

ELECTRA CAGE



PREGNANT
BY THE
VAMPIRE
KING

ARRANGED MARRIAGE FANTASY ROMANCE



ELYSIUM VAMPIRE KINGS

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Arranged Marriage Fantasy Romance

Elysium Vampire Kings Book 4

Electra Cage

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Prologue - Vinir

The male fae's limbs were buckled to the torture rack, muscles tense and flexing uselessly against the bindings. Vinir took his scalpel and with medical precision, dragged the blade down the skin over the fae's breastbone. A thin crimson line followed the blade's cut. A rasping sound from the fae's tongueless mouth, a gurgle that breaks off into a sound resembling a scream.

"Shh, shh, it'll all be over soon," Vinir cooed without breaking focus. "All I need is to make a few adjustments to your body."

Vinir set to work, his fingers working quickly and with precision as he cut open the fae's body and peeled the skin back to reveal the still-living organs beneath his fleshsuit.

"Fae are inherently magical creatures in the way we vampires aren't," Vinir explained as he continued his work, implanting shards of glowing glass between organs and muscles. "One of you will be the key to lifting my curse. Maybe not you, hmm? But one of you ..."

When all of the runes were set in place, Vinir murmured the words the witches who'd given him the spell to convert fae into a living magical converter that he could, in theory, use to reverse the curse his enemies had inflicted him with. Each stitch to reseal the fae's body glowed with angry red magic, and since the fae man was still breathing raggedly when Vinir was done, the ritual seemed to have succeeded.

He peeled off his gloves and clapped the fae's shoulder. The fae gurgled when Vinir's touch burned and sizzled his flesh.

"Good work, my friend," Vinir said, whistling happily while he cleaned up. "You survived. Maybe you have a chance at helping me after all, hmm? Wouldn't that be great?"

Vinir meticulously wiped down the stone slab where his tools and various torture devices rested. There was a chance he would be freed of his curse by the new moon,

assuming this fae survived the night. Then life could go back to normal...

The door to his secret room opened, and Vinir glanced over his shoulder. "Who dare interrupt me while I'm working?" he snarled.

A blue-robed man cowered in the doorway. "It's urgent, sire—"

"Then get on with it!"

"It is your bride-to-be, my king. She's been found."

The elation Vinir had mused up at the end of this procedure dulled to a pale memory. A scowl crept into his features.

"How is this possible? I thought she disappeared," Vinir said. "I'd hoped she died," he added with a mutter.

"King Sinnegard assured me personally that she's alive and well and fit for the wedding to take place immediately," the man said.

Shades of rage flickered and flared inside me, blazing into an inferno. I snapped and blinked across the room, grabbing the man by the throat and slamming him into the door.

"I won't be getting married, you incompetent old fool," Vinir snarled.

The man's wrinkled face squirmed beneath Vinir's grip, eyes bulging. A horse croak came from his suffocating lungs as Vinir's poisonous touch burned into him, flesh roasting in seconds.

"You—you swore an oath ... there are ... consequences," the man wheezed. "Fae king will ... be displeased ..."

Vinir released him, throwing him to the ground. "Fuck."

The man groaned and coughed, but Vinir ignored him.

Not only did he not want to get married, his bride-to-be was a fae princess. A whore, as far as he was concerned. No fae was good enough to touch his royal flesh unless it was to burn them.

A wicked smile curled the edges of his mouth. If his most recent fae experiment failed, then he knew exactly what he'd be doing with his fae bride. He would marry her, then, to fulfill his obligation to the fae king ... but he swore no obligations for what would happen once he had her in his possession.

If he had his way, he wouldn't be keeping her for long. There were many ways a foolish fae woman could die in a kingdom that despised her kind.

Chapter 1 - Aelwen

King Vinir stood tall and regal at the wedding altar, a slab of black, shining marble decorated with crimson roses. Moonlight streamed through the tall windows and illuminated his pale skin. Aelwen took her first step down the aisle, her stomach in knots, her fidgeting hands hidden only by the bouquet.

She couldn't deny he was handsome, with his sharp, elegant features and powerful jaw just made for kissing. His shiny black cape flowed down his back and over one shoulder, revealing only a hint of the ruffled white button-down beneath it. Rumor has it that Vinir is a horrible, ruthless man, and Aelwen could see the shadows in those dangerous silver eyes. The mark of a man who enjoyed inflicting pain.

Aelwen had never even met him before.

She had no choice about whether this wedding happened or not—could anyone blame her for spending years running?

But after being trapped for six months in a castle due to a curse and witnessing two distant souls fall in love against all odds, Aelwen was ready to take responsibility for her fate. She couldn't claim to love the man standing at the other end of the aisle, who she gradually closed the distance between, but she did love her father, and he wanted her to go through with this.

They'd spent years at odds, but now, she was ready to fulfill her role as a princess of the fae kingdom and attempt to find some unity with the neighboring vampire kingdoms. That all started with her husband-to-be, King Vinir.

The pews were filled with all the notable nobles from the lands all around, fae and vampire alike. In contrast with the vampires' dark lace and velvets, the fae wore gowns and suits of fluttering leaves, flowers, and thin, floating silks and gossamers.

Aelwen sucked in a deep breath when she reached the end of the aisle, stepping up to the dais where King Vinir

waited for her. His silver eyes pinned her in place, but it was the disinterest within them that stung her the most.

Did he even want this wedding?

She could see most men's desire lit like a flame deep within when they looked at her. Desires they subdued because most of them knew better than to hope for anything from her, a princess. Her virginity was a protected commodity that her father would have slaughtered any man if it was risked prematurely.

But within minutes, Vinir would own Aelwen. She would be his body and all. Signed away as his property, his wife. But he didn't look like he wanted her at all, and he hardly gave her more than a glance.

She swallowed and settled in place opposite him.

The officiant cleared his throat. "Today, we gather here to witness the union of King Vinir and Princess Aelwen in matrimony."

His words echo through the cathedral. Aelwen had once expected, so long ago, that she'd be excited to get married, but she couldn't focus on the proceedings at all. Next to her, Vinir was as still and silent as a statue. She held her breath, wishing away the droning in her ears, trying to push back the fear that this wedding was a huge mistake.

How could she fulfill her duties if her husband wouldn't even look at her on their wedding day?

Her father, King Sinnegard of Gaivalon, had demanded that Aelwen make her husband happy. Provide him with many children. Perform her duties as expected. Bring unity between their peoples, and he would grant her his favor again.

And no sooner.

"By the laws and customs of our two kingdoms, King Vinir and Princess Aelwen, do you accept each other as husband and wife?" the officiant asked.

There was a moment of silence so deafening that Aelwen thought that she'd lost her hearing. She stared right at

Vinir, commanding him to be the first to speak. She was here, prepared to give him her everything, to fling herself into this marriage heart first and make the best of it.

But him?

It took him a long, slow second to look at her. His silver eyes glowed in the moonlight, and she couldn't help but imagine those tireless eyes raking over her naked body, wondering if they would still be so emotionless or if he would reveal a hint of his feelings to her.

"I do," Vinir said, his voice ringing loud and clear.

Aelwen's heart hammered, half expecting that she was hearing things. "I do," she said quietly but firmly, trying not to let her fear show through her voice.

The fear of what would inevitably come next.

"Then, by the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride," said the officiant at last.

Aelwen turned, expectant, to face King Vinir. His cape ruffled as he did the same. Half closing her eyes, she tilted her head, waiting for him.

But he simply stood there, his face inscrutable—merely a cold and ruthless king.

"No, we won't be doing that part," Vinir declared. "This wedding is official, sanctified, and done. Enjoy the party, everyone."

Then he turned away from the assembled guests and Aelwen and strode down the dais away from her. Aelwen's eyes widened, and a blush of embarrassment crept up her cheeks at the confused murmurs traveling through the guests. She stood there, dumbfounded at King Vinir's simple refusal even to touch her, let alone kiss her.

Had she done something wrong? Had she offended him somehow?

It was easy to stand there worrying where she'd gone wrong, but it became more apparent by the second, at least to

her, that she'd done everything she'd been asked. It was Vinir who had fallen short in this arrangement.

The burn of embarrassment in her stomach grew into a speck of anger. She wasn't going to stand here and be humiliated by her husband's refusal, and she was going to get answers.

Hiking up her dress, she stomped after him.

He disappeared behind a closed door, but she was fast despite her heels and heavy wedding gown conspiring to slow her down.

An expansive hallway unfolded before her, with King Vinir's lone figure lazily wading down the other side.

"King Vinir!" Aelwen shouted. "King Vinir, you turn around this instant and face me."

He stopped in his tracks and turned slowly. His expression was still unreadable, but she swore there was a hint of amusement in those complicated depths. Something in her stomach fluttered, but it was quickly overwhelmed by her anger. She wasn't here to *amuse* him. She was now his wife!

Aelwen marched up to him. Her fists clenched at her sides. "What in the world was that? Why didn't you kiss me like you were supposed to? Why did you leave me there?" The questions tumbled out of her mouth in a rush. "That was so humiliating! Explain yourself."

He simply stared at her. His lips pressed in a firm line. Aelwen felt like she was going to burst waiting for an answer.

Finally, he spoke. "It's not wise for us to show affection in public," he said slowly. His voice held a hint of chill that chilled Aelwen more than the cold stone walls around them. "This is a political arrangement and cannot be seen as anything else."

Aelwen shook her head in disbelief. "But we're married! That's what people do when they marry. It's part of the ceremony!" She gestured wildly before folding her arms across her chest in frustration.

“I understand your confusion,” Vinir continued calmly, seemingly unfazed by Aelwen’s outburst. “But I will not give my kingdom any indication that I am making decisions based on emotion rather than reason.” He paused briefly before adding, “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

She gaped at him, incredulous by how easily he dismissed her and traditions that were thousands of years old. “I realize exactly what this arrangement is, King Vinir, and it’s insulting that you would suggest I came here with fantasies of courtship and romance. I did not. But I *did* expect you to fulfill your husbandly duties. You intended to walk off without any attempt to consummate our marriage, either?”

“In fact, that’s exactly what I intend to do. I didn’t expect you to be so insulted by not being forced to come to my bed.”

Aelwen pursed her lips, willing her cheeks not to enflame. “It would not be by force because I knew what I was getting into when I arrived at the castle today. I know my obligations as a wife to a king, and I came here prepared to fulfill them. If that’s not what you want, what is?”

Vinir shook his head. “I don’t expect anything from you, Aelwen. You are here to strengthen my kingdom and help me fulfill my obligations as a ruler. That is all. This is a marriage of convenience, and I will treat it as such.”

“Isn’t one of your commitments to your kingdom to secure your lineage? Does that not start with the marriage bed?”

He arched an eyebrow at her, his lips sliding into an infuriating smirk. “Are you disappointed, my queen, that you won’t get to spend the night with me?”

“You—you and your ego! This has nothing to do with my wants or needs but yours.”

“On the contrary, I’ve expressed my wants already, and you’ve ignored them. This conversation is all about you, I’m afraid.”

Aelwen shook with rage. “Fine, if you’re not ready for that part of our ceremony, I suppose we can wait until you are. It makes no difference to me. But leaving me alone at the altar? There’s no excuse for that. If you believe otherwise, the least you could do is explain yourself,” she demanded. “So? What reason could you possibly have for abandoning me there like that?”

Chapter 2 - Vinir

There was a spectacular fire in his new wife's eyes, and a part of him longed to kiss her and make her shut up before she pissed him off and *actually* made him mad. Her efforts at looking intimidating and as though she had any control over their relationship were more amusing than anything.

She was lucky he wasn't whisking her away and having her dissected for the crime of being a fae.

"Perhaps I could have handled the situation more delicately," he conceded, "but the end result would have been the same. I had no intention of kissing you then, and I have no intention to do so now. And yes, that means we will not be consummating our marriage now or, very likely, ever. This marriage is for show, and I have no interest in you whatsoever."

His words hit her like a slap. She recoiled, lips twisting with unsaid words. "Then everyone is right about you."

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Oh? And what whispers have you been listening to this time?"

"You're cruel and heartless."

He threw his head back and laughed. "That's the least of what I am, my darling wife. You will soon discover as much."

Aelwen's eyes narrowed. "I'm not your darling," she snarled, her voice laced with venom. "And I don't believe a single word that comes out of your mouth. Do you think you can just say whatever you want and get away with it? No. I won't let you off the hook that easily." She stepped closer to him, squaring up to look him in the eye, her chin raised proudly. "You need to explain and make amends for what you've done because I will not tolerate being treated like this."

Vinir could feel his temper rising, but he kept it in check through sheer force of will. He had no desire to start an argument with her right now. All he wanted was peace and quiet so he could be alone with his thoughts.

“No, I don’t expect to be explaining anything,” he decided. “I’ve given you my answer, and if that isn’t satisfactory, then that is your problem, not mine.”

“That’s because it’s easier for you to be callous and unfeeling than to take responsibility for your actions,” she retorted.

Vinir’s gaze swept over her body, all slim angles, and willowy limbs. Her gown of white petals and silk pushed up her breasts to form the suggestion of cleavage, and he had to admit that he found her quite pleasing to the eye. With skin as pale as milk and hair like spun gold, he wanted more than anything to peel that dress off and kiss every inch of her, marking her as his for every man to see. He wanted to spin her hair around his fist and make her scream his name.

As his wife, that was his right.

But she was a filthy fae whore, and he would never bed her. As a human, or another vampire, perhaps he would have.

Regardless of how much he wanted her, as much as his loins throbbed to take her, even if he could get over the fact that she was a fae, the enemy ... he couldn’t.

He’d come into this marriage with every intention of strapping her to a table and picking her apart piece by piece, seeing if he could turn her into the cure for his curse if the fae in his dungeons failed. But now, having met her, Vinir doubted those intentions. For all the claims of his cruelty, and the truth behind it ... he was not sure he could bring himself to hurt her.

Beauty such as hers should be coveted, not crushed.

Touching her would only bring her closer to devastation. Kissing her would only be a gateway for him to act on his desires—if the kiss didn’t hurt her first.

He wasn’t even willing to take that chance. The curse written upon his body was strong, often manifesting in unexpected ways. And in too many pairs of burned gloves, now discarded.

“You have a lot to learn about men. I can see that,” Vinir said, preparing to strike her back into her place. “Let me

teach you your first lesson. Men don't take kindly to a woman's insolence. Disrespect me again, and you'll regret it. I am your king first and foremost, your husband second, and you are by the right of law mine to do with what I will. If that means I'd rather fuck a slave than you, there's nothing you can do."

Aelwen paled, her angry flame replaced with the embers of hurt. He could see it in her eyes, which quickly lost their determined heat and flicked away from him.

A twinge of guilt twisted in Vinir's chest, but he shoved it away.

"What do I have to do?" she asked quietly.

Vinir paused for a moment, taken aback at the sudden change in her demeanor. He hadn't expected that. He had expected more arguments or demands. Instead, she had humbled herself before him, offering herself up as an empty canvas for him to paint what he willed upon it.

"Whatever do you mean?"

She lifted her chin, clear defiance shining in her golden eyes. "If you are not attracted to me as I am, then what do I need to do?"

He scoffed. "I didn't say that I am not attracted to you. You are beautiful. Otherwise, I wouldn't have agreed to marry you. But beauty is far from enough to win your way around here."

"But then I ... I don't understand. If you're attracted to me, and I am now your wife, why don't you want me?"

Vinir felt the weight of her questioning gaze, and his anger rose like a heatwave inside him. He knew she was only asking out of curiosity and a desire to please, but the way she pressed him for answers sent his temper into a frenzy. Why wouldn't she just leave him alone?

Most princesses in her position would be glad not to be forced into an unknown man's bed, taken against their will, and forced to bear children, but here Aelwen was, demanding why he didn't want to do that.

He wanted to lash out at her, to make her stop asking questions and leave him alone.

“Because I don’t want you,” Vinir snapped coldly. “I don’t need anyone in my life, and I certainly have no interest in you. You place far too much stake in your importance. Yes, we are now bound by the laws governing our society, but that does not mean I suddenly care for you any more than I did two minutes before we were wed. You are a rebel princess married to me because your father saw you as too much of an inconvenience to keep any longer or because he believed you would be more useful in my bed than annoying him at home. Of course, now that means you’re here to annoy me instead. Lucky me.”

Aelwen’s expression crumpled, hurt clearly visible in her eyes as she stepped back from him. “Very well, I suppose that is all there is to be said then.”

She turned around, hoisted up her gown’s skirt again, and stormed off in the opposite direction.

Vinir watched her go, his satisfaction dampening when he saw the slump of defeat in her shoulders as she moved farther away from him. His words had been harsh—too harsh, perhaps—but effective.

A lazy smirk hung on Vinir’s lips as he watched her sway away from him, her speed hindered by the constraining wedding attire. He hoped this simple act of cruelty would be enough to keep her away from him and accept that he didn’t want her. Right now he had changed his mind about cutting her up, but that could change again if she pissed him off and his current fae slave failed him.

Vinir extended a hand, and Roland handed him a crystalline wine glass filled with a deep crimson liquid. Vinir threw his head back and ravenously gulped the blood down, still hot and smooth as if fresh from someone’s neck.

Roland smirked, watching Vinir lick every drop out of the glass. “You’re fucked if she has you like this already.”

“Quiet,” Vinir snarled, throwing the wine glass across the room. It shattered against the worn stone floor, dribbles of blood spattering the floor. “You’ve been gone for months, and here you arrive with yet another problem for me to deal with. I’ve postponed this wedding for years, and the moment you walk back into my court, you come dragging my missing bride along with you.”

“I assure you the trouble was unintended. Had I realized you were not, in fact, looking for your bride but rather preferring that she stay tucked away somewhere out of sight, I would have acted to keep her well out of your way. Alas ...”

Vinir grabbed another wine glass from the sitting room table and filled the glass with more fresh blood. This time he sipped slower, enjoying the sweet taste.

He wondered what Aelwen would taste like. He’d never had fae blood before, despite having many in his dungeons he could have taken by force, but the thought always disgusted him. Fae were little more than animals—true humans were not much better, but they at least understood their place. Aelwen though ... there was something exquisite about her that made him crave a taste. He had the sense that she would let him drink from her, and drink deep he would ... if only he didn’t want to risk revealing his curse to her.

Saliva moistened his fangs, and he took a deep drink again to stave off his desires. He hadn’t drunk blood directly from someone’s flesh in almost a year now. Ever since his curse had struck him.

“I know,” Vinir said at last. “The fault is not yours entirely. It was just my luck that she was caught on King Dominick’s grounds and felt so compelled to get involved in their love affair and set them all free. Now she simply has this illusion that if she waltzes into this marriage, I’ll trip over myself trying to replicate the same success as the other vampire kings.”

“Four curses, four kings ... and three of them are now freed,” Roland pointed out, claiming a seat on the black leather chair opposite Vinir. “You know, they might be on to

something. I saw it myself. My sister fell in love with a king, and the curse upon him was lifted. What if it's really that simple?"

"Love," Vinir scoffed. "Love is no more magical than the weeds in a garden. It is, at best, a temporary illusion sold in storybooks to make young women and men more agreeable to one another, princesses among them. No, I have my own means of curing my curse, I only need time for the magic to do its job. My union with Aelwen is nothing more than a business deal. I'm marrying her because it's politically expedient. After all, we must ensure that the fae remains complacently out of our affairs. This was the easiest way to placate King Sinnegard." Vinir finished his wine and set the glass down with a thump. "But if Princess Aelwen doesn't understand what I'm doing, she won't appreciate it either."

"Of course, she doesn't appreciate it!" Roland laughed. "You made her out to be an unlovable hag because you're incapable of being honest with her, let alone yourself. So, you don't love her and have no intention to. I'm sure she expected as much. But you know what the fae are like."

"Incorrigible, unreliable, tricky?"

"They're baby obsessed," he corrected. "I've been to Gaivalon, my friend. Two hundred years ago, their species was all but eradicated by ours. It's mandated by law and has been since King Sinnegard came to power that their females produce as many children as possible to repopulate their lost cities."

"That has nothing to do with me."

"It didn't," Roland agreed, "until you married one of their women."

Vinir relaxed on the larger leather sofa, letting himself sink in at the same time as Roland's concerns. "You're saying that she's under pressure to have children with me as soon as possible."

"And if you refuse her, there could be dire consequences for both of you. King Sinnegard could see it as a

grave insult for them to sacrifice one of their most desirable females to you, only for you to refuse to reproduce with her.”

Vinir crossed his legs, calming the foot that tapped anxiously. It was typical of the fae to pull some sort of nonsense on him. Of course, he thought he'd figured out every one of their plans and created ways for them not to get the drop on him. Until a year ago, he'd never considered fucking his future wife and getting her pregnant a potential pitfall in his plans.

After all, never intended to marry her at all.

Yet again, the fae proved themselves to be scheming, tricky creatures. Untrustworthy through and through, and he had no doubts that Aelwen was any different.

“I don't care. I will dispose of her before it would be too obvious that we're not doing our duties in the bedroom. That just lessens my timeframe a bit, that's all.”

“You can't do that. You'll trigger a war.”

Vinir shrugged. “Not if they believe her death is an accident.”

“There are simpler ways to deal with this issue than killing her. Just put a baby in her.”

“No.”

Roland gives me an assessing look. Is she really so undesirable that you can't ... find a way around it? This can't simply be about despising the fae, can it? It must be your curse. What is it?”

Vinir pulled at the slim leather at the wrists of his newest pair of gloves. Already he could hear the subtle acidic hiss between the fabric and his hands. He would require a new pair soon.

“I see no remedy to the situation at this time,” Vinir said. “But I will keep your concerns in mind, Roland. Welcome back.”

Roland took that for the dismissal that it was and climbed to his feet. “As you say, Your Majesty. Good luck.”

He left, the door to the sitting room clicking shut behind him.

Vinir would indeed need a lot of luck if he were to avoid Aelwen altogether. She was now his queen, after all, and she didn't seem to be the type to give up easily.

Why did he have to marry a blasted fae?

Chapter 3 - Aelwen

Sunlight filtered through the drapes, and Aelwen slowly woke from her first night as a married woman. Never did she expect to wake up alone and untouched in her marriage bed, her husband's side left completely undisturbed. The expansive four-poster felt far too large for her to occupy all on her own.

Vinir hadn't even given her the courtesy of coming to bed.

Her teeth ground together at the expectation that he probably retreated to the other side of his palace, holing up with either a mistress or a sex slave. On his wedding night!

Aelwen tossed and turned as wakefulness returned to her. Was she really so undesirable to him? She'd gone her whole life being fawned over with countless marriage proposals that her father had rejected on her behalf. Of course, her sister Iffandril was his pride and joy, the angelic goddess who could do no wrong. Meanwhile, Aelwen never stood straight enough, never smiled wide enough, smiled too widely, or looked too desperate, or worse, when her father was in one of his moods, he'd call her a good-for-nothing harlot and threaten to disown her for fluttering her eyelashes too suggestively at one of the more attractive fae nobles.

Of course, Aelwen was still painfully a virgin to this day.

It wasn't that she sought sex per se, but she always believed, truly and deep in her soul, that she would one day have a husband who loved her. She'd sacrificed the dream of love when she was promised to King Vinir. Still, she had expected, at least, the opportunity to explore other intimate secrets that women far more experienced than she often whispered about.

There was a knock on the door, and Aelwen shot up into a seated position. Was it Vinir finally here to attend to their marriage obligations?

She let one strap of her sleeping gown fall down her shoulder, as she'd often seen other young girls do to try and catch a man's eye. It usually worked.

"Come in," Aelwen answered in her most authoritative, queenly voice.

The door opened, but it wasn't Vinir. Three young women about her age popped into the room, the first one's fiery red hair and the second one's raven black tresses immediately standing out in stark contrast to the pale blonde of the third. All three curtsied deeply upon seeing Aelwen, their eyes twinkling with delight.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," they said in perfect unison. "We are here to serve you. King Vinir assigned us to be your personal maids, here to attend to your every whim."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," the second woman said.

"We will ensure you have everything you need for a comfortable stay here in the palace," the third one chimed in.

"Oh!" Aelwen said and hurried to slip her dress strap back securely over her shoulder, then climbed out of bed. "I wasn't expecting you."

The first maid, the one with fiery red hair, came forth and immediately began to strip the bed. "I'm Lissa, Your Majesty. And this is Mori and Alexa."

Mori, the one with the black locks, came forward carrying a wooden tray with a steaming teapot and a large green mug. "A herbal remedy, my queen," Mori said. "To ease any pain after your wedding night."

A fiery blush crept up Aelwen's cheeks. "I'm not—"

"And I'll draw you a bath," Alexa interrupted, sweeping across the room toward the washroom connected to Aelwen's bedroom. "The hot water is always soothing on the lady bits after being worked by a man too hard. It'll help ease any bruises, too."

Aelwen swallowed, following Mori and Alexa into the bathroom. "A bath would be lovely."

The bathroom was just as large as the bedroom, with white marble walls and gold-framed mirrors on each of the four walls. The floors were a breathtaking mosaic of colorful stones, with a golden clawfoot tub sitting in the center. In one corner was a vanity area with an ornate marble countertop and several glass containers filled with oils and perfumes.

She couldn't find it in her yet to admit that she and Vinir hadn't been together as man and wife should be, but they would know when they saw her naked that she was untouched, wouldn't they?

Aelwen felt filthy and useless like she was marked with some horrible deformity that would make it obvious to anyone who looked at her why Vinir hadn't wanted her.

"Should I ... should I be expecting bruises?" Aelwen croaked.

Alexa sat on the wooden stool next to the tub. She twisted the faucet, and steaming hot water poured into the tub. She looked over her shoulder at Aelwen, hesitated, and then glanced at Mori, who had just placed the tea tray on the table on the other side of the tub.

"Oh, darling," Mori tutted, "there's nothing to be ashamed of."

"It's common for a woman to experience pain when she loses her virginity," Alexa said. "And unfortunately, it's all too common for men to hurt women during sex with no regard for their feelings or wellbeing."

Mori nodded in agreement and continued, "The truth is that many men simply don't know how to please a woman and end up being rough or careless with her body, seeking their own pleasures instead. And a man like King Vinir ..."

Mori and Alexa shared a look that made Aelwen's stomach drop. "What about him?"

"Well, he ... he has a reputation, you see. Of being rough during intimate moments," Lissa said as she glided into the room, positioning herself behind Aelwen to help her take off her sleeping gown. "That's why we're here, you see. We

wanted to make sure you were handling yourself well after having to go a whole night with him.”

Alexa scowled. “Last year, when he finished with Countess Malady, she could hardly walk for a week, the poor thing. I gave him a piece of my mind for hurting her so severely.”

“And he beat you just as bad with a cane after,” Mori muttered.

“That’s not the point. The point is he was a little more careful with his conquests after that,” Alexa said proudly.

“More careful not to leave physical evidence, you mean.”

Lissa helped Aelwen into the soapy tub, which smelled of lavender and vanilla. Steam welled into her face, the pleasing scents were calming, and the hot water washed over her tired limbs, wrapping her in a comforting cocoon of heat and bubbles. But Aelwen’s lips trembled, and her shoulders shook. Everything the women were saying about Vinir brought her to the edge of tears.

“Oh, my dear,” Mori said. “Tell us everything. Are you okay? If you’re hurt, I can also give you a massage or call for a healer if you think it’s more serious.”

Aelwen shook her head, unable to find the words to express the pain and confusion that filled her. She felt like she had done something wrong but didn’t know what it was. Tears spilled from her eyes. She was hurt, but not in the way they were expecting.

Finally, after a few moments of hiccupping sobs and Mori gently rubbing her back, she found her words. “He didn’t want me,” Aelwen gasped out.

Lissa frowned in confusion. “What do you mean he didn’t want you?”

Aelwen bit her lip and looked away, feeling embarrassed and ashamed to have to say out loud the truth that was now so painfully obvious. “We...we never consummated our marriage.”

The maids gasped in surprise and distress. Alexa placed a gentle hand on Aelwen's shoulder while Lissa knelt down next to the tub, peering up at her with sympathetic eyes.

Mori reached for one of Aelwen's hands and squeezed reassuringly. "Oh, my dear," she said softly, brushing away the tears that were beginning to stream down Aelwen's face. "That's not what I expected at all. I'm so sorry. I'm sure we've terrified you out of ever wishing to be with him after all these scary stories ..."

"I—I just don't understand why he didn't want me. He wouldn't even kiss me. It was like he found me so repulsive that he couldn't stand to touch me."

"That can't be true," Alexa said. "You're so beautiful. How could he ever think that? I'm sure he just wasn't in the mood, that's all."

Aelwen sniffled and tried to stop her tears, but it was difficult. She hated that she was crying over a man and what he thought of her, but it was so hard. She had witnessed two very different people fall in love and had begun to wish for something, anything, even a fraction of what she'd seen between King Dominick and his new wife. Had she approached this wedding with King Vinir with a little too much hope and emotion?

It was possible, all things considered.

She knew what this wedding was supposed to be—political and nothing more. But to her, there was always going to be an emotional side because she had no choice but to carry King Vinir's children or face the wrath of her disappointed father.

"Him not wanting you right now doesn't mean anything about you," Liss said. "In fact, King Vinir used to have such a voracious appetite for women, but he's been different this past year. You know, there's a rumor that four vampire kings were struck with a horrible curse, including King Vinir. He's been far less public about his bedroom affairs since then."

“Do you think he’s deficient... you know, down there? That would be pretty horrible for a man like him,” Mori whispered. Alexa elbowed her in the ribs. “Ow.”

“The curses aren’t just rumors,” Aelwen said. “I was trapped on King Dominick’s palace grounds for the past year as I passed through the area when the curse befell him. Everyone on the grounds was trapped there by powerful magic.”

The women nodded, curious but clearly restraining themselves from asking the questions they were eager to ask. Aelwen gladly accepted the silence and sank deeper into the tub water. She had yet to consider what King Vinir’s curse might be. Unlike the other kings of Elysium, whose curses were obvious and visual, King Vinir’s affliction didn’t appear as obvious.

“What is King Vinir’s curse?” she asked.

“No one knows. There are many rumors, but he’s kept it a secret.”

“That means it must be bad, doesn’t it?”

“One would expect, I suppose,” Alexa sighed. “I’m so sorry, my dear. A wedding and a squeaky marriage bed should be happy affairs, but here we are, scaring you to death.”

Aelwen shook her head. “I’ve been through my fair share of trials and made it out the other side. I might not be experienced with ... the more intimate side of relationships, but I can handle myself.”

Mori gave her a smile that seemed more indulgent than genuine, and Aelwen had to suppress a sigh. Her anxious tears at being refused by Vinir likely had her looking like a fragile maiden when she was nothing of the sort.

Taking a deep breath, Aelwen dunked her head under the water and stayed there. Heat soaked into her skin, pushing down on her face. Pleasant ripples of warm soap and bubbles whirled around her along with her strands of long blonde hair.

Truthfully, she wasn’t sure why Vinir’s cruelty affected her as much as it did. Far worse things had been said to her by

her father in the past. That was part of the reason she'd run away, after all.

She wanted things to be different, she guessed, and she knew now she's somehow been partially sucked into that fantasy of married life being perfect instead of just a different kind of flawed.

Aelwen pushed her head back through the water's surface, taking in a gasp of air. As soon as she settled herself again, Mori came up to her and gave her a cup of the tea she'd brought. It was sweet, just what Aelwen needed right now.

"All might not be as you expected it to be," Lissa said, "but if you were trapped in that cursed castle and you're out now, the curse must have been lifted, right?"

Aelwen paused mid-sip. "That's right."

"How did that happen?"

"King Dominick fell in love with his wife. But it's different with King Vinir, don't you think? If something is keeping him from being intimate with me ... then there might be no hope of us getting that close."

"You don't know for sure yet that's the case."

Mori laughed. "He could just be an asshole. You might need to help him warm up to you a little."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Aelwen frowned. "If he won't talk to me?"

Alexa began soaping Aelwen's hair, massaging her scalp in relaxing waves. "You're a beautiful woman, my queen. There are some things beautiful women can do that don't require words."

Aelwen breathed deeply again, letting her maid's encouragement wash over her. All three of them were right. Maybe King Vinir was an asshole. Maybe his curse was kept secret for a reason.

But Aelwen was a fae princess, and the fae never gave up. Whatever was getting between her and Vinir wouldn't win.

She would make him fall in love with her. That would be the most surefire way to ensure Aelwen could fulfill her duties as a fae princess. Yet, deep inside her, she also knew that the only way to encourage love between her and Vinir was to let herself be vulnerable to him.

And she wasn't sure she was ready for that.

Chapter 4 - Vinir

Less than three days wedded to a deceitful fae woman, and already King Sinnegard thought he had leverage over Vinir. He scoffed and leaned back into his leather desk chair, letting the edict from his wife's father fall onto the smooth wooden desk in front of him.

How dare he already make all these demands of Vinir, as if some overpriced fae pussy was enough to pay for all the privileges King Sinnegard wanted?

Lower taxes on trade routes. A fae embassy in Vinir's capital city. Say in Vinir's dealings with the other vampire kings. As if promising for the time being not to slaughter any fae who came into his kingdom, Zacorith, wasn't enough.

Vinir had no love for the other kings who lorded over the coveted lands of Elysium, but that didn't mean King Sinnegard had any right to influence his dealings with them. He was king of his own bloody kingdom. He should deal with his shit directly and with less subterfuge!

This was why vampires despised the fae. They chose underhanded methods to pretend they were superior beings. In fact, they were just as treacherous and bloody as the vampires, who tended to be more open with their glee about slaughter. To Vinir, they were animals, and after what they'd done to him ... He snarled, slamming his fist on the desk and shoving away the memory. It wasn't worth dwelling on, but it was enough to blockade Sinnegard and his demands for the time being.

If Vinir were any less of a man, he would punish Sinnegard's daughter for his insolence. Princess Aelwen was ripe for the taking, and if it weren't for his blasted curse ... he might have changed his mind and plucked her as punishment. Would have taken out his rage and needs out on her.

But he also suspected that would be playing right into Sinnegard's hands. They wanted a baby in her belly by any means necessary, and right now, Vinir's curse seemed to be the only thing stopping him from fucking her anyway.

Even if she was a fae.

Damn politics.

There was a slight knock on the door, drawing Vinir out of his thoughts. The door opened, and Aelwen came floating in.

Vinir's breath caught in his throat as his gaze flickered over the princess. She was wearing a long, sheer dress made of purple silk that hugged her body and left little to the imagination, and yet just the right amount. It was cinched around her waist by a belt of black feathers and had slits up each side, showing off her shapely legs. Around her neck was a choker of silver and gold, dangling down between her breasts. Her hair was piled high on top of her head in an elaborate braid, with wispy tendrils framing her face.

He swallowed hard as his gaze swept over her. When he told her that being beautiful wasn't enough, he'd meant it. He needed more out of a woman than someone who equated their beauty to everything, and he had the impression that was what Aelwen was like. She wasn't necessarily proving him wrong per se, but god damn if that dress didn't make his cock stir.

She walked into the room like she owned the place, and Vinir's throat went dry, unable to say anything. Aelwen stared at him with an intensity he'd never seen before in anyone's eyes. It went beyond mere seduction.

It took all the strength Vinir had not to stand up from his desk and take what she was offering him right then and there. His hands were shaking, knowing that if he moved too much, she would see that he wanted her more than anything else in this world, despite the consequences that might bring.

“Good evening, my queen,” he said finally. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

She smiled like an angelic temptress as she sashayed across the long office to stand in front of his desk, one hand propped on her hip. “The pleasure is all mine, my king. I've been thinking about how our wedding went ... and I think it's possible we got off on the wrong foot.”

Vinir arched an eyebrow and leaned back as far as he could in his chair. Half in an attempt to get as far away as he could from her without standing, and half because he was genuinely curious about what she had to say.

“You don’t say?” I answer. “I thought our arrangement was perfectly clear. You’re my wife and queen in title only. I don’t care for you or have any interest in pretending otherwise. What is there about that to misunderstand?”

Her seductive smile faltered somewhat, but she still sauntered closer to Vinir, then sat on the front of my desk, turning to look over her side at him. Her dress rode up her thigh, revealing far too much delicious flesh.

“I understand completely,” she purred. “You’ve been a single, eligible man for almost your whole life. If it weren’t for my father’s heavy-handed tactics, you likely wouldn’t have settled for me. You resent me for taking away certain freedoms, don’t you? But it doesn’t have to be that way. If you give me some of your precious time to get to know each other better, you’ll find that I’m not the naive princess you think I am. I have a lot to learn, true. But I can be an asset to you and a companion in more ways than one.”

Vinir had to rip his eyes away from her body, forcing himself to stare at her face only. Not the way that barely-there fabric hovered over her breasts, her nipples leaving peaks through the purple dress.

“You’re wrong,” Vinir said. “You’ll only be a distraction and a liability. This court is far more dangerous than the cozy lifestyle you’re used to living. It will be better for both of us if we keep our distance. Your attempts to seduce me won’t work.”

She stood from the desk in a huff, a flush drawing across her cheeks. “Seduce you?” she blubbered. “I’m only trying to do my wifely duties! We’re supposed to be a team. The least you can do is let me do my part.”

“There is no team here, darling. You’re an ornament and nothing more; you should be happy I’d prefer to ignore you than do less savory things to you.” He smiled wickedly,

showing off his fangs. “You will not be interfering in my affairs, and that is final.”

Her fists clenched and unclenched, every muscle in her lithe body coiled and ready to spring. “The least you could do is allow us to get to know each other so our marriage will not be miserable.”

“My word is final. You will have to learn to accept things as they are.”

A flicker of pain appeared on Aelwen’s features, but it quickly crinkled with her pent-up anger. She stormed off without another word, slamming the office door shut behind her, neither accepting nor denouncing his stance on their relationship.

Vinir sighed and readjusted his position in his chair. His cock ached horribly from having to argue with her while she wore an outfit like that, and it would only hurt more since he couldn’t give in to her.

He had to remain strong, no matter how hard it was for him to turn down someone so sweet and alluring as Aelwen. Even if he could find it in himself to tolerate her company enough to get to know each other more as people, that would be a dangerous route to take and only open him to more compromises in the future.

If he gained any affection for her, even the tamest, would that open him to the possibility of accidentally hurting her with his curse?

Aelwen was too much. After her bold display by barging into his office in the middle of his work, he could hardly get anything done. Vinir would get two pages into a document or official proposal by his council, only to get stuck thinking of Aelwen’s soft thighs and plump lips.

She was driving him fucking crazy, and he needed to relieve the pressure before he lost his mind.

The door to his expansive chambers flew open, and he stormed into the room and rushed to the bedroom, slamming doors in his wake. There, he relaxed into the down, silky blankets on the bed, hurrying to unbuckle his trousers and pull out his cock.

He fisted himself, jerking to the rhythm of his breaths. The thought of Aelwen took precedence in his mind. Her pale skin, tight waist, full breasts, and the way she'd filled out the dress she had been wearing when she barged into his office earlier.

He imagined it was her hand stroking him instead of his own. Her soft hands squeezing and milking him for everything he was worth. His breathing quickened as he fantasized about taking off every piece of clothing from her body, caressing every inch of skin with his fingertips until neither one could take it anymore.

“That fucking fae slut,” he growled. “How could she have this effect on me?”

His fingers moved faster as the fantasy of having her splayed out beneath him enthralled him. Soon, he was moaning into the quiet night air, imagining what it would be like to make love to Aelwen properly and not have to worry about whether he hurt her in the process.

Heat coiled in his balls, and just as he was on the verge of bursting, the door flew open, and Aelwen flew into the room in a flurry of silk and blonde hair.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, striding toward him. “I heard the doors slamming, and I thought—”

She cut herself off when she came close enough to see Vinir on his back, his hand wrapped around his dick, his eyes hooded and frenzied from his interrupted climax.

“Do you mind?” he growled. “You’re interrupting.”

She swallowed deeply, staring at his cock. “I can see that.”

“Do you have a problem?”

Aelwen opened her mouth to answer, but no words came out. Instead, she straightened her spine, a flush of embarrassment creeping onto her cheeks.

“Good,” Vinir spat. “Then get out before I change my mind.”

Still, she didn’t move. His cock throbbed beneath her stare, so thick and angry with his arousal, and it was all her fault that he couldn’t get his shit together. She’d been distracting him since the minute she arrived at his castle, wiggling her tits and ass at him at every chance she got.

“Change your mind about what?” she whispered.

“About not hurting you.”

She bit her lip, averting her gaze from him for a second before returning to meet his eyes again. Why did she still have to be wearing that little sexy dress? God, if he didn’t have her now, he knew he’d fucking regret it. But the last time he tried to take a woman since he’d been cursed... it hadn’t been pretty, and he hadn’t tried again since.

Everyone he touched, he hurt. Badly. And he took pleasure in their pain ...

“I’m prepared for a little pain.” Aelwen lifted her chin, defiant and strong as always, her eyes glimmering with determination. “I’m stronger than I look.”

He couldn’t take it anymore. This fae slut would learn a lesson tonight, and he’d get to take some fae pussy for a spin and see if she was worth all the trouble she was causing him. If she wasn’t going to listen to him, this was her own doing, wasn’t it?

He’d touch her, and she’d change her mind real quick.

She was asking for this.

Now he was going to give it to her.

With a growl, Vinir rose from the bed. He blinked across the room, landing beside her. He clamped his hands around her waist, pulled her against him, and then sealed his mouth around hers. She gasped into his mouth and clung to

him, her fingers gripping his shoulders tightly. He swept his tongue between her lips, tasting the sweet nectar of her mouth and almost forgetting why he was doing this.

In a rush, he pulled away from her. Her eyes were half-closed with lust, her lips parted in surprise, her chest heaving. She looked like she was ready to be tongue-fucked, not like she was on the verge of screaming in agony.

“You’re not ... you’re not hurt?” Vinir said, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

“That was amazing,” she breathed. “Do it again.”

Vinir licked his lips. How was it possible that his curse wasn’t affecting her? It was supposed to be that anyone who made contact with his skin would recoil as if burned, and extended contact could lead to ... deadly consequences.

But somehow, either Aelwen was immune, or right now, they were able to touch each other without his curse getting in the way.

Whatever the reason, he was going to take full advantage.

His mouth connected with hers again. “Very well then,” he growled into her mouth. “You’re the one responsible for this hard-on of mine. It’s only fair that you’re the one to deal with it.”

She trembled against him as their tongues tangled together, exploring every inch of each other’s mouths. His tongue traced the curves of her lips and swirled in her mouth. She made little mewling noises and moaned against him, pressing her body closer to his as if seeking more of his warmth.

Her hands roamed across his back, dragging the fabric of his shirt up until she had access to the heated skin beneath it. Her fingers left searing trails along his skin, but not the kind that hurt. He savored every inch of her, every moment of sensation. It’d been almost a year since he last touched someone and enjoyed it, and now that he had Aelwen in his

arms, he hadn't realized how much he'd missed the simple pleasures of skin contact.

He was going to enjoy every second of this.

Vinir broke away from her mouth and trailed kisses along her neck and collarbone, licking, sucking, and nipping at her sensitive flesh until she was panting heavily. She was sensitive all over, reacting so well to his touch. If he'd known she could handle him days ago, he wouldn't have waited this long.

He grabbed a fistful of hair at the back of her head, forcing her head down further until she was on her knees. He grinned wickedly at the sight before him. Aelwen was on all fours, looking up at him with pleading eyes that begged for more pleasure.

"Have you ever sucked a cock before, my dear?" he said huskily.

She shook her head, eyes wide.

"Good. Then tonight will be one of many firsts. Do your best ..." he panted before pushing himself inside her welcoming mouth.

Aelwen gasped around him as he filled her mouth completely and began thrusting in and out slowly. Since it was only her first time, he thought about being patient with her, giving her time to adjust to having a large cock thrust in front of her face, but he decided against it. He wanted to fuck her mouth, and that's what he was going to do. Once he was satisfied, there were plenty of other things he wanted to do to her where he would give her more patience.

But this was for him, and he was going to take exactly what he needed. He slammed into the back of Aelwen's throat and threw his head back in ecstasy when she gagged. Pulling out to give her a little relief, she licked and sucked eagerly, trying to get every ounce of pleasure from him as possible.

"Good girl," he groaned. "Do you want me to come on your tits, face, or in your mouth? Since it's your first time, you get to choose."

She pulled back, gasping, and looked up at him with those innocent golden eyes of his. Gods, he was going to fucking ruin her. Not only would she end this night no longer a virgin, but she'd become a little slut for him. He'd make her so desperate for his cock that she couldn't live without it.

“Mouth,” she finally decided.

“Mouth it is,” Vinir smirked and thrust into her mouth again. Her soft hands grasped his thighs as he increased his pace, feeling like he would explode from how good it felt any second now.

As Vinir neared his climax, he moved one of his hands to the back of Aelwen's head, guiding her movements and pushing himself even deeper into her throat. Finally, with one last deep thrust, he released himself inside her mouth, filling it with his hot cum as she moaned around him.

Finally, with a satisfied sigh, he pulled out of her.

She swallowed, her throat bobbing. “How did I do?”

“Fucking excellent. Now it's time for me to get a taste of you.”

He scooped her into his arms, and she let out a startled cry, but he quickly dumped her onto the bed. Her golden hair fanned out around her face, and the purple silk of her dress rode up in all the right places. He was going to take his time with her, exploring every nook and cranny.

Vinir started with her neck, kissing down the slope and bringing the strap of the sheer dress down her arm as he explored her.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she said, every word breathy.

He shivered against her warmth, craving her touch just as much as she was reacting to his. “Nothing. Relax and enjoy this part, my dear ... because I need you to be ready for me.”

He nibbled her sensitive flesh and dragged his tongue down her collarbone, peeling the dress away to reveal her

whole breasts. He squeezed the beautiful globes of flesh in his hands, loving how she writhed beneath him.

He kissed and teased her nipples, licking them with his tongue as she moaned in pleasure.

“Are you really a virgin?” he asked between kisses. “Because I’m about to make you my own.”

She nodded shyly, and he smiled, satisfied with his choice for the evening. He took his time with her breasts, sucking on each nipple until they were firm peaks before moving down her body. With one hand, he pushed apart her thighs, slinking lower on the bed, and with the other, he traced down her stomach to find the waistband of her panties.

She shivered with anticipation, and he smirked against her stomach. His tongue swirled down her navel, kissing and biting her flesh in search of different reactions. Part of him was insanely glad that Aelwen was his, his wife, because there was something special about knowing that no man had ever touched her this way. She would be his completely.

He would be the one she fantasized about when she was alone.

His fingers roamed even lower, pushing against the soft mound currently covered with her damp panties.

“I wonder how wet you are,” he murmured against her skin. “How much did you like sucking my cock, princess?”

He gripped her panties with his teeth and tugged them lower and lower until he revealed the pink flower beneath. Her folds spread open like little petals waiting to be ravaged, glistening, and ready for his tongue to taste.

“You look like you were enjoying yourself.”

“I ... I liked it,” she panted. “I liked how much you liked it, too.”

“Mmm.”

He brought his face closer to her, breathing in her scent before flicking his tongue against her clit.

Aelwen gasped. “O-oh.”

“You like that?”

“K-Keep going, please.”

Vinir chuckled at how polite she was being. He had no intention of being polite with her as soon as she was ready to take him.

Chapter 5 - Aelwen

Aelwen threw her head back against the pillow and bit back a moan. She'd touched herself before, even though she wasn't supposed to, and thought about the pleasures that men and women shared together, but never had she expected it to feel anywhere near as amazing as what Vinir was doing to her right now with his tongue.

“You taste like a fucking dream,”

Vinir moaned into Aelwen's pussy. “Too good for a fae bitch.”

She was dizzy with pleasure, unable to keep still as he dragged his tongue between her slit, carefully flicking between her folds in between sucking on her clit. It was too much sensation at once, and all of it was good. She rolled her hips against his mouth, and there was this growing heat deep inside her, like her stomach was a furnace rising in temperature with each passing second.

“That's a girl,” he said between licks, “you're getting close, aren't you?”

“I—”

Before she could respond, Vinir inserted two fingers into her tight wetness. Her whole body crumpled with the shock of pleasure, which only grew as he thrust them in and out of her in time with the motion of his tongue.

If this was what heaven felt like, Aelwen never wanted to leave. It felt like her whole body was crashing over an edge, rising and falling with no end in sight.

Aelwen screamed out in ecstasy as an orgasm washed over her body. “Oh my god, oh my god, god god!”

Everything went white, and she threw her head back, shuddering as smoldering fire lit her inside and out. It felt like she was buzzing. Like she was a candlewick that went from stable to entirely ignited in the same instant.

Vinir pulled away from between her legs with a satisfied smirk on his face, looking so proud of himself.

It had to be the sex haze, but Aelwen's heart tweaked a little when she stared into those deep gray eyes. Like silver smoke, he seemed to float about, doing whatever he wanted. For how much he was enjoying himself, she could hardly believe it had been this hard to convince him to get him into bed with her.

And now that they were here... she wasn't sure she wanted to leave.

His fingers still plunged in and out of her, and her inner walls squeezed around them like they were a lifeline. Each movement sent another shockwave of pleasure through her, steadily lighting her up from the inside out again.

A breathy moan escaped her, followed by a whine of disappointment when he pulled them out of her.

"Don't sound so upset," he said, his voice husky as he crawled his way back up her body. His breath made her neck tingle, and she shivered. "We're far from done yet."

Something hard and firm pressed between her legs, hot as it slid up and down against her folds.

"Vinir..." she gasped, her eyes wide as he settled against her. "Is it going to hurt?"

"A little, but not for long." He kissed along her jaw, his mouth finding hers and silencing her worries with a passionate kiss. "Tell me if it's too much. We'll go at your pace, okay?"

She nodded rapidly, clawing at Vinir's muscular back for dear life until she settled for just wrapping her arms around his neck in a vise grip. His abs flexed against her chest and stomach, firm and reassuring that he would take care of her.

"I'm ready."

As soon as she breathed the words, Vinir shifted his hips, and the tip of his cock pressed against her entrance. The pleasure was immediate as he pushed into her, and the waves of need rocking through her ended any doubts she had about him taking her virginity. He was gentle, pushing himself in by mere inches while he whispered gentle things into her ear, ensuring she was okay every step of the way.

Then he pushed up against something inside of her, and with a firmer push, it broke. Aelwen threw her head back as her whole body twisted with the rush of pleasure-pain. She gasped into Vinir's mouth, kissing him more desperately to push away the prickle of pain. She only wanted to focus on the pleasure, the rush of a high she felt all over when he kissed and touched her.

"Just tell me when you're ready again," he whispered against her lips. "God, you feel so fucking good. I'm being patient for you, understand?"

She nodded frantically, squeezing her eyes shut. Her inner walls clenched around his cock, and it didn't take much longer until she became used to the sensation of him stretching her wider than ever before. She swayed her hips against him to show him she was ready for more, and he resumed his movements, his thrusts gentle. It hurt at first, but the pain quickly gave way to the pleasure of being so close to feeling him becoming part of her in a way she'd never experienced.

He moved slowly, and she could feel every inch of him inside her, filling all the voids that had been there for so long. Vinir's thrusts grew deeper and more desperate as he sped up. She acclimated to him, and their groans edged with the need to feel as one.

Aelwen let him take the lead and fell into the clouds, letting Vinir drag her higher and higher into an ecstatic state. The room spun around them as they moved together like a single entity until, finally, they exploded into an orgasm that threatened to tear them apart from one another. Aelwen screamed out as waves of pleasure rocked through her body, only partially aware of Vinir's shout of ecstasy just before his body went rigid above hers.

Their cries rang out in one victorious chorus before finally, they collapsed together into the sweaty, tangled sheets, panting so loud that Aelwen's ears burned. They lay there for what seemed like an eternity afterward, still intertwined in their own version of paradise.

She clung to Vinir like he was her only anchor to the world, but the sense of rushing ecstasy was quickly replaced with the weight of exhaustion.

She laughed meekly as Vinir kissed her softly.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Who knew sex could be so tiring?” she murmured, and he laughed, too.

Her eyes closed, and she couldn’t open them again. She vaguely recalled Vinir taking a cool cloth to wipe her thighs and sensitive bits clean before passing out in his arms, drifting off blissfully.

When she opened her eyes again, they were still heavy with sleep, and she almost couldn’t believe that she was feeling the reassuring weight of Vinir’s strong arms wrapped around her.

It was like waking up from a dream. Not necessarily because she felt any strong emotions toward Vinir, but because if he were willing to give in to more intimate pleasures with her, then perhaps he would open the rest of himself to her eventually, too. Aelwen wasn’t under the illusion that Vinir felt anything resembling love for her, but lust was a good start.

She wanted more than anything to be useful to him, to show him that she could be more than a burden thrown at him because of her father. And she would prove to her father that she could take care of her new husband and secure the tremulous alliance between their kingdoms.

But a part of Aelwen still wished for more. Being with him last night ... had been like a taste of what could be. His sweet attentiveness and gentle caresses, combined with his commands, had kept her comfortable the entire time. Aelwen basked in the afterglow of their sex, a smile curling on her lips while she relived those sensual moments.

When she finally shifted, rubbing her face against Vinir’s chest, it woke him up with a start. He blinked at her in

confusion before comprehension dawned on him, and he relaxed against her again.

“Good morning,” he said quietly, giving her an amused smile as he noticed how content she still was.

Aelwen blushed, embarrassed that he’d caught her unawares and delighted to feel his gaze on her like that. He leaned in and pressed a kiss on her forehead before pulling back to look into her eyes again.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Aelwen nodded, shifting closer to him without thinking about it. She peered up at him shyly and smiled at the warmth in his eyes.

“I’m ... I’m feeling wonderful,” she said, hoping he could sense the unspoken apology behind those words.

After all, last night had been spontaneous—while she needed to consummate their marriage for security, she had genuinely been ready to experience those pleasures with him. The only thing she felt a little guilty about was pushing him so hard when he’d clearly been resisting her for one reason or another.

“Good,” he sighed, pulling away to sit up against the wooden headboard and stretch his arms above his head. “Because that’s the first and last time that’s going to happen.”

Aelwen shot up, too. “What? Why? Didn’t you have a good time?”

“Of course I did,” he snapped, “but you don’t know what a dangerous game you’re playing. I could have hurt you unimaginably, and you’ve been throwing yourself at me like you’re clueless.”

“Maybe I am clueless then because I have no idea why you’d be so terrified of hurting me when you were far more gentle and patient with me last night than I ever expected you to be. Why is that, Vinir?”

He pulled away from her completely, crawling out of bed and turning away from her. He ripped the curtain open,

revealing the star-covered sky, the full moon pregnant with luminosity.

“You’re lucky,” he growled.

“I was not. You must know about the things whispered about you and your sexual tastes—I was expecting to be walking into the jaws of a monster.” Aelwen climbed out of bed after him, padding behind him and touching his shoulders. “But you chose to be kind to me.”

“I didn’t choose anything. I could have touched you and left you as a pile of writhing agony instead. Why would you willingly try to put yourself in that situation? Are you fucking crazy?”

“Maybe I am.”

Vinir whipped around and grabbed Aelwen by the throat. For a second, she couldn’t breathe, but he relaxed his hold enough, so she wasn’t in pain. Still, she stared at him wide-eyed and terrified.

“You’ve walked into a monster’s den, princess, and you’ve just used your free pass. I’d be careful about coming to me again without a way to defend yourself.”

“Why are you so afraid?” Aelwen whispered. “Is it because of your curse? Let me help you, Vinir. You can trust me.”

“Trust you!” He laughed. “You’re an agent of King Sinnegard. Wife you may be, but I know where your loyalty will always lie: with the fae who spawned you. Don’t talk to me about trust when I know your only goal is to get pregnant and keep yourself alive.”

“You knew what I was after and did it anyway?”

“A moment of weakness that won’t happen again. And if you’re lucky, you’ll get what you want out of it and keep yourself in your king’s good graces.”

Aelwen snarled and ripped herself out of his grip. To her surprise, Vinir let her. “How dare you talk down to me like I’m a common whore? I’m not as stupid as you think. I know

you're hiding something. Last night, you gave me a glimpse of the man hiding beneath all those scars and rage, and he's not at all the monster you're pretending to be."

Vinir laughed. "You've been in my presence less than a week. *You* have no right to talk about me like you know me. You don't. You know nothing at all. Now get the fuck out of my sight."

Aelwen vibrated with rage as she grabbed her dress and shoved it over her head. She wanted to say a million things to this stubborn asshole, but none of them felt quite right.

So instead, she did exactly what he demanded. She left without another word at all.

But she still knew she was right about him.

Whatever he was hiding, it was big. And it terrified him far more than it would ever scare her.

Chapter 6 - Vinir

Court assembled with a hushed murmur, waiting for Vinir's word for the queries, complaints, and petitions to begin, but he was silent. He was far off in another world. His head stuck on the sweet, dark moments he and Aelwen had shared last week beneath the sheets.

Skin so soft. A body so eager to please. A pussy so wet and tight he couldn't get enough of it in his dreams.

He almost regretted blowing Aelwen off afterward. Now that he'd gotten a taste of her, he wanted more. Likely the only reason he hadn't given in to his savage desires again was that she'd so staunchly avoided him since, and he hadn't been given a chance to. Unless he broke down and searched for her.

Which he wouldn't do in a million years because that would be admitting that he needed her.

"My king?" the steward's voice rang through his thoughts. "We are prepared to begin court whenever you are ready."

Vinir cleared his throat. For fuck's sake, he would spend this entire time listening to people's complaints daydreaming about Aelwen's pussy in his mouth. Damn, if she didn't taste like dessert.

He let the images of her fall away and focused for the first time in the last twenty minutes on the sea of faces before him. The throne room was a grand hall, with ornate tapestries and flags draped from the ceiling and a large gold-inlaid throne sitting atop a pedestal in the center, where Vinir currently sat. The floor was a deep red marble, polished and shining. Tall pillars held up ornately carved arches and lined the walls. Chairs and benches were placed around the room's edges for visitors to sit in. Nobles from all over the city and lands beyond were assembled, dressed in their finest attires to look as pleasing to the eye as possible, as though their wealth would make a difference to him.

“Very well,” Vinir said after a long moment. “Let’s begin.”

Good thing Aelwen wasn’t here in person to torment him. Maybe he could find some focus if he was lucky.

The first member of the court came forward, a man dressed in a long robe of teal and turquoise and a golden belt.

“My king, I seek your judgment on a matter of great importance,” the man began. “I request leniency for my son, who is accused of thievery by the royal guard.”

Vinir raised an eyebrow. This was not an unusual request; he had heard it countless times before. He knew exactly what his answer would be.

“You, sir, what is your name?”

“Lord Barnnigan, Your Majesty.”

“Lord Barnnigan, you have the look of a trader to me. Is that correct?”

He straightened proudly and placed a hand flat against his heart. “That’s right. The Barnnigan family has long since traded spices and other valuable goods in high demand across Elysium, traveling all the way from the islands in the south to the fae lands in the northeast.”

“Have you ever had goods that you worked hard to obtain stolen from you?”

The man’s eyes darkened. “Yes, my good king, we had a shipment of amber and spice stolen last year. It was to our immeasurable luck that the thieves were caught, and we had the thieves punished by the highest count of the law.”

“And how would you have felt if these thieves had been let off easily?”

Lord Barnnigan seemed to catch on to where this was going and looked aghast. “But my son is not a thief! He merely borrowed a cloak. It was never intended to be a permanent arrangement—”

“I am sorry,” Vinir said firmly, his voice filled with finality. “Your son’s crime cannot be overlooked or pardoned in any way. Should I be lenient on your son simply because you are a lord, that would be favoritism, and the balance of order would be sent askew. Your son will be imprisoned and receive the expected punishment fit for the crime.”

The man gasped in shock. “But you can’t—my son is—I’m important!”

“Guards, see him out.”

Vinir remained firm in his decision. If he had learned anything from being king, it was that justice must always be served no matter how much it hurt those involved. He had come to terms with it long ago, even though it pained him every time someone’s life was changed because of his decisions.

He went through a series of more boring petitions, denying them or accepting proposals as he saw fit or beneficial to him and his kingdom. Many hours passed, with more instances of Vinir being distracted by thoughts of Aelwen as the day went on.

Next came a woman to petition him, wearing long robes of emerald and sapphire hues. She was intimidatingly tall, with a mane of thick, dark hair flowing down her back. When she spoke, her voice was like a deep bell, commanding attention, and respect.

“My king,” she began. “I come to you today to speak of a matter of great importance to the future of your kingdom.”

Vinir frowned as he realized what she was about to say. He had been expecting this question for some time, but he still felt uneasy whenever someone brought it up. “The alliance with the fae,” he said flatly.

The woman bowed her head in agreement. “Yes, my lord. In times of peril and uncertainty, many question the wisdom behind this alliance.” She hesitated before continuing, clearly apprehensive about how he would react to her words. “We are all aware of how tricky the fae can be, how dishonest

they are, and now that you have taken a fae wife ... we are concerned for the safety of our people. What if the fae flock here in droves? What if they start cursing our children?"

Vinir sighed heavily and looked off into the distance for a moment before finally meeting her gaze again. He could sense the tension in the room as everyone waited for his answer; even those who had no stake in his decision were holding their breath in anticipation.

"It is true that we have always held issues with the fae, but our resentments are the result of events put to bed hundreds of years ago. The world is changing, and it is changing fast, and I believe it will be to our benefit to secure our favorable position with the fae. That said, I am aware our alliance with the fae has caused some unrest among certain factions," he began slowly, choosing his words carefully so as not to offend anyone unnecessarily or show favoritism towards either side involved in this situation. "But I have faith that our two peoples can coexist peacefully despite our differences."

He paused briefly, and while he was collecting his thoughts, a door to the side of the room opened, and Aelwen strode in, looking as stunning as ever.

She grabbed Vinir's attention the moment she walked in, even as the room erupted into hushed whispers. Aelwen made her way to the throne beside her husband, taking her place as he spoke about their alliance. The room's atmosphere changed slightly with her arrival, but Vinir was not sure if that was for better or worse.

"The fae is like any other people," Vinir continued, addressing the woman directly. "They have done wrong in the past, just as we have done in our own history, but there is no reason we should not try to forgive those wrongs and move forward together."

Vinir glanced at Aelwen briefly before continuing. "My wife has already proven herself to be a lovely asset to us, so I believe it is time for us all to move past our prejudices and come together to create a brighter future for us all."

As he finished speaking, Vinir's instinct was to take hold of her hand, but he couldn't. A week ago, she'd been immune to his curse, but what if the circumstances had changed since then?

Would she fall away, skin burning, like all the others?

"Thank you for sharing your wisdom with us today," the woman bowed profoundly and then made her way to her seat.

She was quickly replaced by a fat man wearing glistening golden robes. He was swimming in gold. In fact, Vinir recognized the man.

"Good afternoon, my king," the man said with a bow as he approached.

"Welcome to my court, Lord Sawgar. What is it you seek?"

"It's my wife, sir. We have been married for two years now, and in that time, we have had a wonderful marriage. She would let me take my pleasures from her whenever I needed it, and before long, she fell pregnant with our son. However, he was born almost a year ago now, and she will still not let me touch her. I am here to ask permission to drag her to bed and have her please me, as a wife is supposed to do for her husband."

Vinir's brow furrowed, but before he could clarify the matter, Aelwen spoke up for him. "I'm sorry, sir. Are you asking for permission to rape your wife?"

The man was taken aback, stammering in reply. "No! Of course not! I would never do such a thing!" He glanced nervously at Aelwen before continuing. "I'm merely asking for permission to take her to my bed and make love to her as any husband should."

Vinir's gaze flickered to Aelwen, who simply stared back in defiance. He felt a swell of annoyance rising within him, knowing this was some sort of challenge due to their last encounter.

He could feel the tension rising in the room as he tried to decide how best to handle this situation. To let Aelwen speak out of turn would be seen poorly if he didn't punish her, but this was also a delicate topic of consideration, where the wrong answer could make many people angry.

“Let me be clear,” Vinir said slowly and carefully, ensuring everyone in the room heard what he had to say. “I will not allow anyone within these walls or under my rule to take anything they are not entitled to. No matter who they may be or what their station may be.”

He glanced at Aelwen with approval before turning back towards Lord Sawgar and finishing his statement. “So no, you do not have permission from me or anyone else here today to take anything from *her* without her consent, including forcing her into your bed.”

“But, your majesty,” he complained. “A wife is the property of her husband, is she not? I am not taking anything more than I am entitled to.”

“But you are *not* entitled to her,” Aelwen said. “She is still an independent person, and if she doesn't want you, then you have to work out why without relying on force. Or are you incapable of earning a woman's trust and must rely on force to bed her?”

A brief scatter of laughter erupted from the assembly. Lord Sawgar's cheeks turned tomato red like he was about to explode in a volcano of rage. “You fae bitch clearly understand nothing about our customs! You shouldn't even be here. You should be waiting in your master's bed begging for the chance for him to fuck you.”

Aelwen snarled and stood, but Vinir was faster.

He blinked down the steps, landing directly in front of Sawgar. Vinir's hands wrapped around his throat, and his skin began to sizzle on contact.

Ah, there was his curse again, so reliable to turn up when he needed it.

“How dare you talk to my wife like that?” Vinir snarled, tightening his grip on Sawgar’s throat. “She is your queen, and you will treat her with the same respect you owe me.”

Sawgar’s eyes bulged in terror as he tried to pry Vinir’s hands away. But it was too late. The curse had already taken hold, and the skin on his throat was beginning to burn with an intensity that made Sawgar gasp and scream in agony.

He writhed, trying desperately to escape, but Vinir held on firmly, snarling with rage despite the pain he was causing. This horrible, insolent man deserved far worse than to burn and suffocate for insulting his precious wife, and Vinir was happy to oblige.

The other courtiers gasped in fright, not daring to move or intervene as they watched the frightening scene unfold. But Aelwen calmly walked down the steps and placed a hand on Vinir’s shoulder.

“My king,” she said softly, “that’s enough.”

Her touch, and her words, were like a soothing balm to a searing wound. At once, his anger flickered out.

Vinir slowly released his grip, and Sawgar fell to the floor, coughing and gasping for breath. He was too humiliated and defeated to even look up.

The guards that had been standing by stepped forward and forcefully removed Sawgar from the court. Vinir stood still, watching them take him away with a grim expression on his face. This was a lesson to all his subjects—no one was above his laws or exempt from punishment if they broke them.

“Court is finished for today,” Vinir barked and turned away, intent on leaving their presence at once.

Aelwen was quick to follow him. “My king,” she called out. “Husband.”

He stopped in his tracks, eyes wild while looking over her. Being close to her was a danger he couldn’t risk right now, as his hands burned and sizzled from the effects of his curse.

With shaking hands, he retrieved a new pair of gloves from his pocket and slipped them off.

“You were wondering why I wouldn’t touch you?” he snarled. “Now you know why. My touch is—it’s poison, Aelwen. Come near me only if you want to be burned alive like I would have done to Lord Sawgar if you hadn’t stopped me.”

She swallowed and brought a hand up to her throat, but she said nothing.

Vinir turned and left, glad that she didn’t follow.

Glad that she wouldn’t try tempting him into hurting her.

Because he might be the cruel king, merciless, but he didn’t want to hurt her.

And he knew if she gave him a chance to, he would.

The door burst open beneath Vinir’s hands, opening into the luxurious guest chamber he afforded only to his most special guests. Roland had long since turned from a trusted advisor to a dear friend during his work as an envoy between Zacorith and Daihalsa, which bordered Vinir’s kingdom on the western side.

Candelabras were placed around the room, the flames of dozens of candles giving the room a warm, inviting glow. The floor was lined with a plush rug, with several couches, armchairs, and ottomans. A marble fireplace and a polished mahogany table with delicate carvings dominated the center of the chamber.

On one of those couches, Vinir spotted his friend Roland lounging on the black chaise, two beautiful women draped all over him. They giggled as Roland fondled them, but they all looked up in alarm when Vinir entered.

“My king—” one of the women began.

Vinir took one look at them and snarled. “Out! Now!”

They gasped and hurried to obey his command, leaving an annoyed-looking Roland on the couch, staring up at him.

“What the fuck, man?” Roland complained.

“I need to know, did I fuck up?” Vinir said as soon as the women were gone.

He paced back and forth across the back of the room, away from Roland, trying to collect his thoughts but feeling entirely incapable.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Roland admitted.

Vinir sighed and took a deep breath before finally turning to face Roland, who was still sitting on the couch looking at him with confusion. Vinir sighed again and ran a hand over his face, taking a moment to compose himself.

“My curse is driving me fucking mad,” he said slowly, his voice heavy with emotion. “My touch is poisonous, and I can burn anything or anyone that my skin touches. It is why I usually wear gloves.”

He paused, waiting for Roland’s reaction, but he didn’t seem fazed by the admission. “I was wondering when you would come clean about your curse.”

“You’re not surprised?”

“Not at all. I was in King Dominick’s court for a whole year, remember? I was there when the curse struck, and the rumor going around at the time was that all of King Eroch’s enemies had been cursed.” Roland snorted and pulled himself up into a seated position, crossing his arms. “I know you’re not a warmonger, but you’ve never had any love for your northern neighbor. I expected you had been hit too, even if no one had been able to uncover what your curse was or why you were keeping it a secret.”

A large weight felt as though it had been lifted from Vinir’s shoulders. Simply the admission to a trusted friend helped immensely.

He shuddered as he remembered how close he had come to touching Aelwen during the trial earlier that day—he could have hurt her just as easily as he'd almost killed Lord Sawgar. He felt the fear of his curse like an icy hand squeezing at his heart; he was afraid of hurting her again, no matter how hard he tried to control himself.

“It feels like my skin is always on fire,” he said quietly, feeling overwhelmed by the whole situation. “Sometimes it feels like my veins are filled with lava, and all I want to do is release it and let out all the pain and anger inside me.”

He looked away from Roland then, ashamed of how weak and vulnerable this curse made him feel.

“At first I had thought the curse could be a source of power, using it to punish my enemies and those who dared oppose me. But it became old fast. Unable to touch anyone ... unable to claim any of the intimacies I crave.”

“Ah, I see now,” Roland said. “This is about your wife. You want her but can't have her because you don't want to hurt her.”

“It's more complicated than that. I have been with Aelwen, and the curse didn't affect her. But I can't risk it happening again. The thought of unintentionally causing her harm is unbearable.” Vinir sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping forward as if he were carrying the world's weight on them.

“I thought you didn't like her? Too desperate, you said?”

Vinir snarled. “Don't you say that about her! I was a fool, angry that I'd been put in this impossible position. I wanted to keep my distance from her! I didn't want this entanglement because it would be far too easy to slip up and make a mistake.”

“But you already did, and you said so yourself that she wasn't hurt.”

“That time. Next time, we might not be so lucky. I don't know what to do. If there was a way to break this

curse...” He trailed off, looking up at the ceiling in despair.

“There might be a way,” Roland said after a while.

Vinir perked up again.

“You think so? What do you know? Tell me!”

Roland laughed. “Relax, I’m getting to that part. When I was in Daihalsa, King Dominick’s curse seemed impossible too. During our first month imprisoned there, we tried everything we could think of to break it. Used every magical possibility inside the barrier and had a fair few people come from outside it to try and break it too.”

“And nothing,” Vinir guessed.

“And nothing. Until ... my sister. Dominick always wanted her, you know, ever since he first laid eyes on her. I warned him away, you know. She’s always been an uptight bitch if you ask me, but he was fixated, and I couldn’t stop him.” Roland smirked. “Turns out he was right all along. When he finally got her to fall in love with him, that’s when the curse lifted.”

Vinir frowned, unsure exactly what his friend was trying to tell him. “You already told me they fell in love, but my opinion on the matter hasn’t changed. Love is a waste of time and only an illusion.”

“I’m telling you, love is the most powerful magic,” Roland said, his voice filled with wonder. “It can create miracles, make the impossible possible, and it seems it can even break curses that were supposed to be unbreakable. It’s a power that no one can deny or ignore. Love is truly a force of nature. “He paused for a moment before continuing, looking deep into Vinir’s eyes. “You just have to find someone you love and who loves you back—someone who will accept your curse and be brave enough to stand by you no matter what happens. Then, together, you can fight against this curse together in whatever way it takes.”

Vinir’s innate cynicism prevented him from believing such a wishy-washy solution was even possible. How could something as simple as love solve a powerful curse like this?

“That has to be your most ridiculous idea yet, my friend,” Vinir said. “How could you possibly believe something like that?”

“Because I’ve seen it happen. Do I look like a romantic to you?”

Vinir smirked. “Seeing what I walked in on, no, you’re still the playboy I remember.”

“So, you should listen to me when I say that love is likely the answer. Can you find that with Aelwen? Do you need to look elsewhere?”

The thought of looking at another woman the way he did Aelwen made Vinir sick to his stomach. She was his wife. He’d sworn a vow to her. Even if he had not been a good husband to her so far, he would never do something as selfish as cheat on her.

That meant he had to find love in their relationship somewhere, didn’t he?

At least, if he was to try Roland’s crazy theory that they could use the power of love to lift the curse that had tormented Vinir for the past year.

“I... I don’t know if I can do that,” Vinir said hesitantly. “Aelwen is my wife, but there is no emotion between us. I desire her, that’s all.”

Roland smiled. “Lust is the first step toward love if you ask me. If you love her body, you can learn to love the rest of her. She can’t be that bad, can she?”

Despite the coldness between them, he knew deep down that Aelwen was a good woman who just wanted to make her husband happy. She had been so patient and understanding when Vinir refused to talk about their situation, never losing hope that things would get better one day.

Maybe Roland was right. Perhaps if he took the time to get to know Aelwen, he’d find out that there was more to her than his first impression of a spoiled princess. If anything, it was worth a try—what else did he have to lose?

He sighed deeply before replying. "I suppose you're right," Vinir said slowly. "Perhaps I can give it a chance and see how it goes."

He left Roland then to wander the castle instead. Vinir wanted to believe he could learn to love Aelwen, but he knew it couldn't be forced, and they would have to learn to love in their own time.

The only problem was, would she want to see him again after everything he'd done and said?

At this point, it seemed like the best thing he could do was give her space, even if he wanted nothing more than to try and make amends.

Chapter 7 - Aelwen

Vinir wrapped his hands around Lord Sawgar's throat, squeezing and twisting. The lord's cries came as agonized moans, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and flapping like a fish.

Flesh burning, sizzling like meat on a grill. The acrid scent of being burned alive.

Aelwen woke with a start, the sheets tangled around her and covered in sweat. She panted as she grabbed at her own throat, remembering how Vinir had grabbed her there as a threat, but his touch hadn't burned her.

But he'd almost killed Lord Sawgar.

As the night terror faded and she adjusted to reality again, Aelwen knew she wasn't going to be able to sleep. Again. There was no point in staying in bed, so after laying there in the warmth for a while longer, she reluctantly peeled herself from the sheets. The stone floor was cool against her feet as she went to find shoes and a gown suitable enough to wander the castle with during the day.

Vinir had a typical nocturnal schedule, so at least she wouldn't have to worry about running into him. He would be long asleep by now.

Pressing out into the castle, she wandered past the various paintings and sculptures that lined the walls like a gallery. The light from the stained glass windows illuminated their rich colors, and Aelwen found herself drawn to them. Each one was more exquisite than the last; portraits of past kings and queens, landscapes of faraway lands, battle scenes that depicted heroic deeds in vivid detail.

As she stopped to admire a particularly striking painting of a knight on horseback, her fingertips brushed against something unexpected. There was a click, and a piece of gold shore away from the frame. She gasped, thinking she'd broken it somehow, but then the wall behind the painting began to rumble and move. It slid open with a soft hiss of air

pressure as its ancient gears shifted into place revealing an opening in the wall—a secret passage.

Excitement bubbled up inside Aelwen. She'd uncovered one of these ancient castle's secrets ... but where would it lead?

She glanced to both sides of the hallway to see if anyone else had noticed, but at this early hour, no one was around. She climbed through the wall, dust flying up into her lungs. She covered her mouth and coughed as she went into the darkness.

Behind her, the wall rumbled again and shut, but she continued on into the unknown.

The tunnel sloped downwards, deeper and deeper into the castle. Aelwen could feel a chill in the air as she descended, but it seemed to be full of energy and electricity. She had no idea what was down there, but her curiosity drove her forward. With each step, the darkness around her seemed to grow more oppressive, but also less human.

A faint light shone at the end of the tunnel. Aelwen's heart pounded in her chest as she approached a slim gap in the wall. Through the other side, it was dark except for a few flickering torches, which seemed to indicate this place wasn't entirely abandoned. In the distance, there was a hoarse wailing sound that made her shudder, but she was too curious to see what she'd stumbled upon to go back now.

She stepped out into an old dungeon that appeared long forgotten by time. The walls were lined with cells, all of them appearing to be empty. Except for when Aelwen passed one, there was another gasping wail that came from inside.

Aelwen stopped in front of the cage, looming closer to get a better look at the inside. Out from the darkness poked the head of a fae man, his white hair matted with dirt and blood. She jerked away, startled by his sudden appearance.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but all that came out was a gaspy, breathy sound. Aelwen saw the stub of his tongue and gasped, covering her mouth.

“Oh, no,” she cried. Then she noticed the rest of his body—the patchwork of angry red stitches on his bare torso. “Who did this to you?”

The man groaned.

“The king?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Are there more of you? More fae?”

He nodded again, and pointed.

Aelwen backed away from the cage, stunned and terrified. There was a horrible sinking in her stomach, and she was overcome by the sense that the world was spinning. But she walked on anyway. Down the hall, there were more fae prisoners, huddled in the cold, dark cells.

The sight filled her with dread—these were her people—and yet there they were, locked away in cells like animals in cages. Her heart ached for them and she felt immense guilt for being so safe within these castle walls while her fellow fae suffered here amongst rats and cobwebs.

King Vinir was holding fae prisoners in his dungeons and doing terrible things to them. She had no idea what to think about her discovery, only that ... that everything she'd come to think about Vinir was a lie.

He was never some gentle, understood beast that needed someone to come and show him and the rest of the world, that he could be good after all. No ... he was evil through and through.

If he could do this to a fae, to any of her people, then there was no redemption for him.

Aelwen had to free them and run before she got pregnant and it was too late.

Shaking, she came up to the first cage, trying to yank the door open. It was locked tight, so she looked around for something to help break it down. She spotted a large rock nearby and grabbed it, striking the metal lock with all her strength.

But as soon as the stone struck, a spark of magic shot out from the lock and zapped her hand. Aelwen gasped in pain, recoiling away from the cage.

She'd heard tales about magical locks that only opened through magical means, but she hadn't expected that a vampire king would use them to lock away his prisoners.

Aelwen tried to shake off the sudden pain in her arm and looked around again for something else she could use to open the locks. But nothing seemed to work—not rocks, not sticks or even trying to pick at them with a rusty dagger she found on the ground.

She wasn't going to be able to unlock these gates through mundane means. She needed to use magic.

But the only magic Aelwen had to her name was the power to shift into a fox—a mostly useless ability that she used to escape the notice of other people when she was outdoors. It was how she'd avoided her wedding to Vinir for so long.

She should have kept running.

Tears burned Aelwen's eyes as she backed away from the cage. "I'm so sorry," she murmured to the captive fae. "I'll come back for you. I'm so sorry."

She choked on a sob as she left, trying to stay as quiet as possible as she slunk back to the secret tunnel she came through in case there were any guards. Once she was deep enough into the passage that she was sure she was safe, that was where she broke down.

How could she have ever thought that Vinir was anything but a monster?

She had to confront him about this. Whatever he did to her, whatever indignities he would inflict upon her for sneaking around, she had to go to him and make this stop. She would do whatever it took to free her people.

Chapter 8 - Vinir

Two armed guards dragged the fae with the glowing red stitches out onto the stone slab, locking his wrists in place so that he would be restrained for this procedure as well. Vinir watched from a distance, a worm of guilt burrowing in his gut and trying to make him change his mind about this.

Roland had told him time and time again, that magic wouldn't work to fix his curse. The only magic that would work was the kind that couldn't be commanded.

Love.

Was Vinir a fool for dismissing his friend's advice?

Or was Vinir a fool for even considering it an option?

He had come so far. Months of preparations and failed experiments to get to this one fae who had finally survived the trials. If Vinir harvested him now, they should have more than enough magic to cure him of his curse. Assuming it was possible at all.

What if it wasn't?

Vinir growled in the back of his throat. Damn Aelwen for swooping into his life and making him doubt everything. He was supposed to be the cruel heartless king who would do whatever he wanted and whatever needed to be done to win, to succeed. Instead, she sowed all of these doubts in his head, forcing him to believe that maybe there was another option.

Maybe she was that option.

She was the only one he'd touched and hadn't burned. Did that mean something or ... was he reading too much into it?

He wanted to make amends with Aelwen, but he didn't know how. She'd been avoiding him and for good reason.

But he knew if he went forward with this experiment on one of her people, if she found out about the fae he captured and tortured down here—or had, before her arrival and she changed him—then she would be lost to him.

Could he risk that?

Everything about this damn woman was so fucking confusing. But he knew he wanted to try and that ... that had to be enough.

“Stop,” Vinir commanded. The guards ceased buckling the fae man to the table, glancing at him with questioning stares. “Free him. Free him and all the fae prisoners.”

“My king, what do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t want them anymore,” Vinir growled, pushing away from the wall to look at the guards head on. “Free them, give them clothes, rations, and some gold, and send them on their way. I want nothing to do with them any longer.”

The guards glanced at each other, clearly confused, but they both bowed to Vinir. “As you command, my king,” one said, and then proceeded to free the fae man.”

“See that it’s done by the end of the day.”

Vinir left at once, his stomach tight, but with each step away that he took, the knots there began to unfurl. He was doing the right thing, he knew that.

Somehow ... somehow it felt good.

Day later, all of the fae in his dungeons had been freed, and it was as though a great shadow over Vinir’s castle had been lifted. No one except for a couple of guards and the fae he imprisoned knew what he had done, but it was a deed done not for accolades or acceptance, but because he was changing as a person.

Aelwen was changing him.

He doubted it was anything close to love—he hardly knew the woman, hardly spent any time with her at all—but somehow, her presence was enough. Soon, perhaps he would find another way to approach her and make up for what he’d done and said, and they could start anew.

For now, Vinir stood at the top of the dais in front of his throne, his court assembled before him. Many faces looked up at him curiously, as he was not the king to make frequent announcements warranting everyone's presence in the great hall.

"My subjects," he began, his voice echoing throughout the room and beyond to the gathered crowd inside and outside. "For many years, we have treated fae as second citizens in Zacorith. Indeed, I advocated for us vampires to treat them with disdain and malcontent, but I see now that this was a desire made out of misguided hate. The fae are a people like ours, like any other, who merely wish to survive by whatever means necessary. So I announce effective immediately, all fae are welcome in Zacorith and are under my protection. Any harm that comes to any fae within the Kingdom of Zacorith, unless under self defense, will be subject to the death penalty."

Gasps reverberated through the room and Vinir looked around at his assembled courtiers and saw their faces filled with surprise. Some were masks of barely subdued rage, and perhaps he'd have to deal with them sooner or later. But for now, this was a step in the right direction.

He had made a choice today that was for the betterment of all people—no matter their race or origin—and it felt good to know that he was on the right path.

"That is all," he declared. "You are dismissed."

He walked behind his throne and down the hall, the heavy doors rumbling open for him. Hurried footsteps came after him, and he didn't stop until he heard Aelwen's voice.

Her pink lips were pinched together in barely contained anger, but the rest of her was the image of beauty. A white gown with gold accents that slimmed her figure, her golden hair teased into curls.

"King Vinir," she said coldly. "What is the real purpose of your announcement?"

He was surprised by her attitude. "I thought you would be pleased to find that I am willing to treat fae within my

realms with respect.”

“I would, were it true. It’s only a means to trick my people here so you can capture and torture them for your sick experiments, isn’t it?”

Vinir went cold. He’d dealt with the fae already.

“How do you know about that?”

She laughed, lifting her chin. “Your castle revealed your secrets to me. You’re a wicked, horrible, hypocritical monster, and you always were. What foul things are you doing with them?”

He looked her straight on. If she knew already, what point was there in hiding the truth?

“I was using them to try and cure myself of my curse,” Vinir said, “but since you’ve come here, I realized it was wrong. I decided to give up on my curse and set them free, and I did so five days ago.”

“Liar,” she hissed. “This is a trap.”

Vinir sighed, shaking his head. “It’s not a trap. I swear it on my honor.”

“You don’t have any honor.”

He stepped closer to her, reaching out a hand. “If you don’t believe me then go check the dungeons yourself if you want.”

She stared at him for a full minute before finally nodding and stepping away from him. “Fine,” she said gruffly, her voice still thick with anger. “I just might do that.”

With one last searing look, she stormed down the hall and out of sight. Vinir watched her go with a deep sigh. It was always one step forward, two steps back with this woman.

He didn’t know if she could forgive him for this, but he hoped she would. He had done the right thing and freed the fae from their prison of suffering. He had done his best to show her that he was trying to make amends, even if it wasn’t enough.

But as he watched Aelwen disappear around a corner, he knew that all he could do now was wait and hope for the best.

Chapter 9 - Aelwen

Aelwen's head spun around in circles. Nausea struck, her stomach churning and twisting, and she raced to the bathroom. Crouching over the toilet seat, her stomach emptied itself as she heaved out everything that was inside her from last night's meal. Her throat burned, her stomach cramping as she heaved until nothing else would come out.

Tears streamed down Aelwen's face in time with each wave of sickness until finally, her stomach settled and there was nothing left to throw up.

Just then, Aelwen heard a light knock on the door, followed by Lissa's voice. "My Lady, are you all right? I heard some commotion."

"Yes, I'm fine," she said meekly, wiping away any remaining tears with the back of her hand. Aelwen couldn't bear for anyone else to witness her in this state, so she quickly lifted herself from the floor and stumbled toward the sink, where she splashed cool water onto her face.

Only while she was bent over the sink again, Aelwen's stomach heaved again, and she stumbled, falling back onto the floor.

The door flew open, and Lissa was on the floor with her at once, her steady hands helping Aelwen back to her feet.

"Oh, my dear, you're so unwell," Lissa fretted. "Let's get you back to bed."

Aelwen tried to resist, but she was too tired and let Lissa guide her back to the bed in the other room. "I'm fine. It's just these nightmares, I can hardly sleep."

All she'd been able to dream about since that day at court was the way Sawgar's face contorted. The scream. The look of wicked mania on Vinir's face while he used his cursed hands to strangle the man, almost like he'd enjoyed causing that pain.

And the fae, their bodies twisted with strange markings.

Had Vinir been right all along that she's walked into a monster's den unprepared to face him, and he'd been doing her a favor by turning her away?

The fae hadn't been there anymore when she checked after Vinir's announcement two weeks ago, but he could have just moved them somewhere she didn't know to look yet.

Lissa placed a cool cloth on Aelwen's forehead and brought her a fresh pitcher of water and a glass. Aelwen chugged down two glasses before she relaxed against the headboard, pulling the warm comforter over her.

"My lady, I hope you don't take offense to this question ... but I can't help but wonder ... did you and Vinir ..." She cleared her throat. "Did you ever succeed in your attempts to be intimate with him?"

Aelwen frowned. "He hasn't hurt me in any way if that's what you're worried about."

"No, no, not at all, my queen. You appear to be in perfect bodily health, and I am so glad that you are. I was worried that ... no, never mind, the point is that all is well. I merely ask because ... your sickness ... it looks a lot like ..."

Lissa trailed off, but Aelwen already knew what she was thinking.

Aelwen sat up, her eyes wide with realization. "You think I'm ...?"

Lissa nodded slowly, a smile spreading across her face. "If you are, my lady, congratulations."

Aelwen sank back against the headboard and let out a joyful laugh, her heart filling with incredible warmth. Could it be true? Was this really happening? She closed her eyes and hugged herself, allowing the possibility to sink in before speaking again.

"My Queen, you must see a healer immediately," Lissa said urgently. "We cannot take any chances with your health or that of the unborn child."

“Fetch a healer,” Aelwen commanded, still smiling as she thought about the child that may actually be growing inside of her at that very moment.

Lissa dutifully obeyed and rushed off, leaving Aelwen alone with her thoughts—at least, mostly alone. Because if she indeed was pregnant, she would soon be carrying another whole being inside of her, and could she truly call herself alone if that was the case?

Her hands flew to her stomach in wonder. She had always wondered what it would feel like to be pregnant, and now that it was here, she could hardly believe she’d missed the obvious signs.

She had always known it was her fate to be a mother, to carry a king’s child and continue her family legacy. However, she’d resisted that fate initially. But now that she was here, with a child possibly on the way, she felt positively giddy, and she had to suppress the urge to run to the balcony and shout to everyone who would hear her.

Of course, she only had to wait for the news to be confirmed.

Moments later, Lissa came running back into the room, grinning ear to ear, with another woman in tow. Her silver-blond hair was tied into a tight bun, and her simple gray robes seemed warm but practical.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” the older woman said as she sat on the bed next to Aelwen. “I hear we might have some good news?”

Aelwen nodded, smiling. The healer patted her hand gently. There was a blue tattoo on her hand, a stag’s antlers in the middle of a thick circle. The sight of it made Aelwen’s smile falter; she recognized it as a slave brand. This woman was King Vinir’s property, not a free woman.

“How about we confirm that hmm? Sit still for me, dear, I’m just going to pull your dress up so I can feel your bare stomach.”

The woman did as she said she would, peeling the covers back and lifting Aelwen's dress, so her stomach was bare. It looked no different than it did last night or the night before ...

Aelwen swallowed as the old woman's cool hands touched her stomach. The healer closed her eyes and hummed a low, soothing melody. Her hands began to glow with a soft blue light, which seemed to be pulled from the air around them and directed toward Aelwen's stomach. The light floated over her skin, the caress a little ticklish before settling around the center of her abdomen.

A moment later, the old woman opened her eyes and smiled. "Well, my Queen," she said softly. "You are indeed pregnant."

The news was like music to Aelwen's ears. Overcome with emotion. She wrapped the healer in a tight hug before turning to Lissa and jumping into her arms in celebration.

"We're having a baby!" Aelwen cried out.

Lissa squealed and hugged her tightly as she laughed too, this news too good to be true. Aelwen had only lain with Vinir once, and though a joyful experience it had been, she'd known there was only a small chance she could end up pregnant.

But for fate to be in her favor ... it was a miracle. This baby was meant to be.

"We must inform King Vinir at once of the happy news!" the healer said in a singsong voice. "Congratulations to you and our wonderful king!"

Aelwen's mood shifted at once, like a cloud falling over a sunny day, and she grabbed the healer's arm before she could travel too far away. "Oh yes, of course, but please allow me the opportunity to tell my husband the news myself. I want to see the look on his face when he hears the happy news."

The old woman smiled. "Of course, my dear, as a first-time mother, I am sure it's an experience you've been craving. I wouldn't rob anyone of such a joy. Now you get plenty of

rest, drink fluids, and don't skip a meal! If you should feel any discomfort at all, you must let me know at once."

"Of course, I will. Thank you so much."

Aelwen's heart beat so fast as she waited for the healer to leave that she thought it would burst and her anxieties would be found out. For a few hopeful moments, she'd been so caught up in the joy of carrying a child that she forgot about all the other complications in her life.

She was so excited for this child, but how would Vinir feel? He didn't love her. He didn't even seem to like her, despite her best efforts to endear herself to him and make herself useful. It appeared that she was fated to live in a loveless, tense marriage because Vinir was so stubborn and angry that he refused to make the best of what they *could* have together.

At least, what they could have had before she found him out for the psycho murderer he really was. She couldn't forgive him for what he'd done to her people ... but now that she was pregnant, what could she do?

"I'm sure you're so excited about this news, but after the morning you've had, it would be for the best if you stayed in bed to rest, don't you think?" Lissa said, pulling the covers back over Aelwen and tucking her in. "You don't worry a single bone in your beautiful little body, I will have Mori bring you some tea and soup to help with nausea, and Alexa and I will work on your care plan to make sure you and your baby stay as healthy as possible."

Aelwen, despite her worries, laughed. "I'm pregnant. I didn't lose a leg. I'm perfectly capable of caring for myself, you know."

"We're not the kind of women who believe you need to stay in bed and do nothing at all as soon as you know you're pregnant, you know. I firmly believe it's important for you to stay active and live your life to keep the baby strong and healthy, the same as yours. But you're under the weather today, love, and these nightmares have disturbed your sleep schedule. So, let's get that sorted out first, hmm?"

Aelwen nodded, relieved that she wasn't going to be stuck in bed and treated like a crazy person for the next nine months simply because she was pregnant. Of course, she would be careful, but this palace was already a cage, and Vinir was her ball and chain, so she would feel horrible if her life became even more condensed because of this news.

She suspected she would have a hard enough time handling how she would give the news to Vinir.

"I'll be right back," Lissa said, humming as she wandered out of the room.

The silence was pleasant, allowing Aelwen the first chance since hearing about the pregnancy to truly come to terms with her reality. She anticipated that Vinir would be neutral about the news, not angry. After all, he'd admitted to sleeping with her well aware that there were certain pressures on her to conceive a child as soon as possible.

She'd been angry at the time that he'd turned their consummation into something so mechanical when, during the act, Aelwen had thought she was connecting to Vinir on a deeper, more emotional, and physical level. But in hindsight, she realized that it hadn't been entirely malicious for him to admit that he slept with her for her benefit—or at least, that had been part of his motivation.

Oddly, it showed that he cared about her well-being—knowing that if she did not carry a child soon as was expected of her, there would be severe consequences. Now that she was Vinir's wife, and because she was a princess, she would not be killed for being too slow to conceive as some fae were, but she would lose all traction she had with returning to her father's good graces.

Not that his small act of kindness meant anything now that she knew the truth about him. Had he married her, intending to cast her away to a similar fate?

She shivered at the thought.

Speaking of her father, he would want to hear the good news. Perhaps his reception of her pregnancy would be less

hostile than Vinir's, as this meant that Aelwen had accomplished some of what she'd set out to do for King Sinnegard when she became married. Hopefully, this would be precisely what she needed to resume a pleasant relationship with her father.

Despite Lissa's insistence that Aelwen stay in bed today, she could do nothing of the sort. Her mind was abuzz, eager to deliver the news to at least one party besides her maid, who would be overjoyed by the news.

She dug into one of her dresser drawers, finding one of the few belongings Aelwen had brought with her to Vinir's palace when she came to marry him. It was the one thing she'd carried with her everywhere she went, even when she'd been fleeing home and her responsibilities as a princess.

Beneath one of her nightgowns, she retrieved a bundle of leaves, still green as the day they were plucked from her home tree in King Sinnegard's palace. They were her connection to home, to her family, even when she wanted to be nowhere near them.

Carefully, she took the leaves out and laid them on the floor. They were roughly shaped into an oval, much like a mirror, the edges of the leaves all layered over one another, so there was none of the marble floor showing through underneath.

Taking a deep breath, Aelwen closed her eyes and planted her hands on either side of the arrangement of leaves. "Father of mine, I reach out to you ... will you answer me?"

The leaves shifted, crinkling and moving in place, rearranging themselves as the magic woven into their fibers took hold. When Aelwen was sure the magic was working, she opened her eyes to find the face of her father staring back at her, his worn features reimagined by the contours of the leaves.

"I answer you, daughter," King Sinnegard's voice droned, warped from the magic and arriving at her despite the distance between them. "Why do you call?"

“I have joyous news to share,” Aelwen said with a smile, her voice steady as she presented herself before her king. “I am pregnant with King Vinir’s child.”

Her father’s face changed—his features became less stern, and he smiled back at her, although it was a small one. “That is wonderful news, indeed. I am pleased that you are following through with your duty to King Vinir, and me.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “How has your relationship outside of bed been progressing? King Vinir must not doubt your value to him outside of being able to produce heirs from him.”

Aelwen’s smile faltered. “He is a wicked man, Father. I fear I ... I fear I will never be able to get close to him. I have tried many ways to communicate my worth to him, but he is always distant and cruel, and now I fear for my life and that of my unborn child. I believe him to be mistrustful and hateful of me because I am fae, and your daughter. You must come for me at once, bring me home where I will be safe.”

“I must not do anything,” he scolded. “I am the king and I am not commanded by any daughter of mine. You have a duty and you will perform it to my specifications, even if that means you must risk potential harm. It is your responsibility to take care of yourself and keep your husband’s temper in check.”

“But, Father—”

“No buts. Your husband must never feel like he could do without you.” He sighed. “You are slacking, daughter. I had higher expectations of you. It is one thing to get knocked up with an heir—the one thing every king covets above all else—and it is another entirely to have him wrapped around your finger, eating out of your hand and obeying your every wish and desire. This is the state we need him in for the security of our people. It is not only you he is resistant to. His mistrust of you also drives his deliberate attempts to thwart my plans in his territories. You must make him trust you.”

Aelwen’s heart sank slightly at those words, but she nodded in agreement.

It was not her fault that she failed to gain Vinir's heart, even if she thought, at first, that she was failing. But now she wondered if she could not capture him because he had no heart.

Maybe he had let those fae go, but could she ever trust him?

Now that she was going to have his child, and her father was unwilling to whisk her away from this place, she had to decide what to do.

She thought that, at least, her father would share more in her joy of preparing to welcome her first child. Her mother would have understood better were she still alive, but she'd passed many years ago when Aelwen and Iffandril were still little girls.

Once again, it seemed as though Aelwen had gotten caught up in her happy fantasy that she had forgotten about reality. Her father expected, no demanded, far more from her than the continuation of their family line.

"I understand, Father," Aelwen said. "I promise I'll do better."

"See that you do. A lot is riding on your success. Do not let me down."

The leaves rustled again, and one by one began to fall away from the image of his face and back into a pile on the floor. Within seconds, he was gone, and the magic faded.

Aelwen stared at the scattered leaves, a sense of numbness creeping into her heart. Why could her father never be proud of her, never be happy for her?

She didn't always have the successes that he wanted ... but she was making her way through life on her own path, and she had her fair share of triumphs too.

But her father's tame response to her pregnancy left a well of uncertainty in her stomach. Now she would have to face Vinir about their future child. Instead of approaching that conversation with the brightness and joy she'd experienced

upon hearing the news, she was already twisting herself into knots, terrified about how the conversation would go.

For the last two weeks, his proclamation about the fae gaining more protections in Zacorith. Although she had initially thought him a liar and a fraud, now she wondered if her initial impression of him hadn't been entirely wrong after all, and she'd been too quick to jump and persecute him. She'd thought several times that she should approach him again, but then another nightmare would strike her about what he was capable of, and she'd feel Vinir's hands on her throat and wonder if she would be next.

But now, she wondered if she was simply using that as an excuse to avoid him. Vinir was as cruel as the stories about him claimed, but there was also a softer side to him. She'd seen it when they made love, and now, understanding that his curse had something to do with his touch, it made more sense why he'd refused to kiss her during their wedding ceremony and initially avoided consummating their marriage.

He'd been willing to make Aelwen believe he was a monster, all to avoid hurting her. He'd thought that, like everyone else, if he touched her, then she would burn.

But she hadn't. None of the times he'd touched her had ever hurt at all. Even when he took her virginity, and there'd been a moment of pain, but that wasn't his doing at all. It was just the natural process of becoming a woman, and he comforted her so sweetly the entire time.

So whatever facade he put on for everyone else, he couldn't lie to her, not after he'd shown her who he really was deep down. Aelwen had forgotten amongst her own fears and hurts, but she knew now that she should never have given up on him. The part of Vinir that hadn't wanted to hurt her was still there somewhere. She just had to find him.

Chapter 10 - Vinir

The stables were in a frenzy as the stable hands and nobles currently residing on the grounds prepared for the end-of-season hunt. Dusk was steadily arriving, and the moon was bright in the sky with few clouds, ensuring that the weather would be clear for the night to come.

The season's hunt was always one of Vinir's favorite events of the year. Although he personally wasn't a big hunter and definitely preferred human blood to drinking from animals, it was a tradition in his kingdom and had been since long before he became king.

He grew up on these hunts, and one day his children would, too.

A stableboy guided Vinir's horse from the stall and into the pasture, where Vinir was waiting in his riding boots and slim-fitting shirt. A lot of the other hunters wore cloaks, but Vinir opted not to because he liked to get on the ground and stalk his prey, and the cloak often rustled too many branches and alerted any game to his presence.

The warhorse stopped in front of Vinir, imposing and powerful, standing at least sixteen hands high in all its regal splendor. Its coat was glossy, raven-black, and its mane and tail were thick and flowing. Its eyes gazed out with a noble intelligence.

"I wish you a good time tonight, my king!" the stableboy said as Vinir climbed up onto the horse's back. "Happy hunting!"

Vinir smirked and nodded to the boy. He grabbed his crossbow off his back, checking that its gears were operational and that he had the correct ammo. Seeing it was all there, he took his reins and began to steer toward the forest on the edge of the castle grounds.

In the corner of his eye, another horse approached him. This was a chestnut mare, and riding her was Aelwen, fully garbed with riding gear. His heart stuttered in his chest at seeing those long legs wrapped in tight leather and a bodice

with a neckline just low enough to show off her ample cleavage—the things this woman did to him without even trying.

He adjusted on top of his horse, irritated that he was aroused simply by the sight of her. When truly, he should still be mad at her. Mad that she'd pushed him to the brink and made him attack Lord Sawgar in front of the court, revealing the truth of his curse to everyone when he'd worked so hard to keep it a secret. Mad that she'd been avoiding him, and he couldn't blame her.

When the truth was, all he'd wanted to do was protect her. He didn't do soft and gentle, but for some reason, Aelwen made him want to try. If only he knew where to start.

He pulled the reins of his horse and slowed as she neared. "Oh, my king," she said. "I heard this night hunt is a tradition in Zacorith. Is this true?"

"It is. We gather together every year, humans, vampires, and everyone else, to hunt the creatures of the night together and feast until dawn. We've been preparing for tonight for longer than our wedding."

Aelwen smirked. "Then I hope you are prepared to take me with you and show me how it's done? I can't say that hunting is my specialty, but I know my way around a bow."

Vinir smiled back at her. "Of course, you may ride with me. I'm glad you decided to come. Are you ready?"

"Let's go!"

He urged his horse forward into the dark forest. As they rode alongside each other through the trails of trees, he could feel Aelwen's presence more than ever before. It was comforting knowing that despite everything, she was still willing to try to be his wife.

He wouldn't have blamed her if, after the last time he'd blown up at her, she gave up for good and avoided him at all costs. But back then, he hadn't been ready to accept her into his life. He hadn't been ready to face the fact that maybe, just maybe, it would be possible for him to have her without

risking harm to her person every time he wanted to touch her, to kiss her, to hold her.

Now, however, he was ready.

He was ready for her.

The darkness engulfed them almost immediately as they entered the forest depths where the moonlight struggled to reach. The trees grew tall and thick around them, blocking out all light from outside except for what glinted off of their weapons and shone brightly under the moonlight above them.

“I must warn you, this isn’t a normal hunt,” Vinir said once they’d gone far enough down the path that they would begin to see a wild game if they were observant enough. “Humans hunt the gentle creatures during the daylight hours, but we hunt for things of great power, monsters that lurk in the shadows.”

Aelwen laughed and drew her bow from her back, a determined look in her eye. “I’m ready,” she said confidently. “I might be a princess, but I am no stranger to monsters. The creatures that lurk in the darkwoods in Gaivalon would scare even the likes of you.”

Vinir chuckled. “Oh? Tell me about these creatures.”

“There are the dovkar, creatures of blood and bone that are alive merely on the resentment and rage of the murdered fae. They make dire wolves look like puppies. And there are the witherhowens, singing trees that take the shape of beautiful dryads and lure men into their trunks, where they are kept alive to feed the tree for as long as possible.”

“Creepy. Perhaps our dire wolves aren’t so terrifying in comparison, then. Have you ever encountered either?”

Aelwen was quiet for a long moment, and Vinir found himself slowing down to glance at her. She looked like she was in a faraway dream, but then she caught him looking at her, and she smiled.

“No, I haven’t, but ... the year I was born, my brother, my father’s firstborn son, was captured by a witherhowen. I was just a baby, so I remember nothing about that time, but my

sister still has a hard time talking about it, and I think some part of my father must blame me for what happened.”

“Why would anyone blame you? You were just a baby.”

“True. But everyone was distracted by my arrival, so they did not notice right away when Cedric went missing. They found him later, which is why we know it was a witherhowen that took him ... but they did not get to him soon enough to save him.”

They rode in silence for a while, the cool breeze brushing across their skin and whistling through the trees. The moonlight was brighter in this part of the forest, and he could see the sorrow written all over Aelwen’s face.

He’d realized long ago that King Sinnegard was not a wicked man per se, but he was just as ruthless as Vinir. He would do whatever it took to ensure the security of his kingdom, even if that meant all but selling off his daughter to a man like Vinir without caring what he did to her.

He hadn’t realized how the king’s attitude might have been reflected upon his home life, namely on Aelwen. Vinir had always thought she was a spoiled princess who ran away from her responsibilities because she didn’t want to get married, but now he wondered if there was more to the story than he thought.

“It’s not fair that you had to go through that,” Vinir said at last. “You had nothing to do with your brother’s death, and anyone implying otherwise is merely them projecting their guilt and insecurities onto you.”

Aelwen sighed deeply. “I know that, but ... well, thank you for saying that.”

“I do not blame you for not wanting to marry me, I was not exactly fond of the idea either.”

“Did you plan to do to me what you’d done to the fae in your dungeons?”

Vinir glanced over at her atop her horse, her gaze fierce. “Yes, I did. Before I met you. And then we met, and ...

you were very unlike what I expected. I could not continue to harm those fae so long as you are my wife. It felt wrong.”

“I appreciate that.” She looked down. “Why were you torturing those fae? Was it really for the curse?”

“The curse was my excuse, but it was not the reason. I have been killing fae long before I was cursed. It is true that I am a wicked man ... and I always have been. But the fae ...”

His jaw clenched.

“Why do you hate the fae so much? Why do you hate *me*?”

“I don’t hate you.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “Before I became a vampire, and I was very young, the fae attacked my village and killed many people that I loved and cared about. My father fought against them bravely but perished in the battle. After that I swore to never forgive them for what they did, to never let them get away with it, and so I began taking out my anger on any fae that crossed my path.”

“There are bad fae, just as there are bad vampires, or bad werewolves, or bad humans,” Aelwen said quietly. “I am sorry for your losses.”

“It was a very long time ago. I don’t even remember what they look like anymore—I’ve been a vampire for so long. But I never forgot what those fae did. And I realize now, my path of vengeance went on for too long. I lost my purpose. I can never undo what I have done, but I am determined not to repeat my mistakes. Even if it means facing the wrath of an entire kingdom that does not want to change.”

In the corner of his eye, he spotted Aelwen’s lips curl into a slight smile. “Perhaps you are not so hopeless after all.”

They rode in silence for some time, the dark trees rustling around them. It was a small admittance, and yet it seemed like the whole world had just opened up to Vinir. He had to press the advantage while he could.

“Why did you choose to run away instead of coming to Zacorith years ago?” he asked.

Aelwen looked away, her eyes drawn to the trees in the distance. She was silent for a few moments before she spoke again, her voice barely audible over the sound of their horse's hooves against the forest floor.

“My father has always held his children to a higher standard than others. It was expected that we were perfect in every way so that he could look good on the throne. Now, looking back, I think this might be because of what happened to Cedric. But if any mistakes were made, no matter how small, the punishments were severe. My sister always thrived in this environment of perfection, and she quickly rose to become my father's favorite. And that meant I was always compared to her. If Iffandril could do it, why couldn't I? And that is what my life quickly became.

“And I became sick of it. Never being pretty enough, or polite enough, or demure enough, or innocent enough, or ...” She shook her head slowly, letting out a deep breath before continuing. “No matter how hard I tried or what good deeds I performed, my father's disappointment that I wasn't like Iffandril was always there, and it felt like a heavy weight just pressing down on me.”

“After that,” she continued softly, “it felt like my father was making an effort just to marry me off, so he didn't have to look at me anymore.” Then she laughed suddenly. “I bet he thought there was no way I could mess this up, and then here we are, the two of us trapped in a marriage that was doomed from the start.”

Vinir didn't know what to say. He could tell Aelwen had been carrying this pain with her since she left home, and he wished there was more he could do besides just sit here and listen.

He reached out and took her hand, but he had gloves on still, so he wasn't worried about hurting her. “I am so sorry I've made you feel this way, Aelwen. It is my fault that our marriage has not gone as you hoped, and I take full responsibility for that. But I want you to know I don't feel trapped. With you, I—”

A loud growling came from Vinir's left, and a creature so large it blocked out the moonlight emerged from the bushes and trees. Black scales glittered in what light was left, and wings so wide they could have taken up half the sky curled and vibrated in warning.

The creature turned its head toward them and glared with bright red eyes filled with malice.

"Shit," Vinir cursed. "A drake. They're not supposed to be in season until ..."

The beast growled again, opening its mouth and snapping at them in warning. He squeezed Aelwen's hand, but with his other arm, he unhooked his crossbow from his back and readied the lever to point at the drake.

Normally he would hunt with his own two hands and his fangs because he found that more thrilling, but he always brought the crossbow anyway for safety. He knew creatures like drakes lingered in the shadows and always came prepared. But he never expected to find anything in his own backyard that he couldn't kill simply through the merit of being a vampire.

Beside him, Aelwen was frozen in place. She carefully nocked a bow on her string, slowly glancing in his direction. "What do we do?"

Killing it would be ideal, so it didn't threaten any nearby towns, but that might not be possible with only a crossbow and a bow. A drake's scales were naturally resistant to piercing weapons, and they needed a sword or magic, which neither of them had.

Scaring it off and coming back with a larger hunting party would be Vinir's second choice. He spotted a weakness in the drake's wings, a gap between its scales that revealed soft tissue beneath. He knew he could easily strike at it and harm it enough to scare it away if he could just get close enough.

He nodded to Aelwen and readied his crossbow. Taking a deep breath, he crept forward on horseback, keeping himself steady. The drake reared up in territorial anger, and as

soon as its front claws landed in the dirt again, Vinir fired a crossbow bolt straight into the drake's wing. The creature roared in pain and kicked off into the sky with a powerful thrust of its wings.

But instead of flying off into the night, it whipped around and flew straight toward them.

“Get down!” Vinir cried.

He and Aelwen jumped off their horses and took cover behind a nearby tree. Vinir pushed Aelwen behind him protectively, doing his best to use his body as a shield against the creature's wrath. The drake flew in circles above them, screeching and snarling, spitting fire that lit up the night sky.

Vinir loaded another bolt into the crossbow, ready to fire again if needed. He looked over at Aelwen and noticed the fear in her eyes but also determination. She had already nocked another arrow on her bow and aimed it toward the sky. Even though he knew this creature could easily destroy them both, he felt a wave of pride wash over him at his wife's bravery.

In the moonlight, Vinir could see the beast's wings twitching restlessly. The beast flew closer and closer, its wings beating so hard that small gusts of wind buffeted against their faces as they crouched behind the tree. Its mouth opened wide and its jaw revealed serrated teeth that glinted in what little light was left of the moonlight. Then it released an ear-splitting roar that echoed through the night air like thunder.

“At the same time,” Vinir gasped as the drake flew toward them. “Aim for its mouth!”

Aelwen nodded and lifted her bow at the same time that Vinir lifted his crossbow. The creature neared, and before its mouth closed, they both loosed their attacks, their aim true. The crossbow bolt, and the arrow thunked into the vulnerable flesh inside its neck and throat, and the beast screeched and lost all momentum, spinning out of control and crashing into the trees nearby.

Vinir clutched Aelwen's shoulder, ensuring she was safe. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she breathed. "Is it dead?"

They stood there, waiting in the darkness, clinging to each other. If it wasn't for the beast roaring at them straight on like that, they might not have been able to defeat it. He was immensely grateful that he and Aelwen made it out of the encounter unscathed.

"I think so. It hasn't moved in a while."

They were still pressed against the tree, and now that the danger had passed, Vinir became more aware of the warmth of Aelwen's body pressed against his. She'd been so stunning at the castle, sitting atop her horse, and she'd been stunning while she waited now behind the tree.

Her hair was wild around her face from the wind, her eyes a little crazed, and her heart beat a loud flutter in her chest.

Vinir looked down at her, and he knew that he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to show his gratitude for all the danger she had faced and for having faith in him when he felt nothing was going right. But he was afraid of hurting her with his cursed hands and his cursed body.

Aelwen looked up at Vinir, reading the look in his eyes. She smiled softly and reached out her hand to brush against his cheek. "I'm not afraid of you," she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.

She stepped closer so that her face was just inches away from his. Encouraged by Aelwen's words, Vinir closed his eyes, leaned in, and kissed her. He tasted the sweet honey of her breath and marveled at how soft her lips were against his own. The kiss was soft but passionate, full of relief and love for the woman before him who had just fought so bravely alongside him against a great foe.

When they finally pulled away from each other, Aelwen smiled up at Vinir with admiration in her eyes as if to say, 'see? I told you'.

But Vinir was so far from finished with her, and from that look in her eyes, her irises like pools of liquid desire, he knew she wanted more, too.

Needed it.

Chapter 11 - Aelwen

Vinir shoved her against the tree, gentle but firm, as his mouth captured hers in another all-consuming kiss. She was already lightheaded from the slow, devouring way he kissed her, as if even despite knowing that she was immune to his curse, he had to hold back just in case.

She'd been terrified the moment she saw that drake. Horrified that she'd blindly followed Vinir into the woods, thinking the creatures they found hidden in the trees couldn't be anywhere near as terrible as the beasts in her homeland. She'd been wrong.

And in those bright red eyes, she thought she'd been staring her death right in the eye. The death of the baby growing in her belly.

But Vinir hadn't been afraid. He had a plan, and because of them, they came out of the encounter alive and well.

He'd protected her.

His firm body pressed up against her, the bulge at his crotch rubbing against her thigh. A groan escaped him, vibrating against her lips. Aelwen threw her head back, unable to breathe, and he pressed his mouth to her neck instead, sucking on the tender flesh there and making her shiver.

"You're incredible," he growled into her neck. "The way you stood beside me, fearless to take down that drake ... I don't know how anyone could see you for any less than what you are."

Aelwen blinked down at him slowly, breathing too heavily from the anticipation of his body, her mind foggy from how he kissed her like they were the only two people in the world.

"And what am I?" she gasped, draping her arms around his neck to keep herself standing.

"The most beautiful woman in the world."

His hands came down to her hips, possessively trailing up her stomach and to the laces of her bodice, slowly unlacing the top until her breasts spilled out into the open. Vinir's eyes raked across her pink nipples, which quickly hardened under the intensity of his gaze and the cool night air.

"You're the most stunning creature I've ever had the chance to lay eyes on," he murmured, his gray eyes smoldering, "and I need you now. I'm going to fuck you against this tree, any objections?"

Aelwen was breathless, awed that he even had the control to ask her at this stage. But she shook her head. She wanted him, needed him, possibly even more than he wanted her. She couldn't stop fantasizing about their night together, even if she'd been paralyzed from pursuing another night of passion because of her nightmares.

As soon as Aelwen confirmed, Vinir dipped his face down to take one of her nipples in his mouth. She threw her head back with a moan as he sucked and licked, fondling her with his tongue. While he gave her breasts all the attention, his hands roamed down her stomach, finding the waistband of her leather riding pants and slowly pushing them down her thighs.

Meanwhile, Aelwen unbuttoned Vinir's shirt and desperately splayed her hands on his stomach, letting her fingers roam the valleys of powerful muscles. Everything she felt for this man was a confusing mess in her head, a lust like she couldn't explain, a connection that had driven her half-mad from the beginning.

Vinir growled, frustrated when Aelwen's pants got stuck on her thighs, so he just ripped the crotch open. She gasped and laughed when he wildly ground against her, then lifted her, so her back was propped up against the tree, her legs curled tightly around his hips.

"Fuck, I need you," he growled. "Tell me you need me too."

Aelwen felt her heart flutter at the tenderness in his voice, and she smiled up at him, feeling an overwhelming love

swell up inside of her. “I need you too,” she whispered. “More than anything.”

Vinir leaned down to kiss her deeply as he finished unbuckling himself, then pushed gently against her exposed pussy. As soon as she felt him there, he glided into her warmth, their bodies moving together as if they were meant to be joined this way.

He let go of a soft moan as he entered her, and Aelwen threw her head back in pleasure. The sensation was overwhelming, but it had never been more right. She felt like she belonged here, in his arms.

“Look at me,” he commanded, and her eyes fluttered open again, and she locked her gaze with his. “You are strong and brave and beautiful, do you understand? You can do anything you set your mind to.” His lips found hers again, hungrily devouring her mouth as he pushed further inside her.

Aelwen moaned against him as they moved together in perfect synchronicity. Vinir’s words of encouragement echoed in her head like a mantra, reminding her of how deeply he cared for her even when he pretended to be heartless and cruel. No matter what happened in the future or how scared it made her feel, she now believed she could always come back to him for the safety and security that only his embrace could provide.

With each thrust from his hips, all fear slowly melted away until they were just their two bodies existing until there was nothing but them and their lovemaking.

Vinir must have sensed this too, for he suddenly lifted Aelwen from the tree and placed her on a blanket of their clothes and soft leaves, their bodies never parting for even a second. He continued to make love to her with a newfound passion, each movement more tender than the last as his hands searched out new ways to bring her pleasure.

He took his time exploring every inch of her body, but his hand always came back to her face, caressing her cheek. There was so much hidden emotion in that powerful gaze of his. Words left unspoken on his parted lips.

With each movement, he pushed Aelwen closer and closer to the edge until she was no longer here on the ground in the middle of a dark forest with her husband but rocketing into the clouds.

“Vinir ... ” she moaned, his name a chant she couldn’t stop singing.

With a final thrust, they both fell off the edge together as their bodies shuddered in unison. A volcano of heat erupted inside of Aelwen, and Vinir shouted out Aelwen’s name in sheer ecstasy as he spilled inside of her. She gasped and moaned with each wave of pleasure that came crashing over them both, drowning her in a hazy abyss of passion until finally, she collapsed into his arms, panting softly with a satisfied smile upon her lips.

Vinir pulled Aelwen closer to him and kissed the top of her head tenderly. “You are perfect,” he whispered against her hair, feeling an immense amount of joy in his heart as if it would burst from his chest any moment now.

Aelwen smiled up at him, curling herself further into his embrace so that not even an inch separated them—not even air or space—just pure blissful love between their two bodies.

Somehow, he seemed to have changed so much since their last time together. It seemed so impossible that the man who had once told her that she was nothing to him would lay here in the grass making love to her, whispering sweet things in her ear that made her melt beneath him.

She didn’t know when or how it happened, but looking at Vinir’s pleasure-stricken face, but there was no doubt in her mind that she was falling for this strange and powerful man. There was hope for them still, a way for them to come together as a couple.

Until she found out about the baby, Aelwen had been ready to give up, but now she saw that she’d been mistaken.

No matter how many times Vinir claimed he was a horrible, callous man, Aelwen could not believe it. He had bouts of cruelty, true, but how much of that was forged based

on how he thought he was supposed to behave, not based on who he actually was?

She wanted more than anything now to tell him about the news she'd been given. But even with this trust that there was a future for the two of them, after all, she was scared that it was too soon to bring a baby into the mix.

Would the baby bring them together or pull them farther apart?

It was too late to change courses. Whether they were ready or not, this baby was coming, and she knew she would need his support if she were going to make it through this.

Aelwen had already kept her pregnancy a secret from Vinir for several days as she worked up the courage to see him again, and now that they were here together, she knew she wouldn't have a better chance to tell him the good news. Now was the time to tell him, but why couldn't she get her mouth to work?

"Listen, Aelwen," Vinir said suddenly, propping himself up on an elbow to get a better look at her. There was a sheen of sweat still on his chest. "Before the drake appeared, I wanted to tell you ... I don't think of this marriage as a cage."

Her brow furrowed. "You don't? But I thought you didn't want this."

"Maybe not at first, but that was before I met you." He swallowed. "Despite our bumpy start, you made a good impression on our wedding day."

Aelwen threw her head back and laughed. "Are you sure about that? I was heartbroken and devastated that you wouldn't treat me like your wife."

"That was my mistake. I ... I genuinely thought that my curse would hurt you, and no matter what people tell you about me, I've never hurt a woman, Aelwen. Not unless she attacked me first. The only time I ... it happened was when the curse first hit me. I was with a woman then, and we ... Gods, I didn't mean to hurt her. I swear on my grave."

Her eyes skittered over his face, gauging how truthful he was being. There were many stories about Vinir's temper and violent sexual tendencies, but she hadn't seen any of that violence manifest when they were together. Sure, he was rough around the edges, but at his heart, she knew Vinir was a good man.

"I believe you," she said and grabbed his hand, splaying their fingers against each other. His fingers were much larger than hers, a little rougher, but still smooth and strong. "So you were cursed with a touch that kills."

He nodded, those gray eyes pinning her in place. "My touch, accidental or otherwise have seared everyone except for you. You're the only one who's been spared, Aelwen." His fingers curled through hers, and their hands clasped together. "I wonder why that is?"

She smiled shyly. "Maybe we were simply meant to be."

"Maybe so."

He leaned in to kiss her again, and Aelwen sighed into his mouth, melting against him. Her heart raced at his touch, every part of him making her feel more alive, more comfortable.

"Vinir ... there's something I haven't been telling you." She whispered as soon as he pulled his mouth away from his.

A look of concern crossed his face. "What is it?"

Her cheeks warmed, and she glanced away, unable to look at him directly despite knowing the importance of this conversation. "A few days ago, I found out ... I ... the healer ..." She swallowed, drawing strength from his steady presence, and looked up to face him directly. "Vinir, I'm pregnant."

His eyes widen somewhat. "P-pregnant? Already?"

She nodded, unsure of if his response was horrified or simply shock.

“Vinir?”

He shook his head, looking slightly dazed. “I ... I didn’t expect this.” He took a deep breath and then smiled. “But it’s not bad news. This is good news.” After a beat, he chuckled and shook his head again in disbelief. “Oh, Aelwen ... I don’t know what to say.”

Aelwen smiled softly. “You don’t need to say anything. We can take it one step at a time. It’s early days yet, but we can make plans for the future. There’s only one thing that I definitely need from you, Vinir.”

He reached up to cup her cheek with her other hand. “What is it?”

“I need you to treat me as your wife, not ..., not like a stranger. This is unfamiliar territory for both of us, but I ... I can’t do this alone, Vinir. I need you.”

She watched with relief as Vinir’s expression softened, his hand squeezing hers gently. He looked deeply into her eyes, speaking volumes without words before taking her in his arms again and pressing a kiss against the top of her head.

“Of course. You have nothing to worry about. If there’s anything I’ve realized tonight, it’s that I made a horrible mistake by shutting you out. You were right from the beginning. We should be a team, and it can start with this. With our child.”

Aelwen grinned, her heart soaring with relief. She felt light all over like she could float away on a cloud of happiness at any moment. “I’m sure it’s not something either of us expected so soon, but I’m already looking forward to raising our child together.”

Vinir’s eyes warmed with affection as he looked at her, and she couldn’t help but smile back at him.

“Me too.”

They lay there in silence for a while, just enjoying each other’s company. But at long last, a crinkle of dawn began to appear on the horizon, and Aelwen shot up from their resting place with worry.

“Dawn is coming!” she cried out. “We need to get you inside.”

Vinir looked up at her as if he was drunk on happiness too, without a care in the world. “Yes, I suppose we should,” he said with a laugh and slowly began to collect his belongings.

They reclothed as fast as they could—well, Aelwen did, and Vinir was considerably slower, considering it was his life on the line—and they found their horses grazing on a grassy forest patch not too far away from where they killed the drake hours ago.

Aelwen glanced at the still corpse, the mound of black scales looking intimidating even in death. “We’ll have to send others to collect the body too.”

“That’s right, for the feast. Ah, tomorrow is going to be fantastic.”

As they rode back to the palace together, the large sprawling behemoth on the hillside that poked through the gaps in the trees, Aelwen was sure that Vinir was right.

Tomorrow was going to be wonderful.

Music blared throughout the night, violins and drums and a dozen different singers rotating through various performances. Meanwhile, the outside of the palace’s main courtyard was completely transformed, with festival banners and trophies from the successful hunts over the past two days.

Brightly colored lights covered every courtyard wall, hanging everywhere to keep the courtyard glowing well into the night.

Various performers and entertainers swirled through the crowd. There was even a group of them parading around with the hide, scales, and the drake that Vinir and Aelwen had defeated just the other night, running around and roaring at other people and spooking children.

Vinir tugged on Aelwen's hand, guiding her toward an open space where everyone was dancing. "Come on," he said, sounding more eager than she'd heard him before. "Let's dance."

"Oh, I'm not much of a dancer," Aelwen laughed, but she let him drag her along anyway.

"Mmm, darling, with legs like yours, you were made for dancing with me."

Aelwen craned her neck as they passed the feast laid out on a long table decorated with fresh produce of fruits and vegetables, as well as seasonal wild game, freshly cooked on an open fire.

"We'll eat after. Come on."

"All right, all right, I'm coming!"

They floated onto the cobbled courtyard, where couples swayed and leaped together to the lively music. Vinir placed his hands on her hips and guided her movements with effortless grace, spinning and dipping until the two of them were a blur, completely in sync.

Aelwen had never felt so alive before.

"I told you, you could dance." He grinned, bringing their faces so close she felt his breath on her lips. "All you had to do was let me take the lead."

The colors of the lanterns blurred into a tapestry of starlight, and the music became background noise to their unique harmony.

The night rushed away with them as they danced, each lost in the timelessness of the moment.

When the music eventually wound down, Vinir dragged her to a quiet corner of the courtyard filled with fragrant roses and thick ivy vines. He leaned in close to her ear, his breath tickling her neck as he spoke tenderly.

"You look stunning tonight."

Aelwen felt herself blushing, but she couldn't find it in herself to care. She looked up into his eyes and smiled shyly. "Thank you," she murmured back. "I'm glad we came out to celebrate. It's a beautiful festival."

"You make it even more beautiful."

Vinir reached out and touched her cheek softly, the tips of his fingers like butterfly wings on her skin. Then slowly leaned forward until their lips met. Aelwen looked up into his eyes and felt a warmth fill her chest, overwhelming in its intensity. When he finally leaned in and brushed her lips with his own, Aelwen thought she could feel the stars stretching across their kiss. A warmth spread through her body, and for that single moment, everything felt perfect.

They embraced each other tightly, almost forgetting where they were as they simply enjoyed each other's presence. Eventually, they reluctantly pulled away from each other after what seemed like hours. Aelwen let out a content sigh as she leaned against his chest.

It was just yesterday when she thought that she would have to fight for months or more to find any sort of affection from Vinir. They went from barely speaking to finally seeing eye-to-eye to finding a balance where they could be together as husband and wife. Aelwen knew a lot of it had to do with how she was immune to the curse and that if everything he'd said to her was true, then he could simply be craving companionship after so long of being unable to touch anyone.

But if she and Vinir were like this, if things stayed this way ... she could see herself being happy with him.

Aelwen grabbed at his hands, tugging him eagerly back toward the festival. "Come on, let's get back to the festival. You promised me a feast, didn't you?"

"You're right, I did, and you're eating for two now, so I better not deny you."

"You better not."

They walked back to the festival, and Aelwen grabbed herself a plate of food, plucking roast vegetables and a few

slices of roast wild boar. Everything was delicious, seasoned to perfection, and so filling that even after eating more than she normally would, she was full so quickly.

Vinir suggested they sit down for a moment to enjoy the music while they ate, and Aelwen happily agreed. As the music drifted through the air, Aelwen began to feel a strange sense of confidence emanating from Vinir. He seemed more sure of himself now, and his gaze was brighter, more alive than before. Then he stood up and made his way to the middle of the courtyard where everyone had gathered, clearing his throat as he prepared to address them.

Naturally, everyone seeing that their king was out in the open, flocked to listen to what he had to say.

“Friends,” he began in a loud voice so everyone could hear him clearly. “We have been blessed beyond measure with bountiful crops, friendship between our families, and true love in our hearts.” He paused for a moment as the crowd roared in approval. “Tonight, we honor those who fought against impossible odds to keep us safe. It is our duty to remember the courage and resilience of those we lost so that we may carry on their legacy even if they are no longer here with us anymore.

“But this is also a time to celebrate and honor new obligations and new life,” Vinir said. “This year, I married my beautiful wife, Queen Aelwen.” He gestured to her, eagerly signaling for her to join him.

With a shy smile, she did as she was bid, leaving her plate on the table to come and cozy up to his side. He kissed her on the forehead, to various awws from the audience.

“I am now more pleased than ever to announce that we are expecting our first child,” Vinir said proudly. “By this time next year, we will have a little prince or princess running around to join the festival with us.”

Aelwen’s smile could not have been wider; she was elated to finally have this secret off her back in the open. She was shy about telling everyone at first, but when the crowd

erupted into a flurry of cheers and hearty laughter, she understood why Vinir made the announcement.

A baby wasn't just good news for them but for the whole kingdom.

Vinir pulled her into his arms and held her close, spinning her around in circles before planting a passionate kiss on her lips. They embraced for what felt like an eternity, almost forgetting that there were people around them, watching their every move.

As their embrace ended and the music began to rise again, Vinir spun Aelwen around one last time before they joined hands and resumed their part in the festivities together. People crowded around them to congratulate them on their news, but Aelwen barely noticed. All that mattered now was that she had finally found balance with her husband.

Everything felt perfect, and Aelwen swore that, even though she wasn't sure if what she felt was love just yet, Vinir looked at her like he adored her to no end.

Chapter 12 - Vinir

His hands sailed over Aelwen's chest, noticing how her breasts had begun to swell ever so slightly. The bump on her stomach was so tiny you wouldn't notice if you didn't know she was pregnant.

But now that she was far enough along to see evidence of their child growing inside of her, something was different.

It wasn't that he didn't believe that Aelwen was pregnant before—he did. It was just that her pregnancy seemed so far away from him, like something so intangible he could hardly comprehend what it meant. But this tiny bump was something tangible he could understand.

See. Feel.

And suddenly, the prospect of being a father became that much more real to him. A wave of emotion overcame him, and Vinir had to sit beside Aelwen on the bed, or else he would fall over.

Tears prickled in his eyes.

Aelwen laughed and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Are you all right? What's with you?”

Vinir looked up into her eyes and smiled. “I never expected to be a father,” he said, voice breaking a little. “I wasn't even sure I wanted children until you said you were pregnant.” He paused and wiped away the tears that had welled in his eyes. “But now... now that it's happening, I couldn't be happier.”

Aelwen smiled then and kissed him softly on the lips. Vinir closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment they shared together, free of any worries, curses, or doubts. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close as he deepened the kiss between them. When they finally pulled away, Aelwen gave him one last look before snuggling back into his embrace with a content smile on her face.

“I'm happy too,” she sighed. “So very happy.”

The two of them stayed like that for what seemed like hours before they eventually drifted off to sleep in each other's arms.

Every day with Aelwen became a precious treasure. It took some time to adjust to his new life with her, finally integrating her into his daily routines. Especially difficult for him was to treat her like a queen in more than title. She wanted to be involved with state affairs, to help him rule the kingdom and take some of that burden away from him.

At first, he hesitated because it wasn't a job he would wish on anyone, it was stressful with difficult obligations, and he worried that it could be hard on her and the baby. But as the weeks passed, Aelwen became more insistent, and as he got to know her better and truly understood what she needed and what drove her, he decided she was a natural queen.

She was confident and knew when to assert herself, and she wasn't embarrassed about not knowing everything or afraid to ask questions. So by the time Aelwen was four months along, they were spending many hours together in Vinir's personal study, debating the state of the slave trade in Zacorith, or updating outdated policies, or renewing trade negotiations with other countries.

He was surprised by her intellect and wit, and how well she took to the task of running the kingdom with him. Deep down, there was a part of him that still feared that her attempts to get close to him were rooted in King Sinnegard's schemes to influence Vinir into doing his bidding. Still, the more time he spent with Aelwen, he saw her passion for equity and equality among the people.

It was only expected that more fae would come to Zacorith now that there was a fae queen on the throne, but Aelwen encouraged no laws that favored them, only suggested changes that would be fairer for everyone. With her help, Vinir could feel the kingdom changing for the better.

"What do you think about your father's proposed alterations to the taxes on our treaties?" Vinir asked Aelwen

one night while they dined together. He had a glass of blood in hand while she sipped on a goblet of bubbly apple juice.

She covered her mouth and laughed. “He is trying to walk all over you. Do not let him.”

After that, any doubts about her intentions disappeared altogether.

And as the months went by, Aelwen couldn't keep up with their regular working hours together, for her bump was becoming too large, and sitting in the same position for hours at a time became too exhausting for her. It was around this time that Vinir decided to put all non-urgent issues aside for the time being while he focused on spending all the time he could with his wife.

Soon, they would have a child together. Every day as they approached the due date was packed with anticipation, and they spent their nights dreaming of what the new arrival would look like and talking about all the things they wanted for their child. A better education, more opportunities, and a brighter future than either of them had known.

But one question began to plague their minds.

“What should we name him?” Aelwen asked.

It was just past midnight, and she had insisted on going for a walk, so Vinir decided to come with her and make sure she was safe. There was a spot near the castle that he'd been dying to take her to for some time, so since it wasn't too bad of a hike, that's where they went.

“Or her,” Vinir said idly, holding his hand out to help her up a steeper part of the path. She took it gladly.

“I thought you would have been hoping for a boy,” Aelwen said.

He shrugged, and since he had her hand already, he looped his arm in with hers to keep her close. “I will be happy with either, so long as the baby is healthy. It's not like we will only have one, right?”

Aelwen chuckled gleefully. “Oh, no, I hope not. How do you feel about five?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Only five? I was thinking seven.”

“Seven! Could you imagine it, seven little ones running around? I think I would die of happiness.”

“It’s decided then, we’ll just have as many as possible.”

At the top of the path, a field of wildflowers stretched out for what seemed like miles. Aelwen gasped in awe, and Vinir knew he had made a good decision to take her there.

“Do you like it?” he whispered.

“Yes!” She laughed and hugged him close. “I want to lay down in the flowers and sleep here forever.”

“Don’t be so hasty. There’s still more.”

They continued walking hand in hand along the thin deer trail, taking their time so Aelwen wouldn’t get tired. They chatted about potential names for the baby, debating possibilities for whether it was a girl or a boy, but they didn’t come up with any that they were particularly sold on.

Before long, they could hear the roaring of a nearby river. Aelwen’s eyes lit up as soon as she heard it, and they walked along a little quicker. At the spot they came out on, they stood at a viewpoint hanging over the river below, which glowed silver in the moonlight.

And to their left was a waterfall as wide as two houses, water slamming down the cliffs and filling the chasm with a thick mist.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Aelwen whispered. “What is this place?”

“This is the Draconi River, it runs all the way from the northern tip of Elysium all the way to the south, where the water feeds the ocean,” Vinir said.

They sat together at the waterfall's edge, watching the moonlight reflect off the water. "I didn't know there was a river here at all. How didn't I know?"

"Because technically, there isn't. This is the only stretch of the river that's visible from the surface in Zacorith. The rest of it is underground. It's magical, don't you think?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I can feel the magic in the air."

Aelwen leaned into Vinir, and he wrapped an arm around her, both in awe of the beauty surrounding them. As they watched in silence, hundreds of tiny fireflies lit up around them, forming a ring that surrounded their spot and glittered like stars.

Aelwen looked back at Vinir with loving eyes, and she kissed him lightly on the cheek before whispering softly into his ear.

"This is perfect."

Vinir felt something inside him stirring, and he realized that this was the moment he had been waiting for. He had known from the moment he met Aelwen that she was special, and now, standing here with her in a place of such astonishing beauty, his old walls were crumbling away faster than ever.

Vinir knew he was in love with Aelwen and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He looked deep into her eyes, and he felt a warmth spreading throughout his body like a wave. He took both of Aelwen's hands in his own and placed them over her stomach, which was huge now. Any day now, their new life as parents would begin.

"Aelwen, I love you," he said. "You have shown me so much beauty and joy these past few weeks, and I can't imagine my life without you."

Aelwen smiled back at him through tearful eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. More than anything." He patted her belly with a soft laugh. "Well, I suppose you might have competition now, but that is a different kind of love. You are the one I'm meant

to cherish and hold for the rest of my life, the one who makes every day worthwhile, so long as I get to see your smile.”

“I love you too,” Aelwen blurted. “You mean more to me than you could possibly know. After feeling like I had no true home, nowhere I could be myself, I’ve found that here, with you. You’re my home, Vinir.”

They kissed deeply, their emotions too powerful and deep for words. As they embraced, a bright light shone down on them from the sky. Aelwen gasped, and the light was so intense that Vinir had to close his eyes.

Warmth radiated down his shoulders and concentrated in his hands. For a moment, it felt like his skin was burning off, and he had to clench his teeth against the pain. He had the urge to shake his hands, but he clenched them into fists instead, groaning.

“Vinir!” Aelwen cried out. “Look!”

He opened his eyes, finding that ... his skin *had* burned off. Or at least, a layer had. The skin turned grey like ash when exposed to the moonlight, and it crumbled and fell away into the wind like dust.

At first, Vinir didn’t think he felt any different, but when he thought about it, it came to him instantly: it was like a huge weight had been lifted from him, a lightness had added to his soul.

“The curse,” he whispered, turning his hands over in his hands. “It’s been lifted. *You* lifted it!”

“Love,” Aelwen murmured, seeming to be thinking out loud. “Love was the key. It always was. Now that we’ve admitted to loving each other, you—”

Aelwen’s eyes widened, and she bucked forward with a sharp cry. Vinir captured her in his arms at once.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked urgently.

“I think the baby is coming,” Aelwen said breathlessly.

Without another word, he lifted her into his arms, and away they went.

The next few hours were a blur of noise and chaos. Vinir kept close to Aelwen's side, holding her hand and offering words of encouragement as she pushed with all her might. In fact, he barely let go of her hand, and a couple of times, she had to tell him to loosen his grip or she would lose it. They joked about how he seemed more nervous about the baby coming into the world than Aelwen did, and maybe that was true.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion—the midwife's cries of encouragement, the newborn baby's first cry, and even the sight of his child coming into this world seemed surreal.

And then suddenly, he was here. After months of waiting and anticipation, there he was: a tiny perfect boy whose fate rested in their hands. Half fae, half vampire, but you couldn't tell the difference.

As soon as he was born, the healer whisked him off to clean him up, and it was only a minute later that she was back, pressing the newborn into Aelwen's arms.

Watching her there, holding their baby ... it was like a dream come true.

"He's so beautiful," Aelwen said, sniffing even though she was smiling with joy. "He looks just like you."

"Like me? He looks like you!"

"Well, I suppose he's a little bit of both of us. Aren't you, my little treasure?" She kissed his nose and then looked up at Vinir. "Do you want to hold him?"

"If you're ready to give him up."

"For a little while. I just gave birth after all. I feel like I could go for a na—aahp ..." She yawned, and though she tried to watch Vinir, she seemed like she could barely keep her eyes open, so he held out his arms to take their baby.

When Vinir held him for the first time, there was the initial shock of worry he'd felt every other time he touched

someone: the terror that he would hurt them.

But the curse was gone now, and he could touch Aelwen and everyone else without inflicting agony upon them.

And this fact, being allowed to hold his son for the first time without fear, filled Vinir with an overwhelming sense of love and joy that could not be contained by any language or action. The baby fit perfectly against his chest like he was always meant to be there.

He rocked the little one in his arms. He had Aelwen's stunning golden eyes. "You look like an Aemon to me. What do you think?"

He just yawned and smiled. To Vinir, that looked like an agreement. Glancing back over at Aelwen, she was already fast asleep. Not wanting to disturb her, Vinir sat down on the bed beside her, rocking little Aemon in his arms while she rested.

For her, he would wait an eternity.

Chapter 13 - Aelwen

Vinir seldom slept completely, as vampires only needed to rest for a few hours during the day to keep their strength, and so he was in charge of waking when Aelwen was dead on her feet to check on baby Aemon. Most of the time, he was a little angel, but sometimes he could be a nightmare when it came to sleeping.

Today, however, Aemon was laughing cheekily at a pair of butterflies whisking through the garden while Aelwen rocked him in his basket. Vinir was finally getting his chance to rest, and since it seemed that Aemon didn't inherit his father's sensitivity to sunlight, she was glad to take some time during the day to get out. Most of the time, she slept the days away and had become a night owl to adjust to Vinir's way of life, so motherhood had slightly changed her way of being. At least for now.

The sun was shining brightly that day, but plenty of trees provided shade from its warm rays. Birds chirped happily in their branches while bees buzzed happily between flowers. Some were bright pink roses, while others were deep blue morning glories. Everywhere she looked, there seemed to be something new and exciting in store for them to explore. Leaves rustling in the wind, caterpillars crawling across a leaf, or even an occasional butterfly fluttering by with its colorful wings catching the sun's light.

She could watch baby Aemon for hours, whether he was simply gurgling and occupied with his own fingers or rattling with his toys. He had such a pure wonder about the world, a curiosity that reminded her of when she was just a girl.

Footsteps sounded from the other end of the garden, and Aelwen looked over to find Mori striding through the garden.

"Mori!" Aelwen said. "I hope you brought me some crackers. I'm dying for a snack."

“Of course, my lady, I have just the thing.” Mori pulled out a bag of freshly baked crackers and handed them to Aelwen. To her, they were like gold, and she could never get enough of them.

“But that’s not why I’ve come,” she said in a hurry. “You have a surprise guest, and he’s—”

“Aelwen! My sweet daughter.”

Aelwen was on her feet at once, crackers forgotten instantly as she turned to see her father standing there. She opened and closed her mouth, as shocked as she’d ever been. The last time she’d seen him was at her wedding, over a year ago, as Aemon had just turned three months old.

“Father,” she whispered. “Is it really you?”

He smiled broadly at her and brought her in for a hug. She stood still for a moment, shocked all over again, as her father wasn’t the hugging type. But after a second to adjust, she gladly wrapped her arms around him, too.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t come to visit until now,” he said while still holding her. “I know I haven’t always been the best father to you, but I wanted you to know how proud I am of you. I’ve never seen you flourish like this, and it makes me so happy.”

Aelwen choked back a sob and held him even tighter. How long had she waited for him to say those words? She felt like she was still in a dream, where it seemed like the impossible would keep happening again and again until she finally woke up and had to adjust to reality again.

But she never woke up.

“It brings me so much joy to hear you say that,” Aelwen said, wiping her eyes as she pulled away from him. “But you don’t have to apologize to me, Father. I understand why you did what you did, and if you hadn’t, I would never have married Vinir. We would never have had Aemon.”

“Is that him?” her father asked.

“Do you want to hold him?”

Aelwen's father nodded, and Aelwen picked up Aemon and handed him over to her father. He held the baby in his arms like he was a precious gift, cooing softly at him and smiling widely. Aemon looked up at him curiously as if he knew that this man was special.

"He's beautiful," her father said. "Such a special little boy."

Aelwen smiled and looked around the garden, then suggested the three of them take a walk so they could catch up. Her father agreed, and the three of them set off together down the garden's winding paths.

It seemed like another piece of Aelwen's life was falling into place ... including one that she never expected to happen. But her father's approval was like a shooting star; even if she only glimpsed it for a little while, she would be happy to have at least known he was proud of her for something.

Chapter 14 - Vinir

“Are you sure it’s safe to leave Aemon with him?” Vinir asked anxiously, even as Aelwen’s sweet lips sucked on his neck and her hand drifted lower toward his crotch.

Gods, how he craved her, but he worried about leaving Aemon with the King of the Fae when he hadn’t bothered to show up in the last year.

“It’ll be fine,” Aelwen murmured, her other hand reaching between them to unbutton his shirt. She determinedly guided him toward the nearest wall, pushing him against it like a wildcat. “Lissa and Alexa are watching them, and the guards in the palace know not to let anyone leave with our child if we’re not present. I really believe he’s here to make amends.”

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.”

“You’ll be happier once you let me sit on your cock,” Aelwen purred. “It’s been too long, my love. I need you. Now.”

Her demanding voice sent a shock of need flaring through Vinir’s system, and he definitely wasn’t going to say no to her. They’d had less sex during the last few months of her pregnancy to try and be careful of the baby, and both of them had been too tired in the last two months after Aemon’s birth to enjoy each other for much more than a quickie before he needed them again.

But right now, Vinir needed to take his time with Aelwen. He needed to worship his wife’s body how she deserved to be worshipped.

It didn’t take Aelwen long for him to give in, and with a growl, he lifted her into his arms and carried her off to the sitting room couch. There, he loomed over her while their tongues danced, slowly taking off their clothes piece by piece.

They were both naked, and his hands sank deeper, absorbing the feel of her skin against his. Aelwen then pulled back from the kiss abruptly.

“Do you still think I’m beautiful naked?” Aelwen asked, surprising him.

Vinir paused for a moment, looking into her eyes to see that this was a real worry for her. He sat up to take her in again.

Her curves seemed even more supple than before, and the swell of her breasts was bigger now due to breastfeeding. He admired her glowing skin and her full lips, which he soon kissed again as his fingers trailed down her body.

“You become more beautiful to me with every passing day,” he murmured. “I’ll never tire of admiring you or showing you just how much I love you and your body. Do you want me to show you?”

She nodded, but he noticed how her cheeks burned pink.

Vinir started with small circles at the top of her stomach and soon moved lower, across the thin stretch marks she still had from carrying Aemon. “These remind me of how hard you worked to carry our son into this world. That is a gift I will never take for granted.”

He went farther down until his fingers were tracing around the apex of her thighs. Aelwen gasped softly as he touched her clitoris through the fabric of her panties, and she began arching up into him with every stroke.

Vinir wanted to make this experience as pleasurable for Aelwen as possible. He wanted to show just how much he appreciated her, make her forget about all the things she worried about needlessly. He drank in her cheeks as they flushed with pleasure, the way her body rippled in response to his touch and with each moan she gave him.

Finally, when she was so damp that she was dripping through her panties, he peeled them away and tossed them aside. Her pussy was slick with her juices, shiny and pink, and ready for much more than the fingers Vinir was about to give her, but patience was key.

He tentatively brushed his fingers across her clit, working her into a feverish state of arousal. He teased her entrance with his fingers until she was bucking against him.

“Please,” she moaned. “Please, why are you waiting?”

He smirked. “Because the best things require patience.”

But to satisfy her a little bit, he slipped a finger inside her, exploring the depths of her wetness. She trembled under his touch, and Vinir increased the pressure, gently fingering her pussy until she clenched around him, pulsing and incredible.

Aelwen looked up at him in a daze, her eyes a foggy glass of pleasure, but she surprised him by sitting up and pushing him back against the couch, straddling his hips.

“I want to ride you,” she said, and he didn’t need any further prompting.

She grabbed his cock, already hard and begging for attention, and guided it inside her. Vinir moaned as she sank onto him, taking all of him in one go.

“Fuck yes,” she groaned, throwing her head back and palming at her breasts. “This is what I needed.”

She adjusted herself so that their hips were flush against each other, and then with a delicious moan, she started to rotate her hips in circles. Vinir gasped as pleasure erupted through him like wildfire.

His hands found her hips, and he began to move her up and down, matching the rhythm of her movements until they were both lost in a haze of pleasure. Everything about Aelwen was perfect. Her mind, body, and soul, and he hated that she’d ever thought otherwise.

To him, her being a mother, the mother of *his* child, made her even more beautiful than before.

She moved with him, faster and faster, until they were both on the brink of orgasm. With one final thrust, she came

undone around him, screaming out his name with pure bliss as he followed soon after, spilling into her depths.

For a few moments after, they lay still together before Aelwen collapsed against his chest in exhaustion. He held onto her tightly, wishing that this moment could last forever.

Their hearts beat as one, and while she lay there, he stroked her hair, just basking in her presence.

He couldn't imagine how their lives could get any better than this.

“Mmm,” Aelwen sighed softly. “I'm pregnant again.”

He took it back immediately.

He did know a way things could be even better.

THE END

About the Author

Electra Cage discovered the magic of books as a child, and as soon as she learned how to read, devoured all the fantasy literature classics she could get her little hands on. The bewitching worlds these masterpieces took her to quickly became Electra's secret hideout. Growing up, they ultimately inspired her to create her own fantasy universe as a writer.

Electra's inspirations don't just come from her vast home library though, where all her heroines and heroes live. She is also well-traveled and has a particular soft spot for mysterious places off the beaten path that often fuel Electra's imagination and influence her work.

Her mini schnauzer is her greatest companion abroad as well as at home, and will sit devotedly by her side when she's writing, no matter how long the hours. She can't imagine her life without him—or without writing. Electra feels truly blessed to have been able to turn her passion into her purpose, sharing her creativity with her readers.

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