing*. I spin my head from side to side, then up again. I'm not holding onto anything at all. But I'm not falling either. I'm making these squeaking noises.

A glance over my shoulder reveals a blur of motion that looks very much like what Barry looked like when he flew by. Feathers. Wings. What? Did he catch me?

*Don't be ridiculous, Quinn.*

Then I look up and see Barry staring down at me with a quizzical look on his face. What, then... What...?

"Wings! She's got wings!" the kid yells. I hear the sharp sound of heels on paving and realize that the teacher must be returning.



“Sam, what on earth are you doing back there?” I hear her calling out.

*Oh lordy...oh, lordy lordy!*

What’s happening to me? I can’t have wings. I can’t! It’s not possible! I must have them. There’s no other explanation. I have wings and this school teacher is about to see me like this.

*Why do I have wings?*

*What’s wrong with me?*

I glance around frantically, realizing that I’m gradually descending. But as the sense of panic builds, I feel myself drop abruptly. I land on my butt on the dry earth beneath me. The jolt knocks the wind from me, but I wasn’t high enough to do any real damage. I scramble to my feet, dusting myself off just as the teacher reaches the kids. She stares in at me curiously.

“She was in the air...with wings,” the kid says again.

I ignore the little voice in my head that’s telling me to feel my back.

“Of course, Sam,” the teacher says. “Birds have wings. That’s how they fly.”

“No! The lady! The *lady* has wings,” the kid insists. The teacher stares at me for a moment, her eyes narrowing. Then she gives a little shake of the head and a knowing smile.

I shrug. “Morning,” I mumble. “Lovely day for an outing, isn’t it?” I keep my front to her because...my back feels chilly. Like there’s a breeze blowing on it, from where a pair of wings ripped through the material of my uniform.

No! Come on! That’s insane.

Maybe I’ve lost my ever-loving mind. It’s quite possible.

She gives a hesitant smile.

“She was flying, Miss Aintree, honest!” the kid insists.

I shrug again and pull a face. “Kids, huh? What an imagination...”

Miss Aintree rolls her eyes and gives a small nod.

“Come on, Sam. They’re feeding the monkeys.”

“But she was! I saw it...I saw her wings!” he insists, turning to stare back at me as the teacher gently guides him away. The other kid pauses for a second, then turns and bolts. I exhale a shuddering breath.

*What the actual heck?!*

A scrambling sound beside me shows that Barry has landed next to me. I barely acknowledge the bird. My head is still reeling.

I move numbly toward the door of the enclosure. There’s a small building adjoining the aviary. We handle all the behind-the-scenes bird care there – vet area, feed bay, general storage, as well as some darker living areas for the nocturnal birds. I push the door open and make my way inside. Barry is hopping along with me, meek as can be. I feel like I’m squinting through a blurred haze as I walk out of the bright daylight into the cool interior.

“Pull yourself together, Quinn,” I mutter to myself. For a moment, I battle to get my bearings. Barry needs to go back into his cage, and I stumble toward it. I pull open the door, and he jumps inside like some kind of trained seal. Why wasn’t he behaving so well when we were out earlier? And what’s brought about this sudden change in attitude? I almost broke my neck for him.

*Darn bird!*

I shut the door, then slump onto a seat near the small table where Emma and I often have coffee together. I pull off my glasses, rub my eyes, then put them back on. I can barely see straight right now. But who could blame me? This is insane!

I’m about to get up to make myself some tea when the door swings open. Emma’s returned. Thank heavens I’ve managed to get some semblance of normality back.

Normality? I just grew wings and flew!

“Hey, Quinn,” she says brightly. “All good?”

No!

Not even close.

I nod. “Sure. Everything’s hunky dory,” I lie. “Just did some tidying up around the enclosure. Checked on Barry.” I stare at the buzzard as if he’s about to rat me out. “He seems to be doing really well.”

“Yeah,” Emma agrees. “I’m thinking we might be able to integrate him with the rest of the birds soon. Poor boy. After what happened to his wing, he’ll never be fit to be released into the wild, but I think he’ll fit into the main aviary very well. And clearly, he’s getting sick of being locked up.”

I resist the urge to pull a face at the bird. Instead, I nod and smile. Emma gives me a strange look.

“Everything okay?” she asks. She’s definitely looking at me funny.

“Sure, couldn’t be better,” I reply too brightly.

“You sure? Because your, uh...glasses...” She makes a vague gesture toward my face. I lift my hand to the frames of my spectacles. They’re on crooked. I remove them, about to wipe the lenses. There’s a huge crack running through one of them.

Shoot! No wonder everything was blurry.

“Oh...boy...” I mumble. “Don’t know how that happened.” I drop the ruined frames on the table between us. “Must’ve been while I was scrubbing out the owlhouse.”

“Is that when you tore your shirt too?” Emma asks. I frown at her.

“My shirt?” I glance down to where the crisp khaki of my uniform is pulled snugly over my chest. Damn! I haven’t been eating all that healthy lately. I’ve obviously put on some weight.

I can't see anything wrong with my shirt. Though without my glasses, that's hardly surprising. I'm blind as a bat without them.

"No...um...at the back," Emma says. "You seem to have torn it." I crane my neck to look over my shoulder. I reach a hand over too. My fingertips encounter torn fabric. Try as I might, I can't see far enough to figure out what I'm feeling. I move to the small restroom adjoining the work area. There's a tiny mirror above the handbasin and I stand with my back facing it, trying to get a better look at my shirt. A blurry look. Still half-blind, darn it. So the breeze I felt not so long ago was real.

And I can just make out that there are two neat rips down the back, roughly over each of my shoulder blades.

*Oh, heck!*

I feel under the fabric, half-expecting to find some sort of injury. Broken skin, or grazing. But there's nothing...aside from two soft ridges that tingle slightly when I touch each one.

This makes no sense. But Emma is still looking at me, obviously expecting some kind of answer. I huff out a breath.

"I'm so clumsy," I say. "I probably got hooked on the top of the door. You know how rough those edges are where they put in the new hinges. Or on one of the trees in the enclosure."

It definitely wasn't wings.

*No!*

*Nope!*

"Hmm, you're right," Emma says thoughtfully. "I asked Tony to take a look at those a week ago already. Obviously, he hasn't yet. I'll have a word with him."

I try not to cringe. The zoo handyman is a grouch, but I hope I'm not landing him in trouble.

*Sorry, Tony!*

“I have a spare shirt in my locker, if you’d like to change,” Emma adds. I shake my head with a tight smile, running an eye over her trim shape. My boss is sweet for offering but there’s no way I’d squeeze myself into one of her shirts.

“I have my jacket,” I say. “It’s cool enough to wear. I was getting a bit chilly anyhow.” It’s not a lie – the temperature has dropped since earlier in the day. It may be cool enough to deter afternoon guests from coming to the zoo. Which would suit me just fine. We normally do a brief demonstration with some of the more habituated birds around mid-afternoon if there are enough visitors. But if the weather’s rotten, maybe we’ll skip it.

*Please let us skip it!*

I don’t relish the thought of dealing with the public right now. Why? Because I just sprouted wings and flew to the roof of the aviary! I couldn’t have, though. I rub my eyes. I’m overtired and I need some quiet time to myself. That’s it! I’m all peopled and buzzarded out.

“Are you sure you’re okay, hon?” Emma seems quite concerned now. “You’re really quite pale. Maybe you hit your head when you bumped your glasses.”

“You know, I think you’re right,” I answer, rubbing my forehead. There’s definitely a headache brewing.

“How about you get packed up here and head home?” Emma says, reminding me why I like working with her so much. “I can hold down the fort this afternoon. Looks like we’ll have a quiet day anyhow. I’ll do the rounds before I oversee the feeds later. There isn’t any vet work to worry about right now, so I have time.”

“Thanks, Em,” I finally answer. “I’d appreciate that. I’ll come in early to make up for it, okay?”

She gives a dismissive wave and shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. Just go have a lie-down. You’re always here first and you’re the last to leave. You need to do *you* for a change. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I slide my arms into the sleeves of my jacket, and reach for my backpack, giving a final wave as I head for the door. I'm pretty proud that I keep my voice steady as I call out a final goodbye.

That's it! The only explanation that makes any real sense. I hit my head hard and then imagined growing wings. I definitely need to lie down. I'll be just fine after some rest.

*Get your copy of ["Cursed: Becoming the Demon Queen"](#) and see where it all began!*

# About the Author

Hello there, lovely reader!

I'm BE Brouillard, and I am absolutely thrilled to welcome you into the captivating world of my latest creation in the "Becoming the Orc Queen" series. For the past two decades, writing has been my ultimate passion, and creating Fire has truly ignited my imagination.

As an author, I find immense joy in weaving tales of paranormal romance that whisk you away from the ordinary and into the extraordinary. The intricate dance between forbidden love, ancient mysteries, and the allure of the supernatural has always fascinated me. In this latest book, I delved deep into the realms of passion, power, and heart-pounding suspense.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of crafting this story was bringing to life the fiery dynamic between our protagonists, Vespvr and Vidarok. The challenge was to develop Vespvr as a more sympathetic character, because if you've read my previous series, you will know that she had some moments where she made pretty big errors in judgement! Let me know if you're growing to love her yet.

Also, with this being a menage, I had some fun weaving in Tariq's character. Creating distinct personalities for more than one male protagonist can be interesting, because you want them both to be steamy compelling, but remain separate identities. I hope I've managed to accomplish this for you!

Thank you for embarking on this supernatural journey with me. I hope my words will sweep you off your feet and immerse you in a world where love knows no bounds and mysteries abound. Let's stay connected, and until our next magical encounter, may your days be filled with love, laughter, and of course, a touch of the extraordinary.

Warmly,

BE Brouillard

I would love to hear from you, so please look me up:

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