



# FORGED

BECOMING THE ORC QUEEN: 2

BE BROUILLARD

Forged  
Becoming the Orc Queen

BE Brouillard

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# Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[Alpha Bond - 1](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by BE Brouillard](#)

## Vespyr

Twisting in the clawed clutches of the stinking creature that's carrying me, I gnash my teeth at her. It's futile. Without my powers, I'm no match for her. Besides, if she drops me, it's a long way down to the ground, and right now, I can't fly. I stare into the darkness to where the earth is so far away.

*He'll come for me. He will!*

Who will? Tariq? Why would Tariq come to save me? He made no secret of the fact that all along, his main aim had been to send me back to Bartholomew. So, we had sex. Big deal! Sure, I showed him my fighting skills could be useful to him. Does this mean he's going to come flying after me to save me from his enemy?

Probably not.

But Vidarok would. He would come if he knew I'd been taken... that's if he could find me. He's done it before. Tracked me. Claimed me. Even now, I can still feel the bond we share, pulling at my chest, twisting in my gut.

*Bond.*

I squeeze my eyes shut as I think of how I betrayed him. How could I do what I did when I knew in my core that I'd found my true mate?

I don't get a chance to dwell on it. The earth is rushing toward us as the beast holding me swoops in the direction of a series of crags. I shut my eyes again as we streak toward a jagged-looking ledge at a speed that makes my cheeks burn.

I'm dropped unceremoniously on the hard rock, bouncing and rolling, my bones jarring as I tumble to a halt.

The creature alights and stands over me, smirking. "Enjoy the trip?" Her voice is a hiss.

"Fuck you!" I stagger to my feet, then sway as clawed hands bite into my shoulder. I hadn't thought to dress appropriately since I'd basically left Tariq's arms to walk in the moonlight wearing nothing more than the light dress he'd found me in earlier. The fragile fabric tears beneath her nails.

"From the stink of you, you've done more than enough fucking for the both of us." She laughs darkly.

My blood boils. "Stink? That's rich coming from you. You reek of death. How do you even tolerate your own smell? Beast!"

A sharp backhand cuts my words short, and I'm sent reeling.

*By Blood!*

I hate feeling this powerless. Finding my feet, I broaden my stance and face off against the female. She's like leather and sinew pulled taut over muscle, lean and wiry. In my vampire form, she wouldn't be a threat, but the way I am now...

"Don't waste your time fighting, witch." Her lip curls. A hand whips out and grabs a handful of my hair. "I could end you in my sleep."

She's right. She could.

"What do you want with me?" My teeth are gritted. It's occurred to me that if they wanted me dead, I'd be long gone by now. Before she can respond, the rest of the Horde descend and we're surrounded by a cloud of

flapping wings.

“Stop playing with the food, Sosalin.” The creature stalking toward us looks bigger than the rest. More imposing. They part as she moves through them, her bearing making it clear that she’s their leader.

The one holding me, Sosalin, releases my hair abruptly and steps back. “Empress.” She dips her head, fixing her eyes on the ground.

The Empress ignores her and walks up to me. “So,” she says. “We meet.”

“Yes. What of it?” I keep my head high. I’m not afraid of someone who thinks she’s royalty. I was born into it. This thing looks like she fought for the title. There’s nothing regal about the female in front of me. She’s ragged, her wings tattered at the edges, her blue-gray skin grimy.

We lock eyes for a moment; hers are oddly silver, unlike the yellow of the others. Despite the number of winged creatures around us, there’s silence.

And then she snorts. “I thought you’d be more...impressive.”

“Funny. I never thought anything about you.” I raise an eyebrow. “In fact, until this minute, I had no idea you existed. I’m guessing you’re the leader of this little...” I run a scornful look over the harpies, “band of misfits?”

Something flickers in her expression, then vanishes. “I am Ceceris. Empress of the Hellions. Though you probably know us as the Horde.”

“I don’t know you as anything...other than vanquished.”

The Empress scoffs. “One meaningless skirmish hardly means we’re vanquished, witch.”

“Meaningless?” I tilt my head. “It meant enough for you to take me. What are you afraid of? That with me on their side, the dragons might win this little war of yours?”



She gives a dismissive wave of a claw-like hand. “They’ll never win it. We’ve been toying with them for years. Every year, there are less of them and more of us. The only reason we haven’t ended them already is that they’re a convenient food source.”

My stomach churns, but I keep my reaction to myself. “Then what do you need from me? Are you planning to kill me?” I really wish I didn’t care enough to ask, but I can’t help myself.

“If we’d wanted to do that, you’d be dead already,” the Empress says, confirming my suspicions. “We have plans for you, my dear.”

“Plans?” I cock my head.

“Oh yes. When your little prince finds out we have you, he’ll come charging over to fight us for you. Which is exactly what we want.”

“Prince?” I frown. “King, you mean.” I’m still clinging to the hope that Tariq will come, though it’s a hope that’s growing weaker by the second. The more I think about it, the less certain I am that he’d fight for me.

“I know exactly what I mean. Your prince will rush to your aid and walk straight into our trap.” Ceceris smirks. “And that will serve us very well.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I huff. The only prince I know is Turin, and I’ve barely met the man two or three times. There’s no way he’s coming to rescue me.

“Don’t play dumb, witch.” The harpy’s eyes narrow. “Your pretender to the throne. He’ll be here soon enough. And then, we’ll have both of you. Although, at that point, you’ll have served your purpose.’ She pauses, and the weight of her words sinks in. My purpose was to lure Tariq to them. And then they won’t need me. Which means I’ll die.

I don’t plan to go down without a fight. I look around at the others. It’s impossible to count how many there are with the way their limbs seem to

blend into a slithering gray mass.

“My brother will avenge me. You’ll regret it for whatever is left of your short, miserable lives. All of you!”

“The brother who put a bounty on your head?” Ceceris laughs. “Yes. That could work for us. Maybe when the prince is in our grasp, we’ll bargain with the vampires, too.” She taps a taloned finger on her sharply angled chin. “I’m not sure, though. I never really liked the idea of siding with those bloodsuckers. Too much competition for food.” Her eyes glitter with malice. “Hmmm... What to do...what to do...” Her tone is musing, as if she’s actually pondering my fate, though I’m certain she’s toying with me.

“Eat her!” someone hisses. “She slaughtered my sister!”

“Mine too!” someone else adds. The throng surrounding us shifts and moves like a snake.

“Oh well, there you have it.” Silver eyes glitter above her beaklike mouth. “We’ll eat you.”

Again, I try not to shudder. “We’ll see about that,” I mutter.

Ceceris waves her hand again. “I am getting bored of you.” She glances at where Sosalin is hovering near me. “Take her away,” she says. “She can bide her time in the cells until the fool comes for her.”

“Yes, Empress.” Sosalin still has her eyes fixed firmly on the ground. “Come, witch.” She grabs my arm and hauls me around. I put up a half-hearted struggle, though, only to let her understand that I won’t be pushed around. As the others press in closer, it’s obvious that I have no chance against them.

“I’m going to eat your heart while it’s still beating,” one of them says as she moves in close. The yellow eyes that are fixed on me are filled with pure hate. I hold her stare coolly.

“You can try.” I shrug, looking away. For all I know, she may succeed, but I refuse to let them cow me. Sosalin has my arm gripped firmly, and she jerks me roughly. I try not to stumble across the graveled ground as she begins to haul me toward a pair of looming rocks.

“We’ll get you, witch!” the female behind me calls out.

“Bide your time, Xylene,” my captor calls back, still half-dragging

me.

The gap between the rocks ahead opens into a yawning cavern that is filled with more of the creatures. As my eyes adapt to the darkness, I see them thronging, staring at me with hatred. Some seem to be dangling like bats from the roof of the cave. As I'm drawn further in, they drop down and begin to move in behind us. The sounds of hissing and spitting swirl around me. Sharp teeth glitter as mouths open and gray tongues flick out. I feel like a meal about to be consumed, although I know I'm not. Yet.

I'm here as bait. Which is ironic since it's what I'd once done to my brother's mate when I'd tried to draw him out to negotiate for his throne.

Maybe this is karma.

In the far recesses of the cave, a tunnel leads out. Sosalin shoves me through the opening and then we're weaving through a labyrinth of narrow walkways carved through the mountain. Eventually, down a long hallway, I can see an alcove hollowed out of the rock. It's encased with thick silver bars, and it's pretty clear that's where I'll be spending my time here.

As she flings open the door and then pushes me through it, I'm almost relieved to have something between me and the harpies that have followed us deeper into what is clearly their lair. Drool drips from fangs, and yellow eyes glow from the darkness with hunger. The threat to eat me isn't an empty one. The only reason they haven't tried is that their Empress is waiting for my knight in shining armor to rush in.

Except these creatures have got it wrong. All wrong. If my survival rests on Turin coming to save me, I'm doomed.

Tariq

Wings! Open, by Fire!

The air is rushing past as we plunge toward the rocks that will probably do a crap-ton of damage if we hit them.

*If!*

My flesh burns as the nubs of my wings burst through my skin and then unfurl.

*Yes! Open!*

The Orc's grip around my chest is almost suffocating; it's so tight against my ribs that it feels like he's about to crush my lungs and heart. I ignore it and focus on the changes happening within my body. Scales form and then begin to coat my skin. Limbs stretch and change, and then I'm growing. It all takes less than a second – but that's nearly too long – we're still falling. Thankfully, the rush of air comes to an abrupt halt mere inches above the ground. We stop. Now the air is whooshing from the force of my wings, which hold us aloft.

*Fuck!*

Close call. I sink the short distance to earth and my talons carve

grooves into the rock. Somehow, during the transition, the Orc has found a way to cling to one of my giant forelimbs. Now, he slides free and drops heavily to his feet in front of me. I'm not concerned about another attack. He's a big bastard but no match for my dragon.

I glare down at him balefully. My face is still throbbing from where he'd broken my nose, but shifting into my dragon has healed it. He could have gotten us killed with that stupid stunt of his. Or at least badly fucked up.

*Idiot.*

Though I guess I can't blame him. She was taken while under my care, after all.

*Care.*

If that's what you could call it. I was balls-deep in her heat just hours ago. The scent of her lingers. I know the Orc can still smell her on me because his eyes have narrowed, and his fists are bunched. If I hadn't shifted, he would be trying to beat me again. But then, if I hadn't shifted, we'd be in a world of pain right about now.

"Motherfucker!" he snarls. "Face me like a man!" He has one hand flattened over his ribs where I'm pretty sure that I cracked a few earlier. I'd roll my eyes if it would make a difference. I take a deep breath, feeling smoke wafting from my nostrils, and then, reluctantly, I change back. It's never a comfortable sensation to put my body through the transition, but I've grown used to it over the years.

Now we stand eye to eye. Almost. In my human form, I'm not small by any means, but the Orc looms at least a head over me. Definitely a big bastard. One I'm in no mood to tussle with again. When he gathers himself to launch at me once more, I raise a hand to stop him. Surprisingly, he does.

"Enough," I say.

"I'll say when it's enough." There's menace in his tone, but he doesn't follow it up with action. "Who the fuck do you think you are,

touching my mate?”

“Your mate?” I scoff. “I didn’t see a sign on her.”

“I left my mark. If you were a male of honor...” He rolls his shoulders. “What am I saying? You’re clearly not!”

I ignore the barb and add one of my own. “If she was truly your mate, she wouldn’t have been so eager to fuck me.”

*Fuck me.* The words sound wrong. It was more than that. I know it, even though I don’t understand it. But I don’t have the time or the inclination to delve into that now. I jut out my jaw at him. He does the same.

“Eager? I only have your word for that. Maybe you forced her.” His voice is a dangerous growl.

“Never!” I bark. “I have never forced myself onto a female. Your so-called *mate* wanted me. She wanted everything I did to her sweet body.” It’s probably a bad idea to bait him, but I can’t help myself. I don’t like the idea of this male laying claim to Vespyn. I’m rewarded with a swinging fist, which I duck easily.

“Stop!” I say when another fist rises. “This is getting us nowhere. We’re wasting time with this bullshit.”

A flicker in his eyes tells me my words have sunk in. I’m glad because I’m right. Every second that passes is one that takes her further away from us.

*Us?*

From me. They’ve taken her from *me*. The Horde. I stifle a shiver at the thought of her being in the clutches of those stinking flesh-eaters.

“I have to get her.” The Orc’s voice is guttural. He’s barely stopping himself from attacking me again. I have to respect that. He has control over himself.

I glance up at the empty night sky. “There’s no way to tell which way they’ve gone.”

He turns from me slightly, looking around, too. “I can find her.”

“Yeah?” I raise a brow. “And how do you figure that?”

“I’m a tracker. I found her with you, didn’t I?”

“Took you enough time,” I scoff, even though it’s foolish to antagonize him. “She was here with me for long enough that she practically forgot you.”

“That’s because when you *stole* her from me the first time, I thought it prudent to advise the Overlord.”

Prudent? For an oaf, he has a decent vocabulary. Not that we have time for that now.

“But you didn’t think it *prudent* to wait before charging to Morganeau this time?”

“Good thing I did, or you might still be lying around in motherfucking dreamland, fool!” He folds his arms over his expansive chest. I don’t want to admit it, but I’m impressed by his sheer size. “You wouldn’t have known she was gone until you’d gotten your ass up in the morning.”

I open my mouth to deny it, but he’s right. After being with Vespyr, I’d been overcome with such a strange lethargy that I’d barely been able to keep my eyes open. I’d slipped into slumber as soon as I’d felt her curled up against me. I should have held her closer.

Shaking my head to clear my wayward thoughts, I glare back at him. “This isn’t the time for assigning blame,” I mutter. “The longer we stand around here, the less chance we have of getting her back.”

Huge shoulders bunch and ripple. His fists are still clenched. “There’s no ‘we’ here, dragon. She’s mine. My responsibility. I’ll find her.”

*Mine?*

I bristle at the word.

“You’d do it faster with my help, Orc.”

What am I proposing? That we team up to rescue her? Bad fucking idea. An Orc and a shifter up against the Horde would be a suicide mission. Not to mention that I have no intention of working with this asshole. He’ll stab me in the back the minute he gets a chance.

“I don’t need any help.” He steps back from me, tilting his head. His nostrils flare as he takes in the air.

“You don’t know what you’re up against. We need my people.” I have to bring in the others, even though gathering them will cost us precious time. I turn back to the castle walls, where I now sense movement from above.

The drawbridge has dropped, and several guards pile out.

About fucking time.

“My Lord!” someone shouts. I look from the Orc to the advancing guards and then back again.

“I’m going to get help,” I say. We lock eyes for a moment.

“I’m going to get her.” His lip curls.

“Not without help.” Why I’m saying this to him? I should let him rush off and get himself killed. It would suit me to have him out of the way.

“I told you; I don’t need help.” He starts to turn away.

“You’ll never make it alone.” Why the fuck am I trying to talk sense into him?

“You wouldn’t. I’m not you. Coward.” He starts to jog away, slowing



occasionally as if scenting the air.

“Fool!” I call after him. He bounds off over the rocks with remarkable agility. I turn back toward my guards. Grier has come down and joined them. I stifle a swirl of annoyance at how easily our defenses had been breached. It’s not his fault, after all. I’d been the one to make the call to keep our strongest troops patrolling the borders of the realm. I’d been the one to decide that Morganeau Castle was an unlikely target. This is on me.

“My Lord!” Grier is breathless. “The commotion. We heard fighting.”

I don’t bother explaining the altercation with the Orc. “The princess has been taken.”

Grier’s eyes go wide. “The Horde.”

I nod. “I need to gather the Circle immediately. We have to form a party to bring her back.”

His face drops. “They’ve dispersed to their regions, my Lord. I can send word to recall them, but it will take time.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as frustration and impatience war within me. I can’t blame any of them; we hadn’t anticipated another run-in with the enemy so soon after the last. And each of them had pressing duties to attend to. Still, it doesn’t make me feel any better.

“We don’t have time,” I grit out. “The Horde will...” I can’t say the words, but we all know what they do to their victims.

“I know.” His face sets into grim lines. Footsteps ring out and we both turn to face where Turin has come to join us.

“What’s happened?” He glances from me to Grier.

“The Horde. They took Princess Vespyr,” Grier answers when I don’t. I’m still fighting the urge to throw my head back and roar at the skies in frustration.

“Fuck.” Turin looks at me. “How long ago?” I notice his eyes narrow as he inhales, and I’m sure that, like the others, he can smell her on me. He doesn’t say anything.

“Can’t say for certain. Possibly several hours.” Fuck. How long was I asleep? Blissfully oblivious. Such a fucking fool. I exhale to calm myself. I can see why the Orc chose to rush off immediately. The sense of needing to act at once is weighing on me.

“We need the Circle of Six,” Turin says unnecessarily.

“They’ve disbanded,” I mutter. I rub my eyes as I fight for clarity. This feeling is foreign to me. I always know exactly what to do in the face of disaster, yet here I stand, thoughts whirling in my head, muddling my mind.

*I can’t lose her.*

What the fuck is wrong with me? I can’t understand this sudden sense of possessiveness that’s come over me. She’s barely been around long enough to touch my world, and yet it feels as if she’s the center of it.

“I’ll bring the others together,” Turin is saying. I stare at him for a moment. “I’ll call the Circle together while you take a search party to find her.”

I stare at him for another second. This makes sense. “Yes.” I nod. There are enough guards around us to make up a formidable team. I look over my shoulder at where the Orc has disappeared into the darkness. I’ll probably lose sight of him in the time that it takes us to prepare, but I’ll find him again. Somehow, I know I will.

“My Lord?” Grier is looking at me, waiting for my next instruction.

“Call the others. We need as many as we can gather.”

He nods, but I pay little attention. I’m already sensing the scales beginning to form again.

It takes several long, agonizing minutes before I’m surrounded by the

giant forms of my dragon team around me. Several more, as Turin returns from where he's been within the castle, sending out word.

“We’ll do this, brother.” His expression is grim. “She’ll be okay.”

I nod, the shape of my snout casting a huge dark shadow over him. And then I spread my wings, lift myself from the earth, and turn to fly off in the direction the Orc had taken.

*Vidarok*

Asshole. I can't fucking believe him.

Backup? Fucking coward!

Ignoring the throbbing of my battered ribs, I lope smoothly forward, covering ground at astonishing speed. I may not have wings or true magic, but I've learned through the years to move quickly and efficiently.

In minutes, the castle is out of sight behind me, and I'm following the trail the creatures have left in their wake. The stench of the Horde is unmistakable, even though they haven't touched the ground. Death, decay, malice.

And Vespyr.

I can sense her faintly. The slight tingle at the edge of my senses tells me she's passed by here. They may have taken her through the air, but that doesn't stop me from feeling her. And it's more than just my supernatural tracking skills. It's the charge of our bond calling out to me. Whatever the dragon may believe about their time together, that remains firmly in place. The tie that binds us is still there. My freshly healed ribs are a testament to that – I heal fast as an Orc, but since taking her blood, I've felt invincible.

She's mine.

Firm in this knowledge, I keep up the pace. Traveling over fields, over rivers, and through glades of trees. Until I reach the foothills of the Morganeau mountains. And then I stop.

They're here.

Looking around, I take in the area surrounding me. It's not far from the castle. Maybe not within a regular day's march, but certainly too close for comfort.

*Fucking idiot.*

The Dragon King left his defenses open when the enemy was almost within spitting distance. He's been so concerned with protecting his villages along the edges of his territory that it hasn't occurred to him that the Horde might have a stronghold within. He left himself vulnerable to save his people.

*Isn't that what a good king might do?*

Screw that. I'm not in the mood to see the positive side of him. By putting himself at risk, he endangered Vespyr. My mate. He should die for that.

*Except he saved you.*

Clenching my jaw, I shove that thought from my mind. He saved himself by shifting before we hit the ground. I happened to be along for the ride.

I turn my attention back to the mountain range in front of me. It stands tall and imposing, stretching out into the horizon where the sun is now rising. Its peaks soar higher than the clouds, and its sides are jagged and treacherous. I can see why the Horde might choose it as a lair; from here, you can see for miles. I just hope they haven't seen me.

I take in a breath, seeking out the scent I've been tracking. A crisp wind carries a wild fragrance of evergreens and fresh earth. It is sweet and aromatic, like a vast bouquet of wildflowers and pine needles lingering in the

air. But beneath it lies the stink of those creatures. Now that I know it, it's unmistakable. They carry death with them.

The wind rustles through the leaves and grasses around me, but closer to the base of the mountains are pockets of stillness, where nothing but the song of birds can be heard echoing off its walls. And further up its slopes, there is an eerie silence. I'm sure it's deceptive. I know that beneath it lurks the danger I'm about to walk into.

It doesn't bother me. I'm going in. I'd charge into the fires of hell if it meant saving her.

Still, I wish I had a plan. I'd been so consumed with finding her when I left that this one small detail didn't occur to me.

*Small detail? Major fucking detail, Vidarok.*

The enormity of it occurs to me now. Because I have no idea how many I'll be up against, let alone how to reach them. The cliffs look impenetrable. That doesn't stop me, though. Pulling my shoulders back, I check the ax that I had the presence of mind to return to its place against my spine earlier. Its weight is comforting. I begin to climb; at first, it's easy, but soon, the going grows more difficult, and I make my way up by finding footholds and small cracks in the rock to sink my fingers into. Steadily, inch by inch, I haul myself up.

If they catch me now, it would be a disaster, but I'm hoping that I have the element of surprise on my side. I don't think they'd assume that I'd just charge in blindly.

Maybe my stupidity will work in my favor.

Let's hope that they're not particularly cunning. Though it's probably too optimistic of me to make such an assumption. I have no idea how their minds work. Not to mention that I've never even seen the creatures I'll be facing. The dragon hadn't described them apart from the fact that they're voracious flesh-eaters who descend in vast swarms.

The Horde.

The name brings to mind a plague of demons. Clambering upward, I finally find myself at the summit, still wondering what I will discover here.

It doesn't take too long for me to find out because, within minutes, a shadow flickers overhead, blocking the early morning sun for a moment. It flits away, and suddenly, there's another. And then several more. I'd seen such creatures before I left Earomond. Harpies. They fly overhead, swirling and swooping, their wings outstretched, their shadows darkening the sky. They twist this way and that, spinning and diving in intricate patterns. The watery sun glints off their sharp talons and gleams from their pallid skin. The air is heavy with the pungent odor of carrion and decay. As if these creatures were drawn to scavenge death and feed off its remains. I suspect they're planning to feed on me.

"Here!" something shrieks in a voice like a crow. The cry is met by a cacophony of screeches and hisses that reverberate around me. "He's here! The Orc. Tell the Empress."

They've been waiting for me. Of course, they have.

*Fuck it.*

It shouldn't surprise me. Though it's a bit odd that it seems to be me they were waiting for.

How would they expect me? Surely the Dragon King would have been the one they'd be waiting for?

It's of no consequence. It had occurred to me that I might be walking into a trap, but that wouldn't have stopped me. Reaching between my shoulders, I release my battle ax and begin to swing it in a loop overhead.

"Take him alive!" The words reinforce my belief that this was planned for me. If that was the case, they should have brought more harpies. One of them sweeps in close, and I slice her in half with one swing of my ax. I dispatch several more in a similar fashion. And then all hell breaks loose.

The sky is suddenly full of harpies, screeching and clawing their way towards me. There's a wave of heat emanating from the wings of the creatures as they descend, beating against my skin. I swing my ax in wide arcs, slicing through the air and cutting down each one as it comes close enough for me to reach. They attack in waves, coming from all sides and never ceasing. I am surrounded by death and destruction, but I somehow manage to keep fighting despite the overwhelming odds against me.

I will not let them take me alive!

My muscles burn with exhaustion, but I refuse to stop until every last one of them is defeated or forced to retreat. With their numbers dwindling, I begin to think that perhaps this might be possible after all.

And then another wave of them descends.

"Dragh!" I mutter, sweeping a forearm over my sweating forehead as I back up against a rock face and use it to defend myself from a hind attack. I brace myself, preparing to take on more of them. I'm splattered with their stinking gray blood, their bodies strewn about me. They seem to have little regard for their own lives, their attacks almost suicidal as they charge. It appears that they use their numbers to their advantage rather than fighting skills, which is all that's keeping me standing at this point. It's an advantage that's beginning to dissipate. I'm flagging.

Claws pluck at my arms, something swoops dangerously close to my head, and then my arm is being dragged back as I swing it up to cleave yet another in two. One of them has me. And then another joins her. Soon, I'm bowing under the weight of at least half a dozen of them. Teeth gnash, grazing my skin.

"Do not harm him!" I hear someone scream.

Maybe I have more than one advantage in my favor. They can't hurt me. But I won't let them take me. Shaking myself like a wet dog, their wiry bodies fly from me, only to be replaced by more. At this rate, I'll go down exhausted.



Then it happens. There's a jet of flames, and suddenly, I am surrounded by fire. The harpies pause, stunned by the sudden display. I look up and see dragons overhead – I count at least ten of them. Flames pour from their mouths as they swoop and dive. I hear the screams of the harpies as they're engulfed in orange and yellow.

Through the smoke, I can make out the Dragon King leading the dragons in a loop pattern, breathing fire and singeing ragged gray wings with each pass. The harpies scatter as quickly as they had descended upon me. They try desperately to dodge the dragon's fiery breath, some making it away unscathed while others are burned to stumps.

With renewed energy, I resume my attack. Now that there's the distraction of the dragon fire, the harpies aren't as intent on taking me anymore, although some seem to have kept their mission in mind. It's a number that's diminishing.

*We can win this!*

I can practically taste victory now. The air is almost clear, aside from the giant, flying shapes that are decimating the stinking Horde. Some of them have tumbled to the ground, dragging their battered bodies away. I'd end them if I was less merciful, but I'm not wired that way. Besides, I'm here for a more important purpose.

Pushing away from the wall, I charge in the direction of where the Horde had emerged from the mountain. A dark chasm between the rocks seems to be the mouth of what can only be a cavern huge enough to accommodate them all. Claws sink into my shoulders, and I swing about to take out the harpy hovering in the air overhead.

“Vidarok!” The sound of my name being screamed out stops me in my tracks. Although it's not my name that stops me. It's the voice that calls it.

*Her voice.*

“Vespyr!” I choke out, turning to face her. She’s in that dark doorway. Behind her stands a gray-winged female, taloned fingers grasped firmly around my mate’s throat. She’s bigger than the others. Taller. More powerful. I have no doubt that one slash of those claws would take out Vespyr’s windpipe.

*She’ll heal!*

But I can’t take that chance. I have no idea what these beasts are capable of. My chest tightens as I look into her beautiful face, her lovely eyes dark with torment.

“Stop, Orc,” the female calls out. Her voice is deeper than the others, too; there is a bloodthirsty edge to it that has my skin going cold. “Put down the ax.” Gleaming eyes shimmer from her birdlike face. “Put it down, or she dies.”

*Vespyr*

My heart stutters as I catch sight of him. Grimy, blood-streaked, his bare shoulders and chest gleaming beneath a light sheen of perspiration... He's magnificent. And he's going to die here if he does what she's telling him.

"Vidarok! Don't listen to her!" I scream. The harpy Empress tightens her grip, her claws sink further into my skin, and blood begins to trickle. Though I try to hide it, I flinch, and the small movement has his eyes narrowing. His chest heaves. A chest I've rested my head upon.

*By Blood, I've missed him!*

It may have been weeks since we sealed our bond, but it feels as strong as that first day.

A sharp shrieking sound overhead has my eyes flitting upward. Dragons circle above us, and I recognize Tariq's golden sheen instantly.

Tariq and Vidarok. They're here together. My mind races, and confusion surges. Did they join forces to save me? It seems incomprehensible. How did they even get together? Could Vidarok know what happened between us? I feel the shame rise...and yet, part of me can't regret it.

"Drop the ax, Orc," Ceceris repeats her instruction. "Make no

mistake, I will kill her.”

Vidarok scoffs. “The princess is too powerful for the likes of you, creature.”

God, I love the sound of his voice. Even now, it ripples through me, reminding me yet again of the bond that we share. If there’d ever been a doubt about it, it’s gone now. Having him this close again settles me, even though I’m in the clutches of this fucking harpy.

Ceceris gives an ugly laugh. “You think so? Because I’ve seen no sign of any power since we got our hands on her. Perhaps because her dragon took her magic from her.”

*Fuck! How would she know that?*

It still burns that he didn’t return my powers, even after what happened between us. There’s no trust there. Probably never will be. Not that it matters right now – I might never leave this place alive.

I twist in the Empress’s grasp, snapping my teeth at her. Her claws dig deeper. “Leave here, Vidarok!” I shout. “I’m not afraid of them. I can handle this.” My words lack weight, even to me. But there’s no way I’m letting her dull my spirit.

“Oh, but you can’t, bloodsucker,” the Empress hisses into my ear. Her words are drowned out by a roaring sound overhead. A stream of flames suddenly hits the rocks beside us, and Ceceris looks up. “Back off, dragon!” she calls out. “This is no concern of yours. We only want the prince.”

Prince? That again? There’s no sign of Turin’s copper scales above us. What the hell is she on about?

“Release my mate, and I won’t end you here today,” Vidarok says evenly. It amazes me that he can be so confident in the face of overwhelming odds. Then again, I’ve seen him in action. He’s a force of nature. Except the numbers he’s seen barely represent the tip of the iceberg. There’s a vast army in the cave within this mountain.

“End me?” Ceceris gives another dark laugh. “I dare you to try!” With that, she starts backing away, dragging me into the depths of the cavern again. I watch in horror as Vidarok starts charging forward.

“No!” I scream. “No, don’t! It’s a trap!” At least I think it is. Whoever the Horde is waiting for hasn’t arrived yet. They’re going to kill him in here. The thought of watching him die fills me with dread.

But he’s not listening. His expression is sheer determination as he closes the distance between us.

“Hold on, Vespvr! I won’t leave you here!” His words make my chest tighten.

“Come on, Orc! What are you waiting for?” Ceceris taunts him as I’m pulled further into the recesses of the filthy caverns. Wings flutter behind us, a hint at the Horde lying in wait. Away from the cover being given by the dragons, Vidarok stands no chance against them. And there’s no way Tariq could get in here without shifting. In human form, he’d be even more vulnerable than my mate.

My mate.

Fuck. How am I supposed to explain what happened? Maybe it’s better if I die here today. I’ve betrayed him. And yet, I’m still warmed by the thought of the dragon whirling overhead. Something pulls at me there, too.

What the hell is wrong with me?

*Stop thinking about it!*

I don’t have time for self-pity right now. I have to stop this madness and find a way to save him.

“Leave, Vidarok! Don’t come any further!” It seems so futile to try to stop him when he’s still racing forward. Over the fallen corpses of the harpies who’d attacked him. If the Empress feels any sorrow at their loss, she doesn’t show it.

“That’s it. Come and get her,” she laughs, still dragging me.

“Tariq!” I scream, changing tactics. If Vidarok won’t see sense, maybe the Dragon King will. My call is met with an answering shriek from above. The mountains echo with it.

“Shut up!” Ceceris snaps. “Do you want to die here today?”

I ignore her. I don’t care what they do to me. My life as I knew it ended long ago. There’s nothing to go back to. My brother will end me. My throne is gone. All I have is this man who’d die for me, and without him, what is there?

Tariq.

Enough! I can’t let Vidarok sacrifice himself for me and then simply rush straight into the arms of another. I could never live with myself. Besides, who ever said that was even an option? I had one night with the Dragon King. That was it. Reading more into it would be foolish. But he’s here now, for whatever reason, and all I can do is hang onto the hope that he can help.

“Tariq! Do something!” I scream, praying that my voice will carry now that I’m deeper in the caves. I can’t see the sky anymore. All I can see is Vidarok’s face as he heads toward us. And then a shadow flits over him. He looks up briefly, and there’s rage in his eyes. Rage as a golden dragon swoops down and closes its talons around him. Rage as he’s whisked off the ground by the man whose body I touched just hours ago.

“No!” I hear Vidarok roar as he’s swept away into the sky, away from me. He continues to twist and shout his furious objections as he vanishes from sight. His roars grow fainter. The distance between us is growing.

And even though he’d been my only hope of getting out of here, my only hope of survival, relief surges.

I may die here today, but at least they won’t have him.

## Tariq

“No!” the Orc roars yet again as we finally reach the castle. I set him down in the courtyard where my attendants are waiting on the wide granite flagstones. Mighty fists crash uselessly against my scales as he shouts his fury at me. It doesn’t seem to matter that he’s as ineffective as a beetle attacking an elephant. “We have to go back!”

*Fire take him! The male has a death wish.*

Knowing it’ll expose me to his attack, I shift back to my human form. My dragon might lose patience and fry him at this rate.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I say, ducking a swinging blow. “Did you plan to die out there today?”

“Fuck you! It would be better than doing nothing. You left her there, you coward!” he rages at me. I can’t help admiring the man’s bravery. But he’s stupid as fuck.

“Actually, it would probably have gotten her killed, too, you big oaf!” I shake my head. “Can’t you see that you were playing right into their hands? They wanted you to go in there!” It’s something that’s occurred to me since I watched the interaction. They could have killed him, yet they had something else in mind. I can’t quite figure out what, but it seems to me that the Horde had their sights set on the Orc before me.

*Why?*

“How would it have killed her?” he snarls, steering my thoughts back to the current situation. “I was this close to getting her!” He holds up his hand and indicates with two fingers.

“Because you had no damn plan! And once they had you, they wouldn’t need her anymore. You were their target, Orc.”

He shakes his head in confusion.

I huff out a breath. “You really are all brawn and no brains, aren’t you?”

“Better than having a yellow streak down my back. Those scales of yours aren’t *golden*, Buttercup.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, turning on my heel to walk out of the courtyard. If he’s going to attack me again, he can have at it. I’ve had enough of this shit. Thankfully, he doesn’t. There’s silence behind me as I stride toward where the rest of my party is waiting. Grier has draped a robe about his shoulders. Aside from some soot on his face, he’s unscathed, as are the others. It’s another reason I’m certain the Horde was totally focused on the Orc. They wanted him, not us.

Again, I wonder why.

“What is our next move, my Lord?” Grier asks. He knows I don’t intend to simply leave her there. He can probably see it in my expression, which I’m sure is dark and determined.

“The Circle—” I begin just as Turin arrives.

“They’re waiting,” he tells me, and I feel a surge of relief. There’s a lot to do right now. Not bothering to see if the Orc is following, I make my way to the Circle. An attendant has appeared, holding out a traditional red cloak for me. We may be heading for battle, but arriving naked at the Circle of Six would be taking things a step too far.



I'm greeted by a grim-faced group of elders who've obviously been awaiting my return.

"What news, King Tariq?" Nirem gets straight to the point. There's no time for traditional formalities today.

"We were unable to rescue the princess." The words bite at me, but that's not the only information my people need to know. "The Horde has set up a base in the Steel Cliffs." My announcement is met with a flurry of murmurs.

"They're here? In Morganeau?" Timmir's eyes are wide. "How long have they been there? How many of them? How—"

I raise a hand to cut him off. "There's no way of knowing that right now. But we'll have a better idea once we go in again."

"You plan to go back?" he says.

"Of course he does!" Nirem barks. "All of us do." Her jaw is set in steely lines that echo those of Aidurn beside her.

He runs a hand through his flaming hair. "Fire! This is not good news."

"I agree, Lord Aidurn." I meet his eye. "But as soon as we have more information more about—"

"We're going back now!" Vidarok has stalked into the Circle and is glaring around at the others. "Gather yourselves. Your men. We need to save her."

There's a brief silence as the others take in the sight of the disheveled Orc. He's still streaked with the filth of battle. I would be, too, except that, like the rest of my fighting troop, the harpies had little interest in me.

"Lords Aidurn, Timmir, Zydus... Ladies Nirem and Bridrod, I introduce the Orc Vidarok." I face the Circle again. "He is the Chief of

Security for the vampire royals of Ryacyn.”

“I am Queen Aurora’s private guard,” he snaps at me. I give a shrug. It makes no difference to me either way. Right now, he’s a pain in my ass.

“Captain Vidarok has made it his quest to keep the princess safe.” I’m improvising a little. I don’t know if the man has an actual title, and I can’t fathom his motives for pursuing Vespyr. They say they share a mate bond. Yet there’d been no hint of that in her response to me last night. The thought of that would stir me if there was time for it right now.

“Greetings, Captain Vidarok.” Zydus leans forward in his seat. “We welcome you to our Circle of Six.”

At least one of us still has a head for propriety.

Vidarok inclines his head toward him, then looks around at the others. “Princess Vespyr is in grave danger. There’s no telling what they’re doing to her right now.” His rumbling voice cracks, and I see his throat work as he swallows. He’s not fabricating his feelings for the woman. I guess I have to give him that.

“And we will make it our first priority to save her,” Zydus goes on. His tone is soothing. I see the Orc respond to it as the heaving of his vast chest begins to slow. I suppose my aggressive behavior around him has done little to calm him.

“Thank you, Lord Zydus. When can we leave?” Vidarok fixes his attention on the man who exudes a quiet calm. The dappled shade of the towering oaks adds moving textures to his brown skin, and his eyes seem to glow from the shadows.

“We need to plan carefully, Captain Vidarok.” Zydus keeps his voice steady.

“Yes. A plan!” It’s Timmir now. “We can’t just go charging in without understanding what we’re up against. It would mean certain death.”

Of course, that's exactly what Vidarok has in mind...again. He doesn't say it, though. Hopefully, common sense is beginning to sink in. He'll literally sacrifice himself in a futile rescue attempt.

Fool.

But a mate bond can overwhelm rational thought. My own impatience rises and I tamp it down. There's no bond between me and the princess. We had a night together. Something happened that I can't explain, but I'm not going to try to analyze it when she isn't here.

She needs to be here!

"...numbers, access points. Is there a way to send in an infiltrator? We need to determine the best way to go up against them." Timmir is speaking, and I realize that I'd been so distracted by my thoughts of Vespyr that I'd barely heard them.

*Get your head out of your ass, dammit!*

I need to focus on what to do next.

"I don't see that there'd be a way to safely send anyone in, Lord Timmir," Bridrod says. "It would be too dangerous. We can't lose anyone inside there. It would be a suicide mission." Her features are colored with concern.

"I don't see how else we could find out," Timmir replies. His brows pull together. "We can't take any chances by going in blind, either."

As much as the man's decisions are usually driven by his over-vigilant nature, he's often the voice of caution for the rest of us. Although I prefer Zydu's more measured approach. If we left it to Timmir, we'd never go to battle against the enemy.

"There's no way we could send anyone in there." Nirem is frowning, too. "Many of my territories lie within the Steel Cliff Range. Those mountains are a labyrinth of tunnels and caverns." Her lips purse. "I can't

believe we never expected them to hide there. I'm such a fool!"

"There's no need for recriminations now, Lady Nirem." Zydus smiles at her gently. "We faced a direct threat along our borders. You can't be blamed for focusing your attention there. They'd obviously chosen to keep their home base secret, and assuming that they came from outside was a very logical conclusion."

Nirem's chest rises and falls beneath her heavy leather breastplate. I can see that his words are cold comfort. Nirem's fighting force is fearless and often the first to go in when we engage the Horde. She's lost many good people and mourns each one deeply.

"Of course, Lord Zydus." A muscle flickers in her jaw. She looks over at me. "My Lord, I'm sure that you will understand that the princess is important to us. But more important is rooting out the rot that lives within."

I nod, though something unfurls uncomfortably in my gut. My skin tightens as I feel the tautening of scales beneath it. I might see her logic, but my dragon does not. And that is troubling.

"You are right, of course, Lady Nirem." I keep my eyes on me, though I hear the Orc growl at my side. "But I think that saving her will achieve that goal." An idea is beginning to form.

"Explain." Aidurn has been silent until now. I imagine that this revelation has affected him. His lands lie at the foothills of the mountains. His people are as vulnerable as Nirem's.

"When we encountered the Horde during our last skirmish, they seemed intent on luring Captain Vidarok into their lair." I slant a look at the Orc. "My guess is that he is their actual target."

"Dragh!" he spits out in response. "That's bullshit!"

"I disagree." I turn to him. "You saw how that bitch was taunting you, drawing you in." I remember the fear in Vespyr's eyes, and the tension in my gut becomes tighter. "She wanted you to follow them. She was using the

princess to manipulate you.”

He’s silent. He can’t deny this, but like me, he’s probably wondering why. I turn back to the others. “I think that it won’t be necessary to go in. They’ll come to us.”

“And why would they use the princess to lure the captain?” Bridrod blinks at us.

“Because she’s my mate!” Vidarok runs his eyes over the gathering, his challenge unmistakable.

“And why would they want you?” Timmir asks.

The Orc rubs his eyes. “I... I have no idea.”

“Let’s figure that out later,” I interrupt. “Right now, we can use it to our advantage. They’ll come for the captain.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Timmir eyes me.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure.” At least, I hope I am. “We will use the bulk of our available forces – we have a large number of good fighters. And we will use Captain Vidarok to lure them out so that it’s not necessary to delve into the tunnels, where we will be vulnerable. They will try to hold us off by threatening the princess. I will save her from them and—”

“No!” Vidarok barks. “I will save her.” He turns to me, bristling. “She is my mate. My responsibility.”

I can understand why he feels that way, except logic tells me his plan wouldn’t work – not that he seems to have a plan. Although logic is going out the window right now – and not just for him. “Don’t be an ass, Vidarok,” I snap back. “You’ll be keeping them busy elsewhere.” I gesture toward the others, who nod. “We must assemble and deploy a strategic defense so that we have enough time to get in and out safely with the princess. You will be crucial in this endeavor.”

“That’s a whole lot of big fancy words to say that you want to get

your filthy hands on her.” He glares at me. I hear someone murmur from the Circle.

“Nonsense! My only concern is her safety – before we turn our attention to the Horde.”

“Your attention has been on my mate since the moment you took her from me!”

“Of course it hasn’t, Orc! I had a job to do. That was all.”

“Oh really? And what job was that? Who told you to take her?”

I don’t answer him. For some reason, the deal I made with the Orc Queen is something I’m not proud of right now. Taking Vespvr as a way to forge a shaky alliance suddenly makes me feel dishonorable. “That’s no business of yours,” I mutter.

“It is my business!” He’s bristling yet again. “You took her for yourself, and now you plan to do the same again. Except this time, you’re hoping to play the knight-in-fucking-shining-armor card!”

“Have you forgotten that I’m the dragon in this little fairy tale of yours? You’d be the knight.” I smirk at him.

“By the Maker! You test me!” He steps into my space. I don’t back off.

“It doesn’t take much, Orc!” We’re nose to nose, and he’s bigger than I am, but fuck him.

“Sire...Captain,” Zydus steps in as things grow heated. “I understand your sentiments. But this is not about who will save the princess. This is about the best course of action.” He looks from me to Vidarok, his gaze stern yet firm. “We need a plan that will protect everyone and ensure success against the Horde. That means we need both of you – Lord Tariq and Captain Vidarok – working together. And we must act fast. Now that they know we’re onto them, they will move quickly, and then there’s no telling where

they'll be hiding next. This is our one chance.”

Vidarok growls but reluctantly nods in agreement, though I can tell he's still bristling with indignation at my words. Nirem watches us silently, her expression unreadable as she considers Zydus' words. Finally, she speaks up again. “My Lord Tariq has the right idea,” she says finally. “If we use our forces wisely and use both of you together to bait them out of their lair, then we should be able to defeat the Horde without putting anyone at risk.”

“I will not be bait!” I grit my teeth. I'm suddenly consumed by the thought of my woman in the Orc's grasp.

*Fire! Not my woman!*

“But I agree, Lady,” I add. “This is the safest way.”

“Then it is settled.” Zydus' voice is as level as always. “Now. Let us prepare. This may be a solid plan, but one mistake could mean death for the princess.”

His words have my blood flooding with ice. For the first time in my life, I'm afraid of the prospect of battle.

*Vespyr*

“She said that there was no way the dragons would be in league with the prince,” a voice says from the darkness of the hallway beyond my small cell. My ears prick up.

“Well, clearly, she was wrong.” It’s Ceceris; I recognize her hissing tones. “Her information is inaccurate.” The Empress is discussing something with one of her lackeys.

“Do you think she’s to be trusted?” the first voice responds.

“Of course not. Do you believe I went into this with my eyes closed, Xylene?” There’s contempt laced into Ceceris’s words, although that seems to be her norm. “I’m no fool. But it suits us to have her behind us. Without her backing, we may never win this war. She’s the key to it all.”

“I don’t like it,” Xylene responds.

“It’s not for you to decide,” the Empress snaps. “We go ahead as planned.”

“But they know that we’re here now. This place isn’t safe.”

There’s a pause. I sense that the Empress is mulling this over.



I am, too.

Who is this prince they keep talking about? Not Turin, from the sounds of it. Whoever it is, they want him badly. Or at least, the one they're allied with does. Who the hell are they working with? And how will this impact Tariq and Morganeau? It won't be good, I'm certain of that. I know how hard the dragons have been fighting to keep the Horde at bay.

If Ceceris has a way of bolstering her forces, that can only mean disaster for them. From what I can tell, they're already stretched thin. In the brief time I've spent with them, it's become pretty clear that the harpies aren't the best strategists. The Empress is wily, and she has a team of high-ranking fighters who are smarter, too, but most of these creatures aren't particularly bright. They attack in a swarm, using their numbers to their advantage. If what I saw during the previous skirmish is anything to go by, Ceceris has no qualms about using her people as cannon fodder.

Ceceris finally speaks, her voice a low hiss. "We must get out of here. Gather the troops and make ready to leave. We'll fall back to the queen's territories; she'll have a place for us to lie low there."

Xylene breathes a sigh of relief, and I hear her footsteps as she turns to leave. But then, suddenly, there's a loud thundering sound from outside. The walls shake, and dust rains down from above us.

"Empress!" Xylene gasps.

"Go!" Ceceris barks. "Go now!" She makes a low growling sound. "I should have known they'd be back so soon. Prepare the others for battle."

There's another low rumble, a sound like drumming. I press my face against the bars of my cell, straining to figure out what's going on.

They're coming for me. That's what's going on!

Hope blossoms in my chest. It crumbles quickly as I hear rapid footsteps coming toward me. Ceceris is striding toward me with a purposeful gait.

“You’re coming with me,” she snaps out, unlocking the cell door and yanking it open. As she reaches in for me, I shrink back. I’m certain that, once again, I’m going to be used as some sort of bargaining chip.

“What do you want from me?” I snarl, trying to pull my arm from her grip. The gesture is useless; her grip tightens around my upper arm, and I’m not strong enough to resist. It’s been over a day since I last fed, and soon, I’ll be feeling the effects of the Curse.

*Gift! I have a gift.*

Ceceris gives me a shake, and my teeth almost rattle. “You’ll find out soon enough, Bloodsucker!” Before I can object, I find myself being hauled out of the cell and down a nearby tunnel. Once again, I’m in the dark. And then I’m almost blinded as we emerge into the light outdoors. Except it shouldn’t be light. Night has fallen in the hours since Tariq flew Vidarok away. Why is it so bright?

“Beast!” a voice bellows above the din outside. “Beast, come out and face me.”

*Vidarok!*

By Blood, he’s back. I can only hope he hasn’t come charging in unprepared this time.

Ceceris tightens her hold on my arm, nails biting into my skin. “Looks like your little friend is back,” she sneers, though there’s an underlying tension in her voice now.

“You’re going to be sorry you did this, bat.”

She yanks my arm cruelly. “I’m no bat. Keep that up, and I’ll end you right here. Just because she thinks you’ll be useful doesn’t mean I have to play along with her game.”

“Who is *she*?” I demand, staggering to keep up as the harpy pulls me along with her.

She aims a contemptuous look at me. “None of your concern right now.” She looks away, and I follow her line of sight. My chest goes tight. There’s a wall of fire running along the length of the plateau we’ve emerged onto. In front of it, silhouetted by the golden light, Vidarok is standing on top of a giant boulder.

“Come, harpy. I’m here. What are you waiting for?” He thumps a giant fist on his chest. Yet again, I’m filled with that strange warmth as I catch sight of him. Everything within me is pulled in his direction.

“You mean to play me at my own game, Orc?” Ceceris’s voice shrieks past my ear, the sound grating like nails on a chalkboard.

“Play? I’ve already beaten you,” he calls back. “There’s nowhere to run. You’re trapped.”

Ceceris laughs sharply, glancing around. “Trapped? I think you’re a fool who didn’t learn his lesson the first time.” A flutter in the air above us draws my eyes up. There’s a wave of harpies hanging in the air overhead. Vidarok doesn’t look at them. His eyes are fixed on me, and a thousand unspoken words pass between us.

“Return my mate, and I may consider letting some of you live.”

Ceceris laughs again, shoving me ahead of her. I stumble forward, but only as far as the length of her arm. She’s taunting him with me. “Prove it!” she yells, pushing me another step toward him. I want to tear free and run for all I’m worth, but that hand on my arm is still too strong. Fuck, if I had just one drop of blood to fuel me, I’d destroy her.

*Oh, sure. Of course you will.*

I’ve never felt more powerless in all my life.

*Fine princess you are now, Vespyr.*

I lock eyes with Vidarok, letting his confidence bolster me. For a moment, I’m lost in an ocean of green, and nothing else matters until he

looks past me, no doubt challenging the Empress.

“What’s the matter? You afraid I’m going to sweep her out of your grasp?” He laughs, the sound rich and deep.

“I’m no fool, Orc. You have something up your sleeve.”

Vidarok raises his arms, his muscles flexing in the firelight. “No sleeves, harpy.” He winks at me, and my lips twitch at the corners.

Suddenly, the air moves around us as if there’s a storm brewing. Something flashes behind him, and my eyes widen as I realize what it is. At least a hundred dragons rise up behind him in a vast cloud of wings and scales. Vidarok’s eyes lock with mine again; there’s a flicker deep within them.

“Run!” he yells. I don’t need a second instruction. Twisting sharply, I slam my head back into the harpy’s face and use her momentary distraction to pull loose of her grasp. And then I’m bolting forward with every ounce of strength inside me. There’s a swish of air behind me as she rakes her claws at me, nails trailing between my shoulder blades. But I don’t stop. I don’t slow down. I hurtle into the space between us. And then I’m dimly aware of a flash of gold that streaks from beside me. Before I realize what’s happening, my feet are off the floor and I’m swept away from the mountain.

“What...?” is all I manage to scream before the breath rushes from my lungs. I’m being held aloft by Tariq’s golden beast as he flies away with the speed of a jet plane. I twist my head to catch sight of Vidarok, who’s still facing the harpy and her Horde. “Vidarok!” I call hoarsely, but he doesn’t look up at me. He’s glaring at the Empress with such hatred that I’m surprised she doesn’t turn to dust.

Then, a beast bellows, and I recognize Turin’s copper scales as he flies in front of the hovering dragons, communicating in a way that I can’t comprehend. They surge forward toward the gathered harpies, wings beating, the air so hot I can see the heat waves shimmering around them.

Tariq swoops away in a wide arc, putting distance between us and the

battle. Vidarok has leaped nimbly from the boulder and is charging forward to where Ceceris is standing. I hear her shriek as she turns and bolts back into the safety of the caves. Her soldiers form ranks to block the path she's taken. And then there's mayhem

Dragons clash with the dark cloud of harpies, claws flashing against talons as they smash into each other with a force that I can hear from where we're flying into the distance. I crane my neck to keep my eyes on them. There's a thundering roar as an entire battalion of winged beasts breathe flames into the entrances of the cavern network. Smoke billows. Fire plumes from all the exits. Harpies shriek and scream, flying from the heat of the fires that have burned them out of their many hiding places.

"Back! Get back! Retreat!" Ceceris's voice is unmistakable, but I don't hear it for long. I don't know if it's because she's been consumed by the fire or if it's because Tariq is flying me further from the action. I catch one last glimpse of Vidarok swinging his ax against the harpies surrounding him. But now we're too far away.

And this time, I'm the one being whisked away from danger.

*Vespyr*

“You can’t just leave him there!”

Tariq looks at me with a curious intensity, then turns and walks away from me. “He’s in good hands,” he says over his shoulder as he heads toward the tall windows. The sky beyond is like a thick, dark cloak. I’ve always loved the night, but now I can’t help worrying about what lurks out there.

“Whose hands? Hers? That *creature’s*?”

“Stop worrying about him,” he says.

We’re standing in the rooms that I’d shared with him for the past weeks while I was with the dragons.

His rooms.

Beside me is the sofa he’d had me bent over barely two days ago. I don’t look at it. I can’t. It recreates too many images that make my cheeks flush, and my mouth go dry.

“How can you say that? We left him back there in a throng of those animals.” In spite of my inner turmoil over Tariq, anxiety hits me in waves at what might be happening to Vidarok right now.

“He can take care of himself, Vespyr. Besides, Nirem and Aidurn had their best fighters there. And Turin...” He trails off in thought as he turns to face me again.

“Well, I want you to bring him back,” I huff, folding my arms over my chest. I’m still in the same dress the Horde abducted me in, and I’m suddenly aware that it’s ragged and filthy.

“He’s a big boy, Vespyr. He’ll come back when he’s done.”

I purse my lips. I doubt that my mate will take kindly to being dragged off the battlefield just because I’m having conniptions. I’m guessing there’s some sort of “guy code” about that kind of thing.

“Fine.” I don’t let the word sound gracious. I’m feeling belligerent right now. “Then I’ll go get cleaned up.”

“I think that can wait, don’t you? We have things to talk about.” Tariq steps closer to me again. I resist the urge to back away.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I mutter.

“Really?” He glances down, and the heat of his eyes moves down my neck to my shoulder. My skin prickles where he’d sunk his teeth into me that night. “I disagree.”

“What happened was a mistake.”

“Perhaps.” He’s still looking at the bite he left there. “But it still needs to be discussed.”

“What’s to discuss? We fucked. It was nothing.” My arms are still folded at my chest. I clasp them around me defensively.

“I bit you, Vespyr.” His jaw works. “That’s not nothing. To a dragon, that means something.”

“That sounds like a ‘you problem’ to me.”

“Actually, I think it’s both our problem. Can’t you feel it?”

My skin is still tingling and tugging. Something tightens in my core. “No,” I say.

“Well, I think you’re a fool to ignore it.” He takes another step forward. This time, I step back. I stop when the sofa hits the back of my thighs. *That* sofa.

“I’m not ignoring anything. You held me here against my will. We shared a few moments that were completely inappropriate, considering I have a mate bond with another.”

“We shared more than a few moments, Vespyr. I was *inside* you. I felt your response to me.”

“I was weak...vulnerable...” I search for words.

“You wanted me.” His tone is final. “You wanted me to claim you, and—”

“No!” I snap, surprised at how sharp my voice has become. “No,” I add more calmly. “It wasn’t like that. Maybe you wanted it to be like that.”

“Why would I want that, Vespyr? Do you think my life isn’t complicated enough without tying myself to...”

“To what?” I narrow my eyes.

“To a woman like you.”

“A woman like me?” I raise an eyebrow. “Exactly what is that supposed to mean?”

“A woman with issues. You have problems with your realm, your family. You’re... you’re fucking impossible. Not to mention that you already have a bond; you said it yourself. Why the fuck would I want all that in my world?”



“Only you can answer that, Tariq. You’re the one who came to me.” My nostrils flare as outrage builds. Who the hell does he think he is? He started it, not me. “I was quite happy without you.”

“Were you?” He cocks his head.

“Yes. Well, as happy as I could be while I was being kept from my mate.”

“And yet you wanted me,” he repeats.

“It told you that was a mistake.” My lower lip protrudes, and I tug it back, my teeth denting the soft flesh. He watches the movement before lifting his eyes again. There’s something in that look that makes my throat tighten.

“Do you really believe that?” His voice is husky.

Mine is too when I reply, “Don’t you?”

“I…” He shakes his head, reaching out and tracing his fingertip along the line of my lower lip. I suck in a sharp breath but don’t brush his hand away. When he cups my cheek, I squeeze my eyes shut.

*What the fuck are you doing, Vespvr?*

“Where is she?” Loud voices in the hallway have me stiffening. The door flies open, and Vidarok storms in. We both spin to face him, and I’m certain that I have guilt written all over my face. If Vidarok notices, he gives no sign of it. Closing the space between us, he throws his arms around me and sweeps me up against him.

“Dragh!” he groans as he buries his face into my hair. “I thought I’d die without you.”

I wind my arms around his neck and hear myself whimper. Whatever just went on with Tariq seems inconsequential now. “Vidarok,” I breathe, letting my face sink to the strong line of his shoulder. He smells of smoke and fresh sweat and his own warm man scent. It floods my senses. I cling to him, and he tightens his hold as if trying to draw me into himself. I melt.

Good. So good. This is how it's meant to be. Not all the confusion and conflict that Tariq brings.

Finally, he draws back and cups my face in his hands. It doesn't matter that they're smeared with soot and grime. "Sweet woman," he murmurs a moment before his lips brush over mine. In that moment, we could be the only two people in the room. I'm lost in him. Until Tariq clears his throat beside us.

"I'm hoping everything went as planned?" he asks.

Vidarok looks at him as if he hadn't realized he was there. "Exactly as planned." His mouth twitches into a grim smile. "The caverns are cleared. Those who did not flee have been dealt with."

I don't dwell on what he means by that.

"You're certain?" Tariq narrows his eyes on him.

Vidarok nods. "Lady Nirem and Lord Aidurn made sure of it. They're still sweeping the area now."

"And yet you're here."

"I had more pressing matters to attend to." My mate pulls me closer. I sink into the safe harbor of his arms. He's a wall of solid muscle.

"More pressing than battle?"

"That is your war, dragon." Vidarok's mouth tightens into a firm line. "My reason for fighting is standing right here." He looks down at me, his eyes softening. "And now you're safe. By the Maker...I'll never let you go again."

"Vidarok," my voice breaks, "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

His lips touch mine, and my breath catches. There's a low rumble beside us, and I shoot a look at Tariq, who's staring at us with an inscrutable

expression.

I realize that Vidarok is looking at him too. “Thank you,” he says, surprising me. I’d expected some sort of confrontation, but maybe that’s my conscience speaking. “Thank you for helping me to get her back.”

Tariq shrugs. “It suited us.” He waves a hand. “Dispatching the Horde protects my people. I owe you my gratitude for helping us, too.”

I watch in amazement as the pair exchange a glance that speaks volumes. Tariq claps a hand on Vidarok’s shoulder. Vidarok nods.

*Wait. What?*

Did I expect some sort of testosterone-fueled battle over me? Then again, maybe Vidarok hasn’t figured out what happened between us. What would he do if he found out?

The moment between them passes.

“I’m guessing you two have a lot to catch up on.” A muscle flickers in Tariq’s jaw when he looks at me. I break eye contact first. “I’ll let you have a moment together.”

“We’ll need more than a moment.” Vidarok’s rich baritone ripples through me like a touch. He fixes his attention on me again as if Tariq has already left the room. “Mine...” he sighs a moment before his face descends. I tilt my head back, shutting my eyes as he captures my mouth.

It’s a kiss that takes the air from my lungs. His lips move over mine like a whisper, gentle but passionate. I’m lost in him in this moment. I wrap my arms around the thick column of his neck and surrender myself to him.

The low moan that sighs up my throat almost drowns out the sound of Tariq shutting the door behind him as he leaves. Almost... But not quite.

*Vidarok*

She feels like heaven. Like everything I ever wanted in my world, needed without knowing it. And now I have her back. I can breathe again.

I gather her against me more firmly, then release my grip when she makes a little sound. If I don't take care, I might crush her. And as I raise my head from my fevered kiss, I look into her face, and concern washes over me.

The hollows of her cheeks. The shadows beneath her lovely eyes. She's too damn pale.

*Dragh!*

I'm an idiot. "When did you feed?" I trace a stray strand of hair from her cheek.

She purses her lips and gives a little shrug. "Before they took me." She looks down at my chest, and I don't like the fact that she's not meeting my eye.

I tilt her chin up with my fingertip. "That was nearly two days ago."

"There's been a lot going on." Her voice is hoarse. Thick lashes flutter as she looks everywhere but at me.

“I know.” I run my thumb along the line of her jaw. “A lot.” I caught her scent on the dragon. It was unmistakable. And yet, I find that I don’t care. I’m just so glad she’s safely in my arms again.

Sliding my hand around to cradle the back of her head, I draw her face toward my neck and tilt my head to the side. There’s a vein throbbing there, and the invitation is unmistakable. She needs blood. And I don’t want her taking anyone’s but mine.

There’s a slight pause, and I respond by pressing her face closer to me. Her sigh wafts over my skin, and then her lips follow suit. When her teeth pierce my flesh, a familiar rush pulls a low moan from me.

The sensation of her mouth on my skin, the way she drinks from me, it’s like nothing else, a sensation I didn’t realize I’ve grown to crave since we’ve been together. She takes more than blood; she takes life, vitality, and strength. But she gives them, too. And with each draw, I feel myself coming alive in ways that go beyond physical.

“Yessss,” I groan, drawing the word out. My cock starts to harden as she drinks from me. I can’t help it; it responds to her without thought or conscious effort.

I lift her up against me, sliding my hands under her thighs as she wraps them around me. When she finally lifts her head, the loss of that connection almost hurts.

“Vidarok...” Her voice is small. “I thought we’d never see each other again.” There’s already a flush of color in her cheeks.

“Never.” I shake my head. “You’re mine. I’m yours. I’d follow you through all the realms and beyond to find you. You never need to worry about that.”

She clings to me, burying her face in my neck just below where she’d fed as if she needs the closeness just as much as the sustenance. Her arms twine around my neck. Her tongue flicks out over the small punctures in my skin, and it makes my cock twitch.

“Fuck...how I’ve wanted you...” she moans. My body tightens in anticipation of what is to come. My hands grip her hips, my fingers digging into her flesh. She moves against me, her hips rolling and grinding her mound against my shaft through the leather of my pants. The sensation is exquisite, and I groan in pleasure as she continues to rock back and forth, each motion sending waves of heat through me.

When she reaches down, tugs the hem of her skirt up her thighs, and then tugs at the top of my pants, I shudder.

“Dragh! You’ll be the death of me, you know that?”

She shakes her head, pulling my pants down my thighs to expose me. “Don’t ever say that. You’ve already risked yourself for me too many times. I never want that to happen again.”

“I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat,” I say. “I’d do it—” My voice breaks as her fingers curl around the length of my cock. The rest of my words come out in a throaty growl. “Fuck...”

“You’re so hard. So thick.” She trails the tip of her tongue up the side of my throat and then nibbles along my jawline to my chin. It’s almost my undoing. Her hands slide up to grip my shoulders, her fingers digging into my skin as she continues to tease me with her tongue. I can’t take it anymore, so I grab hold of her hips and shift her up until the line of her slit is gliding over my shaft. Her lower half presses against mine, and I can feel every curve and dip of her body.

“Oh! Oh...fuck!” she hisses as the head of my cock brushes over her clit. Her next moan is muffled as I wrap my arms around her and pull her tight against me, and our mouths meet in a passionate kiss. I press my tongue against hers as she moves with me.

After what seems like an eternity, we finally break apart, both of us panting heavily from the intensity of the emotions that are swirling. She leans back slightly so that she can look at me, her legs still locked around my waist.

“I want you inside me,” she husks out.

“Thank fuck, because I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.” I keep my eyes on hers as I stride toward a sofa nearby, planning to set her down on it and take my sweet time devouring her. But she shakes her head sharply.

“No! I want you like this. Now!” Tipping her hips, I can feel the hungry entrance of her pussy against my throbbing flesh. It’s almost more than I can bear. When she grabs my shoulders and lifts herself away from me slightly, I angle myself until the head of my cock breaches her.

“Yesss...” I hiss as I slide into her.

“Fuck! Oh, fuck!” Her voice pitches higher as I press as deep as I can go against her tightness. She’s panting, her nails raking grooves into my skin before I’m fully seated. “Good! So, fucking good!” Her voice is still high, her breath coming in small gasps.

My chest heaves as I look down to where my flesh pierces hers. I keep watching as I slide out and then back in again. It’s like slipping in and out of paradise, my skin gleaming with her dripping juices.

“Fuck...look at us...” I groan, transfixed by the sight of it. Her eyes are glazed when they meet mine briefly before moving down to where I’m looking.

“So big. By Blood, you’ll break me!” But if she’s worried about it, she doesn’t seem to want to slow me. She locks her ankles behind me, and then she’s rocking forward, grinding her hips with such force it makes my eyes water. I keep holding onto her firmly, almost afraid she’ll slip from my grasp if I don’t hold her, as if my life depended on it. And maybe it does. I can’t remember a pain like the one I felt when she was torn from me. And now that she’s here, it’s like I’m whole again. Whole and inside her...and it’s as if she’s filling me as much as I’m filling her because my heart floods with warmth. When she throws her head back, her lips part on the start of a throaty cry, I gaze at her in wonder.

“Beautiful. So fucking beautiful,” I grit out. Her golden curls trail

almost to the floor as she tosses her head, bucking against me with a lack of restraint that sends a jolt down my cock. “I want to watch you come,” I tell her.

My words seem to drive her wilder, and the sensations radiating up my flesh make me want to roar with pleasure. It’s as if she’s taken over every nerve in my body, and they’re all firing simultaneously.

As we move together, the intensity builds until it seems as if flames are consuming me.

“Harder!” she urges. “I want to feel you everywhere!” Her words are carried on her gasping breath that jerks from her throat each time I push into her.

“Everywhere,” I echo through clenched teeth. And I can feel it, too; the connection that we created all those weeks ago is in full force once more. If I’d worried that it had been my imagination, it’s all coming home to me now. “Mine. You’re mine!”

“Yours!” she gasps. “Ohhhh... Oh, my God!” She’s leaning back, trusting me with every thrust as I hold her firmly. And of course she can trust me. She can trust me with her life if she has to. Because our fates are so interwoven now, I can’t imagine a world without her in it.

“I’m going to come,” I grit out when I realize that the unfurling sensation shivering along my shaft is about to become unstoppable.

“Come!” she chokes out. “Fill me. Come now!” Her sweet scent wraps around us, and all I can do is surrender to this moment. The waves of pleasure crash through me like thunder, the force of them sending me shuddering.

“By the Maker!” I barely recognize my own voice it’s so low and rasping. I’m sure that my eyes have rolled right back in my head. I don’t release my grip on her, though. I would never do that. *Could never* do that. It’s no easy task because she’s flung herself back, her thighs scissoring around me as she locks her pussy down the length of my shaft. She cries out



sharply as her own orgasm grips her, muscles tightening and milking the last spurts of cum from me. It feels like she's wringing out my soul with her body. And I'm entirely wrung out by the time she stops moving.

I slide my hands up to her ribcage and tip her up until she's flush against my chest. Her breath comes quickly, her body heaving as she fights to settle it. I curl my arms around her, cradling her against me. When she unlocks her ankles behind me and lets her feet drop to the floor, I let out a sigh as my cock slides from her warmth. I could stay there forever.

We're still standing like that long moments later, her face pressed into my chest, my arms wrapped around her. Sweat gleams on her skin, and she's warm and damp against me.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, tipping her head back to look at me. Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes glitter with the last remnants of our lust.

"I'm thinking that I'd like to spend the rest of my days with my cock buried in your heat." My lips twitch up.

She answers me with her own warm smile. A happy, satisfied smile that mirrors the feeling in my chest. "That might be inconvenient," she says.

"Not for me." I press my lips against her forehead. Fuck, she smells good. Especially when my cum is dripping from her, marking her, overshadowing any hint of scent that dragon may have left on her.

I fight back a scowl.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." I shake my head as I lie. "Everything is right. At last." I cup her cheek and brush the pad of my thumb over her kiss-swollen lips.

"Yes." Her cheeks have dimples when she smiles, and I love them. I love everything about her. "Yes, everything is right...at last."

But even as she says the words, a small niggle of doubt comes to haunt me. Because there's a dragon out there who thinks he has a claim over the woman in my arms. Over what I've fought to get back. He thinks he can touch what is mine. And I'm going to have to show him that he's wrong.

Tariq

What the hell am I doing?

My hands curl into fists as I linger in the hallway just a few feet from the door I closed behind me. I can hear her soft moans and the small sounds of pleasure she's making. Sounds I recognize because she'd made them for me not so long ago. I have no doubt of what they're doing in there. The Orc is making no attempt to hide it. And why should he?

Because it's driving me crazy, that's why. Simple good manners should stop him.

But as far as he's concerned, he's with his mate. And if anything, he wants me to know that. It was perfectly clear that I'd been fucking her the night he came here. The night they took her. And I put my mark on her then. I can still remember how her skin had felt like silk against my lips.

The dragon within me moves sinuously, lust building at the memory of being inside her. When I glance down at my hands, scales shimmer beneath the surface of my skin.

*Fire take it!*

My thoughts are a jumbled mess, my emotions boiling over with both rage and envy. I want to storm back into the room and demand that he leave,

but I know better than to do something stupid like that. There's no way I can win this battle without completely humiliating myself.

Instead, I take a few steps away from the door and try to clear my head. As much as it pains me to admit it, she was never mine. She's with him now, and there's nothing I can do about it. I don't even have the right to be mad at him for taking what I never owned in the first place. But maybe I could have. And maybe I still can. She yielded to me. I could feel her so close to tipping over the edge.

*Go in there, you coward!*

I stare at the door. A throaty female moan wafts through it...and my cock goes rock-hard in an instant. It doesn't matter that it's his hands on her that bring her that pleasure. It doesn't matter that he's probably buried deep inside her right now. I want to see her. I want to see the way her eyes glaze as bliss takes hold of her. I want to watch her gnaw on her lip, and I want to see the small crease furrow between her brows as she focuses on that sensation.

I take a deep breath and try to force myself to get control of my warring thoughts.

It doesn't work. My head is spinning. My body is burning.

I'm fucked.

I can't count the number of times I've been grateful for the lightweight trousers I started wearing after Vespvr came into my world. I'm grateful for them again now. Because there are footsteps coming down the hall, and my cock feels as if it's about to explode. I turn my back on whoever is coming toward me.

"My Lord." Grier appears at my side, and I try not to look flustered. "My Lord, the others have returned, and—" He's cut off by a loud howl of ecstasy followed by a low grunt from the Orc. "Err..." He slants his eyes at the door and then back at me.

I scowl at him. "The others have returned and...?"

“I...er...”

There’s another sound. This time it’s almost a scream, and fuck it, my stomach knots with need for her.

“Are you going to stand there all day with your mouth hanging open like a fish?” Anger colors my voice. Or maybe it’s frustration. Probably both.

Grier clears his throat and looks down the hall in the opposite direction to where sharp, staccato cries are now tearing at the air. He begins to walk that way, clearly hoping to put distance between himself and the source of the noise. It takes me a moment to realize I’m not following him.

*Why am I not following him?*

Probably because every muscle in my body is straining to go back into that room, and—

And what? Tear him off her?

Watch. Them.

*What the fuck?*

I jerk myself away from the spot I feel rooted to and march after Grier. By the time I catch up with him, we’ve both composed ourselves. Slightly. He keeps throwing curious looks my way. I ignore them.

“The others have returned,” I repeat what he’d said earlier. “What do they have to report?”

“It seems like good news.” If there’s an undercurrent of humor in his voice, as if he’s trying to stifle laughter, I ignore that, too. “But there will be a proper briefing in the Circle. I was sent to call you to meet with them. Of course, I had no idea that you’d be...”

“I’d be what?” There’s an edge to my voice.

“Busy.” His voice sounds strangled, and when I look at him, he’s fixed his eyes on a point in the distance. His shoulders are shaking.

By all that burns! He’s fucking laughing at me.

“Mind yourself!” I snap. He nods mutely. I can tell this situation is not going to improve, so I broaden my strides and put distance between us.



Thankfully, we both have some measure of composure by the time I reach the Circle. Only Timmir and Bridrod are there, but voices from nearby soon herald the arrival of Nirem, Aidurn, and Zydus. Turin is with them. They’re all streaked with dirt. And they’re all grinning broadly. Nirem’s teeth are white against the ebony of her chiseled features, and her eyes glint with victory as she sees me.

“A good day, King Tariq! A very good day!”

I nod, wishing I could completely agree with her – because although the battle was a success, my head is a clusterfuck of confusion right now.

“I’d say that was a resounding success, brother.” Turin is exultant.

“Let’s take it to the Circle.” I nod to where Timmir and Bridrod are still waiting. I don’t want to sound like a stickler for convention, but I’m hoping the structure of our meeting will go some way toward settling my thoughts.

Turin claps a hand on Aidurn’s shoulder, and the pair exchange jubilant grins before we head to the entrance of the circle of stone seats. An attendant steps forward to begin the usual announcement of those in attendance, but I wave him away. We’ve spent enough time in this place lately for it to feel like we seldom leave. Aside from when we need to fight.

I wait a moment for everyone to take their seats. Turin takes my spot, but for a change, it doesn’t bother me.

I have other things on my mind right now.

“You all fought well today, brothers...sisters.” I look at each in turn. Timmir and Bridrod may not have gone into battle, but their efforts are vital. Bridrod runs the medic centers, and Timmir ensures our strategies are sound. I’ve always trusted him with that – his caution makes him careful.

“We won well today!” Turin breaks in. The others murmur their agreement.

“Yes, we did.” I take a deep breath and look around the Circle. “What happened after I left?”

Turin stares at me for a moment before speaking. “We burned them out of their mountain stronghold. Those who didn’t flee were... There were no survivors.”

“We burned them in the very territory they’d stolen from us.” Nirem’s face is all hard lines and tight lips as she nods in agreement. I can still see the pain in her eyes over the loss of her fighters from the previous battle, but there is also a fierce satisfaction there; they have been avenged.

“It was a short battle but decisive,” Turin continues. “Our forces fought valiantly against their numbers, and we managed to drive them back.” His lips curl up into a wicked grin. “The harpies were no match for us – they couldn’t withstand our fire.”

“That’s because we made sure there was enough of it,” Aidurn smirks.

“I think it’s safe to say that the Horde no longer has a base within Steel Cliffs.” Zydus looks satisfied.

I feel the same way. It had come as a shock to learn that the Horde had set up camp within Morganeau. In hindsight, it makes sense. We could never understand how they seemed to appear out of nowhere and then vanish as quickly. I can picture them now, ragged gray fiends peeling out of the

cliffs.

“We can’t become complacent about this.” It’s Timmir now. “We may have ousted those in the Cliffs, but there will certainly be other strongholds. We have to remain vigilant.”

“Of course,” I agree. “And we should use this opportunity to learn more about them. Their numbers will be depleted; they’ll be on the run. We must learn everything we can about them so that we can use it to our advantage.”

There are murmurs of agreement from the others.

“I still don’t like the idea of sending anyone in among them,” Bridrod interjects. “We’ve already lost too many. And our species are too different. They’d be identified in an instant.”

“I’m sure there are many among us who would be willing to take the risk; to find a way in and remain hidden.” Nirem looks at the other woman.

“There has to be another way, though.” Bridrod pinches her lips together.

“They have a queen.”

Everyone spins to face Vespyr, who’s striding toward the Circle. Vidarok stays in step beside her, his eyes not leaving her. They appear to have taken the time to wash up since I saw them. It doesn’t make a difference; the scent of sex still surrounds them.

Or maybe that’s just me. When I look at the others, there’s curiosity, but that’s all. Aside from Grier, who’s smirking at me.

Asshole.

“Princess Vespyr.” Zydus stands. “I am delighted to see you safe and well. And you too, Captain Vidarok. You fought well today.”

The Orc inclines his head.



“Thank you, Lord Zydus.” Vespyr flashes him a smile and then looks at the others. “I was among them. Not for long, but I paid attention.”

Smart. Of course she is.

“What did you learn, Princess?” Nirem is leaning forward, an elbow on one upraised knee, her chin resting in her palm. The pose is casual, but her eyes are intent.

“They have a queen...an Empress,” Vespyr says. “And their troops are organized in ranks led by generals and captains.”

“They’re organized?” Aidurn mutters under his breath.

“Of course they’re organized,” Timmir snaps. “They’re not mindless beasts. We’d have vanquished them by now if that were the case.”

“They’re not mindless, but they’re not particularly smart either.” Vespyr smiles slightly. “The Empress – Ceceris – is wily. I’ve no doubt she would have escaped. Her high-ranking fighters would have found a way out, too.”

“They would have abandoned their forces in the height of battle?” Nirem widens her dark eyes.

“Without a doubt.” Vespyr turns her attention to her. “I saw little sign of loyalty among them. One or two showed resentment at losing their sisters – they’re all female – but I didn’t get a feeling that it was a matter of affection. I think they just like the idea of revenge for the sake of killing.”

“Killers with no hearts,” Bridrod breathes.

“Not much in the brain department either, my Lady.” Vespyr flashes her a smile. “That could be useful to us.”

*To us.*

I tilt my head slightly as I watch her. Is she taking this fight on as her

own? I've seen her in action; she'd be a valuable asset.

And if she stayed to fight...

*She'd be here.*

I can't think of a single reason why she'd choose to do that. When I catch the Orc assessing me coolly, I'm sure that similar thoughts are running through his head. I turn away from him.

"This is all very interesting, Princess," Turin says. "But it leaves many questions. Not least of which is why they took you."

Vespyr shrugs. "I wish I knew. They kept talking about a prince. They said he'd come to my rescue. Actually, I thought they meant you, to begin with." Her expression grows wry. "But I couldn't think of a reason why you'd do that for me."

Turin bobs his eyebrows. "I'd always come to your rescue, Princess." He gives a wink.

At Vespyr's side, Vidarok bristles visibly. There's a low rumbling growl and someone takes in a sharp breath. I realize why when it occurs to me that I'm the one growling.

*Get a grip, man!*

I clear my throat. "This prince. Did they give any idea of where he might be coming from? His realm?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing. But they're working with someone. Someone who is looking for this person." She rubs her brow as if reaching for fragments of information. "They spoke about a queen. They were planning to retreat to her realm. It seemed almost as if they were in league with her. I got the impression she was powerful. They said she was the key to it all."

"A queen?" When I focus on her, I notice Vidarok has grown still. "She's the key to their plans?"

“Yes. But that’s all I was able to pick up.” Vespvr shrugs. “A queen who is their ally and who is looking for this prince who seems drawn to me.” She splays her hands. “I just can’t imagine who that might be. My brother is already the Overlord. None of the Fae royals I know of have the status of prince. I can’t think of anyone they could have been talking about.”

I rub my jaw as I mull this over. “It’s a mystery. But one that won’t take long to unravel.” My eyes meet hers, and I sense the Orc growing fractious. His tension level has ramped through the roof.

Tough. I’m not going to stop looking at her. Golden and glowing, she’s like a candle, and I am a moth.

“If we find him, we will find her,” Turin says.

I eye him thoughtfully. “You are right, brother.” I look around at the others. “And once we have her…”

“We will have the head of the beast that plagues us.” Zydus is wearing an expression of grim satisfaction. “I say we put the lion’s share of our efforts into this endeavor, my Lord.

I nod. “Yes. We find the prince, get to the queen. And we end this war, once and for all.”

*Vespyr*

“I’m not going back to Ryacyn.” I look from Vidarok to Tariq and cross my arms over my chest. I jut my jaw out, too, for good measure. It’s been hours since the meeting in the Circle, and it feels like the dust is finally starting to settle. We’re back in Tariq’s quarters, and the fragrance of recent sex hangs heavy in the air. Tariq gives no sign that he’s aware of it, but he surely must be.

I go on, “I don’t care what either of you thinks about Bartholomew’s motives; I’m not interested. He’ll do me harm.”

“You already know how I feel about this matter, Vespyr. I asked you to stay here, remember? To fight on our side,” Tariq says. I press my lips into a tight line. There are a lot of things I remember about when he asked me to stay and fight. Things I can’t think about right now while my mate is standing looking at me, his scent still fresh on my skin.

Vidarok’s expression is inscrutable. I still can’t figure out if he’s realized what happened between Tariq and me. But now, I’m more concerned about what his plans are., I can’t forget that his original mission was to capture me and take me to the seat of Ryacyn for a reckoning.

“You can’t take me back to my brother, Vidarok. You can’t!” My eyes beseech him. For a moment, as he looks at me silently, I’m half afraid he’s going to tell me that’s exactly what he has in mind.

“I won’t do that to you, Vespyr.” He shakes his head. “The night I left Ryacyn in pursuit of Tariq, I cut my ties with the royal court. I disobeyed a direct order from my king and queen, and I’ll have to face the consequences of that. I don’t care, though. The only reason I’d want to take you back there is so you can be cured of the Curse.”

“Ugh!” I give an exasperated sigh. “How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t need to be cured? I’m fine! Can’t you see that?” I raise a hand as if it’ll show them that there’s nothing wrong with me.

“But could you say that after a day without feeding?” he says. “I’ve seen what happens to you, my love.”

*My love.*

I swallow hard. “So I need blood. What vampire doesn’t?”

“You need a lot,” they both say at once. I go tense because there’s no way they don’t know what might happen when I feed. Namely, sex. Lots of it. And since they’ve both been supplying blood for me, it’s only a matter of time before everything starts to peel out.

“Fine. Maybe I do. But it’s worth it for the power it brings.” I glare at Tariq because right now, I have no power. He looks sheepish for a moment. Just a moment. “I want it back,” I tell him. “Get rid of your spell.”

“You took her power?” Vidarok glares at him. “That’s how they were able to take her from us.”

*Us?*

“It’s your fault.” Vidarok’s expression has grown stormy. “She could have defended herself if you hadn’t done that. She could have—”

“All right! I get it, dammit. It’s my fault,” Tariq cuts him off. “But I had to take precautions, okay? I couldn’t have her walking around my realm like a loaded gun.”

“Loaded gun?” I snort. “All I was trying to do was protect myself. You abducted me, remember?”

He really does look sheepish this time.

“That’s right. You stole her...from me!” Vidarok’s fists are bunched at his side. I step closer, putting myself between the pair of them. As much as I’m pissed at Tariq, I’m not in the mood for more bloodshed right now.

“Why?” I ask Tariq. “What did you do that for?”

His eyes shift, not meeting mine, which is odd because Tariq is nothing if not forthright. “I was brokering an alliance,” he finally says.

“Alliance? That’s why you took me?” That makes no sense. “I don’t understand.”

“The Orcs agreed to give their support against the Horde if I took you...” He looks at Vidarok. “From him.”

“They wanted you to take me from Vidarok? But why?”

“I didn’t ask. They simply said that you were a witch and needed to be taken out of the picture.”

*Out of the picture...*

“They wanted me dead?”

“Nobody said that. I was just asked to locate you and take you from him. I suppose I could have interpreted that as killing you. I chose not to.”

*Small mercies.*

We’re both looking at Vidarok now. He’s grown silent.

“Why would the Orcs want us apart, Vidarok?” I frown at him.

He shrugs. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Are you hiding something from us, Orc?” Tariq faces him straight on.

Things aren’t adding up for me. “Vidarok... When we arrived on the border of Earomond, those Orcs who attacked us... They weren’t after me. They came for you.”

His chest heaves as he huffs out a breath. “I have history in Earomond, Vespyr. I didn’t want to go back there. But we had no choice once the gateway back to Ryacyn was closed to us.”

“But why didn’t you say something?” I reach out a hand to touch his arm.

He shrugs again. “Didn’t seem important.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Tariq breaks in. “If your foolishness compromises my alliances-”

“My foolishness?” Vidarok snaps. “All I did was save my mate after you put her in danger.”

I sense the tension between them building further. But I’m feeling pretty tense now, too. “What kind of alliance are you talking about here? Was it worth risking me?”

“I never even knew you,” Tariq snaps. “I was told you were dangerous. A threat to their realm. So was Vidarok. They didn’t say why, and it wasn’t my place to probe.” He rubs his eyes, his shoulders slumping slightly. “The Orcs are powerful. Their army is battle-ready. Morganeau needed their help.”

“Tariq,” I begin.

“I would never do it knowing what I know now, Vespyr.” Something in his expression makes my chest tighten. “Knowing who you are.” His eyes flick to Vidarok and then back to me.

“And that’s supposed to make it better?” Vidarok asks. He’s still bristling.

“Actually, no. But what’s done is done. The question I’m still left with is what makes you so important to them.” Tariq fixes his eyes on Vidarok.

“I’m not important,” Vidarok mutters. “I told you; I had history there. Bad blood. It was... It wasn’t good, but it was a long time ago. I thought it was over. Maybe they haven’t forgotten.”

“What kind of bad blood are we talking about here?” Tariq presses.

“It was a family matter,” is all Vidarok says. I remember the conversation we had about his mother and how she died of a broken heart.

“It’s hard to talk about, isn’t it?” I say softly. Our eyes meet, and something passes between us. It softens me.

“Yes. It’s hard.” He heaves a sigh. I hate feeling as if we’re pushing him to relive memories that are painful to him.

“I’m not buying it, Orc. Tell us what you’re hiding.” Tariq isn’t giving up.

“It’s not important, okay?” Vidarok glares at him. “I told you it was over a long time ago. They probably don’t like the idea of having me back. It has nothing to do with the Horde taking Vespyr.”

I still sense there’s more to all of this, but it seems that Vidarok isn’t going to reveal too much more.

Tariq looks as if he’s going to push harder, then thinks better of it. “You’re lucky we have bigger problems to deal with right now, Orc. Namely, defeating the Horde.” He looks at me. “Will you stay?”

“Only if my mate does too.” I eye him coolly. His jaw clenches. I may have no place else to go right now, but I’m resourceful. I don’t need to remain here.



He slants a look between Vidarok and me and then nods. “But it’s only a temporary arrangement, do you understand?”

“If it’s good enough for my princess, it’s good enough for me.” Vidarok rocks back on his heels and folds his arms over his chest.

“Good,” I say. “That’s settled. Then there are some matters to address...”

“Like what?” Tariq asks.

“Like giving my powers back.” I narrow my eyes on him. “I mean it, Tariq! I’ll be no use to anyone like this.”

He sighs and rubs his temples. “It’s not that simple.”

“Then make it simple!”

“You have the Curse, Vespyr. What if you lose control and harm an innocent? I have to take precautions for the safety of my people.”

I feel a surge of indignation. “How could you—?”

“I will ensure that there are no incidents.” Vidarok’s voice is a low rumble that has my skin tingling. “I have spent years protecting the Fae Princess and her entourage. I can watch over Vespyr. For her safety, as much as that of your subjects.” He reaches for my hand and squeezes gently. “I trust you, my love. Nothing will happen. I’ll make sure of it.”

My heart goes warm.

Tariq pauses for a moment, considering his options. “I will lift the spell, but only if you agree that you will never leave the company of either Vidarok or me.”

“You?” Vidarok snaps. “I can do this myself.”

“There’s no way you can keep your eyes on her every minute of every

day, Orc.”

“Watch me.” Vidarok’s jaw is out.

“Deal,” I interrupt. “I don’t care, as long as you free me from this ridiculous spell. I feel smothered.”

Tariq gives a slow nod. “So, you will stay to fight for the dragons. You and the Orc.” That doesn’t seem to delight him, but I guess we’re a two-for-one deal right now. “And I will remove the spell.”

“Good. It’s settled.” I look from one to the other, and suddenly, something occurs to me: I’ll be with my mate and my lover under the same roof. This may not be a smart idea.

*Vidarok*

The dragon war room is impressive. Like the rest of the castle, its walls are heavy slabs of rock, and the furnishings are rich and ancient. Intricate tapestries depicting fierce dragons in battle hang around us. One wall is lined with shelves overflowing with scrolls and leather-bound books. The stone floor is smooth and polished, reflecting the dim light of torches.

“So, you think you have something to teach us, Orc?” Tariq is looking at me coolly.

“I believe I do, yes.” I return his stare, not feeling very charitable toward him right now. I should have spent the night with my mate; instead, we’ve been going over battle plans and maps. They’re strewn across the dark, polished wood table that we’re seated at.

“And why should we be convinced after that stunt you pulled?” He’s referring to my frantic rush to save Vespyr when I first learned that the Horde had taken her.

“I was impetuous, I’ll admit that. But my mate was at risk. Any red-blooded male would do the same.” I raise an eyebrow at him. The message isn’t subtle. If he thinks he has a claim to her, he’s not proving that he’s man enough.

“There is a difference between fighting for your mate and putting her

at risk. Your actions were reckless.”

“And yours were—”

“Captain Vidarok. Your Highness,” Zydus breaks in. “Shall we put these matters behind us? I think we can all agree that we are very happy with the outcome of our last battle. Both of you behaved with great courage—”

“If you call snatching up my mate and flying off with her courageous,” I mutter.

Zydus fixes me with a hard stare. I shrug. He goes on, “You were both courageous, the princess was saved, and the Horde was forced to retreat. We couldn’t have hoped for a better result.”

I nod because he’s right.

“That still doesn’t mean the Orc has anything to teach our troops.” Tariq scowls at me.

“I beg to differ. As Chief of Security for Queen Aurora’s guard, I have years of military experience. I’ve led countless battles and trained soldiers from all the realms. I understand tactics, strategy, and the psychology of warfare. And most importantly, I know how to work with different personalities and unite them towards a common goal.”

Tariq looks skeptical as I make my case. “I’m not sure we need an Orc teaching us anything about warfare. We have our own strategies and methods that have served us well so far.”

“Really? This is coming from the king who had no idea that his enemy was hiding beneath his nose?”

Tariq visibly bristles, but Turin raises his hand. “Let’s hear him out, brother.” He turns to me. “What do you propose?”

I lean back in my chair, keeping my expression neutral. “I’m not suggesting you abandon your strategies completely. But it never hurts to learn new techniques and tactics. Especially when facing an enemy like the

Horde.”

Zydus nods in agreement while Nirem and Aidurn exchange glances.

“Most importantly, you need to look at your weaknesses. As dragons, your soldiers are formidable. As humans, not so much.” I glance at Tariq. “When you came to Ryacyn, you told the king and queen that the Horde attacked your most vulnerable. The young and unskilled. Those who haven’t yet matured enough to shift, or women with child.”

“This is true,” says Zydus. “We are stretched to our limits trying to protect them all.”

“I can teach them to fight,” I reply confidently. “Archery, swordsmanship, close-quarters combat skills.”

Tariq’s expression shifts slightly. I’m guessing he knows I’m right but is resisting it.

“And what makes you qualified to teach hand-to-hand combat?” he asks.

“As an Orc warrior, these things are an integral part of our training,” I explain. “We are known for our strength and physical prowess in battle.”

Tariq nods slowly, considering my words. Zydus speaks up again, sensing the tension between us.

“Perhaps we could arrange for a demonstration,” he suggests. “Then we can see for ourselves.”

I rise. “It would be my pleasure.” I look around at the others. “Any volunteers?” It’s an unnecessary question. I can already guess who’s going to volunteer.

“I’d be happy to try.” Turin grins at me. “I’m pretty good with a sword.”

“I’ll do it.” Tariq is standing. I see Turin stifle a chuckle. He probably

expected the same reaction from his brother.

Without fanfare, I gesture to the door. “After you,” I say.

We make our way to the courtyard, where the elders surround us.

“Choose your weapon,” I say to the Dragon King. He’s confident, I’ll give him that. I can’t deny that he’s probably battle-hardened. But not in his human form. He’s always relied on his dragon to win his battles. I’m willing to bet that his combat skills are not finely honed.

Mine are.

“Sword.” He jerks his head toward Grier, who’s hovering nearby. The man eyes us uncertainly, but within moments, we’re both armed with heavy swords. The others back away, leaving us to face each other on the sunlit flagstones of the courtyard.

Tariq and I circle each other, swords at the ready. He’s clearly a skilled fighter, but I can sense his hesitation, and there’s a slight lack of confidence in his human form. Only slight, though.

I take the first strike, a feint to test his defenses. He easily blocks it, but I can see the surprise on his face when he realizes my strength. I press on with a series of quick strikes, and he struggles to keep up.

I can hear murmurs from the elders watching around us. Turin is grinning smugly, enjoying the show.

I aim a thrust, then spin aside as Tariq retaliates. The force of his movement unbalances him, and he staggers forward.

“Ready to take a break?” I smirk.

“Why? Scared already?” Tariq regains his footing and begins to fight back, his movements becoming more fluid as he warms up. I can sense frustration building within him as our swords clash repeatedly.

But I don’t give him a chance to catch his breath, pressing on with my

relentless attacks. I can tell that the other elders are impressed by my skill, but Tariq seems determined not to be defeated so easily.

“How about now? If you need a breather...” I ask when I see that his breath is growing labored. He’ll never admit it, but he’s realizing that he’s bitten off more than he can chew. And I’m not about to let him off lightly.

His lip curls. “Let’s see who needs a break!” He starts to match my intensity, each of us fighting with all our strength. But it’s not just about strength; it’s about strategy and technique as well. And in that regard, I have the upper hand.

Our swords continue to clash loudly, creating a symphony of metal against metal. But then Tariq throws me off balance with an unexpected move, knocking me back a few steps.

I grin at him, impressed by his skills. He may not be an Orc warrior like me, but he’s definitely a formidable opponent.

“Lucky break,” I tell him, even though I know it’s not just that.

“Plenty more where that came from, Orc.”

We continue to exchange blows until sweat drips down my face, and my muscles start to ache from the exertion. But I refuse to let up; this is not just about proving myself to the others but also about proving myself to Tariq.

I push him harder, testing his limits.

He stumbles back, and I see my chance. With a swift move, I knock his sword out of his hand and have him pinned against the wall with my blade at his throat.

“Yield!” I say.

“Fuck you!” he growls.

The courtyard is silent except for our heavy breathing.

“By Blood! What is going on down here?” Vespvr’s voice cuts through the silence. I snap my head around to see her sweeping toward us, her hair wild around her face. “Put that sword down!” she barks. Without thinking, I drop it. The metal clatters across the smooth stone at our feet. I step back, putting distance between me and Tariq.

“You fight well, dragon,” I concede.

He hesitates before responding, “So do you, Orc.”

“What the hell are you two doing?” Vespvr is beside us, tapping her toe. Her arms are folded across a lush pair of breasts that have my cock hardening in a second. Adrenaline and testosterone surge. Tariq’s nostrils flare, and I sense that he’s picking it up. Though, from the way his eyes are roving over her chest, I think his attention is elsewhere.

“The Dragon King wanted a demonstration of my combat skills,” I say, stepping further away.

“And so you did this by trying to kill each other?” Her eyes are wide.

“How else would he do it?” Tariq says, dusting himself off. He moves up beside me and slaps me on the shoulder. “Good job.”

“It was nothing.” I use the back of my hand to wipe my cheek. It comes back smeared with blood.

“Seriously?” Vespvr stomps her foot. “I don’t believe you two!”

“It was all in good fun.” Tariq shrugs. His chest is still heaving. I work to slow mine before he does.

“Fun?” she huffs. “You’re like a pair of schoolboys! I take my eyes off of you for *one* minute...!”

“You were watching us?” I grin at her.

“What do you think? Every time you’re out of my sight, you get



yourself in trouble,” she grumbles. “I was up at the window, minding my own business, when I heard the commotion.”

“But you were watching us,” Tariq echoes me. “Both of us.” He smirks at me.

“Oh, my fucking God!” She stomps her foot again. “I should just leave you to it. In fact, why not get a couple of heavy rocks and smack each other in the head with them?”

I look at Tariq.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he deadpans.

“At least no one would get hurt,” Vespyr says, her voice heavy with sarcasm. She shakes her head and turns away, but not before I catch a glimpse of a smile.

Before any of us can respond, the sound of metal clanging against stone cuts through the air. We all look up to see a warrior rushing into the courtyard. He stops in front of Nirem, drops to one knee, nods in Tariq’s direction, and then bows his head low.

“King Tariq... My Lady!” he almost wheezes the words.

She looks down at him. “What is it, Makam?”

He looks up at her, dark skin gleaming beneath a sheen of perspiration. “We found one alive, my Lady. One of the Horde.”

Tariq turns from where he’s standing with Vespyr and me and strides closer. “You have one?”

“This is excellent news!” Aidurn says.

“We’ll be able to extract more information from her. About what they’ve been planning.” Timmir looks pleased.

“We’ve already begun, Lord Timmir.” Makam has moved to his feet,

tall and imposing. His lips curl into a satisfied smile. “When I left, she’d already begun to talk.”

I stare at him silently, keeping my expression carefully neutral.

Tariq claps his hands together, looking equally pleased. “This could reveal the identity of the prince they’ve been talking about.”

A sense of foreboding begins to build as I wonder what secrets she’s going to reveal. Because I’m a man with more than my share of secrets.

*Dragh!*

This isn’t going to be good.

## *Vespyr*

“I don’t see why you have to be here.” Tariq and I have just arrived at Nirem’s fortress – because it could only be called that – and he’s pissed off that I’ve insisted on coming.

“I told you, I’m not leaving the two of you alone again.” I keep walking, my eyes fixed on Vidarok’s broad, golden back before us. He really does have the most amazing shoulders. And that ass... “But aside from that, I have every right to know what’s going on. If you want me to get involved in this war, I need to understand things.”

“I could tell you.”

“Or I could see for myself.” I don’t understand why he’s so bent out of shape about this. We keep walking. A drawbridge is lowered and leads us over a moat of dark water, its surface mirroring the shadows of the fortress looming above. As we step inside, torches line the walls, casting flickering shadows and revealing glimpses of stone corridors and heavy iron doors. We’re greeted by the musty scent of old stone and dust combined with the oil of burning lamps.

“I have returned!” Nirem calls out. Unlike Tariq’s castle, hers is completely enclosed, which is why we flew in and landed in a large empty field just beyond the walls. I’m pretty sure that’s its purpose. A dragon landing strip. I’d flown in on Tariq’s huge golden back, which didn’t gel well

with Vidarok, who didn't like me getting that close to him. Then again, he could have joined us, but Tariq objected to having Vidarok sit on him and insisted that he fly with Turin instead. They're like a couple of oversized boys.

As Nirem strides in, attendants scurry to meet her, bringing robes and clothing for everyone to put on after shifting from their dragon forms.

*Thank God.*

It's all I can do to keep my eyes above Tariq's chin. The expanse of bare skin beneath it is like catnip for my eyeballs.

The drawbridge creaks and groans as it's raised behind us, the sound of metal against metal ringing out in the quiet surroundings.

"Where is it?" Nirem calls out.

Makam, who's at her side, indicates forward. "We took her to the storage rooms, my Lady."

"You're sure that thing's a 'she'?" Nirem asks.

"They're all female, Lady Nirem," I call to her.

She looks back over her shoulder at me. "You learned this while in their custody, Princess Vespyr?"

I nod. "They are a sisterhood of sorts. Led by an Empress."

Tariq scoffs. "Empress. That would mean she has an empire. I doubt that very much. I think they exist by living off others. Like parasites."

"Bugs. Meant to be trodden on," Aidurn mutters from nearby. We're walking down a long, dark corridor. It ends at a heavy metal door.

"You don't have to go in here." Tariq turns to me.

I glower at him. "I'm not some fragile female who needs to be

protected from reality, Tariq. I can deal with an interrogation.” Still, I’m not prepared for the sight that greets me as the door swings open into a large, bare room. It’s lit by multiple torches set on all the walls. Strung from the rafters, wings outstretched, arms trussed overhead, is a battered harpy. Her head hangs limply forward, her chin resting on her chest. A pair of guards at the door step forward smartly as they recognize Nirem and the others.

“My Lady! Esteemed elders!” one of them greets the group. “The prisoner is secured.” The statement is barely necessary. The creature couldn’t move a muscle if she tried.

“Has she said anything more?” Nirem asks. Makam had filled us in on the information they’ve extracted so far. The harpy hasn’t really been a fountain of details, but they’ve learned that the Horde had been hiding in the Steel Cliff mountain range for the better part of a year. I sense this has unsettled Tariq, who’s become uncharacteristically agitated. Vidarok, on the other hand, has grown quiet.

The door slams shut behind us, and the harpy lifts her head. Baleful yellow eyes fix on me, and I recognize her instantly.

“Welllll...” Xylene hisses, “if it isn’t the little witch.” Her laughter is ugly, rattling past spiked teeth. She looks around at the others, then stops on Tariq. “Hello, dragon. Did you bring me a snack?” Yellow eyes lock on me, and she clatters her teeth together, drool streaming.

Tariq steps forward, his face stony. “We need to know where the Horde has retreated to.” He says it in a low voice, full of power and menace. When she laughs in response, he steps closer. “Don’t let this turn ugly. Where is the Horde?”

Xylene cackles and turns to me. She bares her teeth, and my body tenses up in response. “Oh, they’re long gone,” she says, eyeing me with unmistakable hunger. “You know, I’ve eaten my share of dragon spawn. All those squalling babes of yours. I wonder if you’ll be as tender. I bet you’d be juicy.”

A low growl vibrates in Tariq’s throat.

“Is she juicy, dragon?” She makes a slurping sound. “We smelled your stench all over her the night we took her. Were you tasting the wares?”

I go still as I flick an eye over at Vidarok. He’s standing, impassive. Nothing changes in his bearing as she continues to speak.

“Stop wasting time, beast. You’ve told us how long you hid there. How far your network stretched into the mountains. Tell us where they’ve gone.”

Xylene shrugs her shoulders, though they are bound tightly with rope. “No idea. Maybe you killed all of them.”

“Enough of this!” Nirem interrupts. “We’ll get nowhere at this rate.”

“Planning to convince her, my Lady?” Aidurn looks over at her from where he is standing at her side with burly arms folded over his chest. Nirem is moving forward, gesturing to her guards.

“Unbind her feet,” she tells them.

“Yes, untie me, fools. There’s no sense in keeping me here any longer,” Xylene sneers. “I only spoke to you before because it amused me. It had nothing to do with your so-called beating. We can withstand so much more.” She keeps cackling as her ankles are untied.

Nirem unfastens her voluminous cloak and bundles it up, then tosses it onto the floor beneath the harpy.

“What is she doing?” I murmur to Tariq, who doesn’t answer. The harpy seems equally curious, eyeing the mound of fabric under her. When Nirem breathes out a plume of flames, her eyes fly wide.

“Wait!” she squawks. “What are you doing?”

The flames take hold of the dense cloth, and it starts to smolder, then quickly catches fire. The harpy is no longer laughing.

“Where did the Horde go, beast?” Nirem is asking the questions now. Xylene shakes her head, her eyes still fixed on the growing flames. Nirem lets out another breath, and the fire burns higher. The harpy flexes her bony legs and bends her knees, raising her feet.

“Is this supposed to scare me, dragon-girl?” she scoffs.

“No.” Nirem eyes her. “It’s supposed to *burn* you.”

The harpy shakes her head, but I can see anxiety beginning to build. It’s getting hotter.

“Speak, creature,” Tariq takes over. “Lady Nirem lost many good warriors to your Horde. We all did. But Nirem is particularly pained. She has a strong bond with her fighters. An unbreakable bond. I don’t think I can control her.”

Smoke is billowing now, forming a cloud that gathers along the roof. Heat waves are causing updrafts of hot air that tug at the harpy’s ragged wings.

“I’m going to burn you...from the soles of your feet to the top of your ugly head, creature.” Nirem’s lip curls.

“I’m not afraid of you!” Xylene snarls.

I’m not convinced.

When a flame leaps up and licks at her legs, she shrieks and curls her knees up. She tries to tuck them toward her chest, but it’s only seconds before they drop again. Fire crawls up from her ankles toward her thighs, and she lets out a bloodcurdling scream. The stink of burning flesh makes my stomach churn.

“Make it stop!” she howls.

“Yes!” I turn to Tariq. “Stop. Make it stop.”

“Nirem...” he says to the woman watching the scene with golden

light flicking over her ebony features. “Nirem!”

“Please!” Embers are popping up from the burning cloth and crackling in the air. One touches one of Xylene’s wings, and it starts to singe. She writhes. “I’ll speak! I’ll tell you everything. Please!”

Nirem stands motionless as if transfixed by the leaping flames. It’s only when Vidarok strides forward and kicks the burning pile from under the harpy that she snaps to attention. He stomps the fire out with a heavy booted foot before turning back and taking up a position behind us.

“It’s done. Enough,” Tariq says to Nirem. Nodding her head curtly, she turns on her heel and stalks away from the sobbing harpy. I notice Aidurn slide an arm around her shoulder. She stands stiffly.

I peer up at Xylene, who is no longer as scornful. Her expression isn’t something that I want to take in, but it’s better than the blistered skin of her charred feet and ankles.

“Right. Spit it out.” Tariq is standing in front of her. “Where is the Horde?”

She only hesitates for a moment before babbling her response. “The Queen. They went to the Queen. She promised us safe harbor if we were ever in trouble.”

Tariq cocks his head. The torchlight catches the gold of his thick hair in a way that shouldn’t be so appealing considering our circumstances. “The Queen? Which Queen.”

“Of Earomond. The Horde is allied with the Queen of Earomond.”

Someone sucks in a breath. The others exchange glances while Tariq stands silently contemplating this new information. Eventually, he turns back to Xylene. “You mean the Orc Queen?” Disbelief colors his face. “You are working with the Orcs?”

The harpy nods her head vigorously. I try not to inhale the stench of



burning that still hangs in the air.

“Betrayal!” I hear someone whisper. Probably Timmir.

Tariq’s fists are clenched at his sides. “For how long?” His voice is almost a snarl.

“Years. Two...maybe three.” Xylene whimpers when Nirem moves slightly. “But we didn’t see her much until now. She...she has plans. She asked for our help.”

“Help doing what?” Tariq asks.

The harpy twists slightly in her bonds, her movement throwing giant shadows on the wall behind her. They look like something from the depths of hell. “She wanted to get him. The prince,” she says.

The prince. Again.

“What prince are you talking about? We know of no other who lives near our realm. You’re lying.” Nirem is leaning forward. Smoke curls from her nostrils.

“No!” Xylene cries out. “I speak the truth, I swear it! The Halfling Prince of Earomond, the one who was banished. He is the rightful king of the Orcs.” She’s breathless now, her words coming out in a stream. “She told us that he would be in Morganeau and that if we caught the vampire witch, he would come for her. Because...she’s his mate.” Xylene keeps babbling. But I’m barely listening anymore. I don’t know if Tariq is either. Both of us have turned around.

And both of us are staring at Vidarok.

*Vidarok*

All eyes are on me.

And who could blame them? This is a secret I've kept for so long that I can barely believe it myself.

“*You’re* the prince?” Vespvr looks incredulous.

“Prince?” Tariq scoffs. “If he’s in league with the Orc Queen, he’s a traitor!” He looks thunderous. I suppose he’s still coming to terms with the fact that his so-called ally is actually his enemy.

“I’m no traitor,” I assure them.

“But you *are* the Orc Prince?” Vespvr presses. There’s silence from the others. They’re watching this play out, but I have no doubt that a misstep would have Nirem and her men on me in a flash. Probably Aidurn, too. Timmir and Zydus might pull them off me. But then again, maybe not.

“I don’t see myself as any kind of prince.” I set my jaw. Too many bad memories are beginning to resurface.

“Stop fucking around, Orc. Are you, or are you not, the heir to the Earomond throne?” Tariq is growing impatient. I suppose I can’t blame him.

“Yes.” I rub my eyes. “In a manner of speaking.”

“And what manner would that be?” Tariq steps forward, about to get in my face.

Vespyr puts a hand on his chest. “Let him speak.”

“My father is the King of Earomond.” I look from one to the other.

“Was,” says Tariq. I frown at him. “He *was* the king. King Xuruul died months ago. Queen Bagrak has been ruling in his stead until her son has passed the trials to take the throne.”

I need a moment to process this. “Dead?” A thousand long-suppressed emotions threaten to spill over. But what I mainly feel is empty. “My father is dead.”

“Yes,” Tariq replies bluntly. “So that makes you next in line. Which makes you our enemy since the Queen has clearly chosen to side with the Horde.”

“Tariq! By Blood! You just told him that his dad died. A little sensitivity?” Vespyr scowls at him, then reaches a hand to my shoulder. “You didn’t know.”

I shake my head. “It has been years since I visited the realm of my birth.”

“Really? And you expect us to believe that?” Tariq’s eyes are narrowed.

“Okay, I traveled along the outskirts with Vespyr before you took her.” I glare at him. “Aside from that. No. I haven’t been there.”

“I say he’s lying.” It’s Nirem now. She’s stepped up behind Tariq, and she’s glowering at me.

“Believe it. Don’t believe it. It’s the truth.” I sigh. I’d hoped this would never come out.

*My father is dead. Gone...*

I'm suddenly saddened by the fact that there'll never be a chance for a reunion.

"So then you'll be the King of the Orcs?" Vespvr still looks astounded by all of this.

"I suppose so. Or I would be if I was interested in taking the throne." All I'm interested in right now is finding a quiet place to think. "I have no desire to rule the Orcs."

Tariq snorts. "And now we're supposed to believe that you're just going to walk away from it all. They obviously want you back there. Otherwise, they wouldn't be searching for you."

"Yes, they want me back. To kill me." I fix him with a level stare. "I'm not welcome there." The last time I was there, they made that perfectly clear.

"You're an Orc royal. In league with the Horde. The ones who've been harvesting our people like cattle." Nirem spits on the floor and then looks at Tariq. "I say we end him."

My fists clench, and the urge to defend myself starts surging. It would be pointless, though. There's no way I could fight my way out of this place. I need to talk this through.

"I may be a royal by blood, but not in name. I never took my father's name." I turn my focus to Nirem. "And it was never offered to me.

"Why not?" She glares at me; torchlight flickers across her features, reminding me of the fire she'd used to torture the harpy.

"Because I was his bastard son." I turn my attention back to Vespvr. "I wasn't wanted there."

Her eyes soften. "Oh... Vidarok..."

I shrug. “It was a long time ago. And a long story...”

“Go ahead,” Tariq folds his arms. “We’re all ears, Orc. Let’s see what line of bullshit you’re planning to string us.”

“Tariq. Cut it out!” Vespvr glares at him. “I want to hear it, Vidarok,” she says to me. We’re all standing in a huddle, the harpy hanging limply behind us. It’s not the most conducive environment to bare my soul, but it doesn’t look like I have an option.

I take a deep breath and begin. “My father met my mother during a visit to the Earth realm. She was a Romany...”

“A gypsy?” Zydus says.

“Yes,” I confirm. “She had the ‘sight,’ not a normal human female. My father was considered small for our race, and he could mingle among her kind without too much attention...”

“If he filed down the tusks and hid his pointy fucking ears,” Tariq mutters.

I look at him coolly, then continue, “He didn’t have any. Tusks, I mean. By Orc standards, he was exceedingly ugly. Much like I am.”

“I think you’re beautiful,” Vespvr whispers, and my heart swells.

Tariq’s expression darkens, making it clear that he’s not moved by her display. “Go on.”

“He and my mother began a relationship – in secret. Their love was forbidden. Taboo. When he showed her a way into our realm, it was too much. Orcs are not a welcoming race. We don’t like strangers. Certainly not as lovers. And for the king to do such a thing... It would have been a scandal. So, when I came along, there was outrage. The royal council was up in arms. Especially, when my father declared that he wanted her as his Queen.”

“He fought for her,” Vespvr sighs wistfully. “He fought for the

woman he loved.”

“Yes.” I give a small smile. “In that, we are the same too.” I heave out a breath. “But it was not to be. The council gave him an ultimatum: choose his kingdom or my mother.”

“He chose his kingdom.” Vespvr looks sad.

“No. She did. My mother left with me. She refused to come between him and his duties to his people. She found a way to get home to the Earth realm and hid there with me. It was only years later, when she developed a serious heart condition, that she reached out to him again.”

“You were raised on Earth?” Zydus is curious.

“For my childhood, yes.” I nod. “Things grew more complicated when I reached school-going age. My mother taught me my letters. My numbers. Became my best friend. We were close.”

“And then she got sick.” Vespvr’s hand tightens on my arm. “You must have been heartbroken.”

I swallow thickly, refusing to dwell on that time. “When she was told that she wouldn’t live out the year, she took me back to Earomond, hoping my father would find a way to take care of me. He refused to see her.”

“What?” Vespvr shakes her head. “After all she’d meant to him? And you were his son!”

“He’d remarried. His new queen wasn’t interested in taking my mother and me in.”

“That’s so horrible. What kind of a father—?”

“Life is hard. Not everything is rosy, Princess,” Aidurn interrupts her. “Looks like you came through all right, though, so there’s that.”

I shrug. “Yes.”

“But your mom...?” Vespyr presses.

“She never gave up hope. Found a village near the royal court and a family willing to give us board. She went to see him every day, and every day, she was turned away until...” I trail off.

“Until she died.” Tariq’s expression hasn’t changed through all of this.

I nod. “We shared a room. I woke one morning, and she...she didn’t.” My chest tightens at the memory of it. How terrified and alone I’d felt. The hours spent hunched over her slowly cooling body until they pulled me from her.

Vespyr’s eyes well. “She died of a broken heart.” She dashes away a tear. “Like my own mother.”

I don’t say anything. The moment is already too heavy with emotion.

“So you’re saying that through all of this, your father never acknowledged you?” Tariq breaks the silence.

“No.” I turn to him. “After my mother died. I was sent to train with the troops, and I remained there until—”

“But you were a boy!” Vespyr looks shocked.

“It’s not unusual among my kind.” I give her another small smile. Her obvious distress almost makes it easier to mask my own. “I trained and fought until I came of age. And that’s when things went downhill.”

“Because you were a threat to the throne,” Zydus says. “According to Orc custom, you had the right to challenge your father.”

“Yes. But I never wanted to do that.” I’m still frustrated by how unfair it had all felt. “When I returned from a patrol one evening, I was faced with an execution squad.”

Vespyr gasps. Even Nirem looks unsettled. “Your own father planned

to execute you?”

I don't deny it because that's basically what happened. “I fought them off, escaped, and left Earomond that day. It was fairly obvious that it was only a matter of time before I'd meet that fate if I stuck around. I traveled through the realms, offering my services as a fighter, until I reached Meadowside...in the Fae realm. Lady Aurora took me into her Orc guard. It wasn't too long before I'd risen up the ranks. And that's where I found my home.”

“And I dragged you away from all of that.” Vespvr looks crestfallen.

“I chose that mission to find you, Vespvr. Perhaps it was written that we would come together.” I aim a gentle smile at her. This woman is probably the closest I've ever come to a true connection since my mother died.

“I think you're right.” She steps closer, sliding a hand around my waist. I sense Tariq shifting.

“I don't like it,” he says, his voice terse. “I don't like any of it.”

“You mean his story?” She glares at him.

“Well, that's all it probably is, right? A story?” He looks around at the others. Nobody says anything.

“It's the truth, dragon.” I'm not sure what else he wants to hear.

“Again, you expect us to take your word for something when you've been lying to us all along. *All* of us.” He looks pointedly at Vespvr. “I think you should go back to where you belong.”

“And where would that be?” I challenge. “I don't belong in Earomond. I no longer have a place in Meadowside or Ryacyn.” I look down at my mate. “This is where I belong.”

She smiles up at me. “Yes, you do—”



“No! I won’t have it!” Tariq’s mouth is a hard line.

“The king may have a point,” Timmir breaks in. “He can’t be trusted. I say we send him back to the Orc Queen.”

“She’ll kill me,” I say simply.

“Actually, she didn’t want you harmed.” The hoarse voice of the harpy has us all spinning to face her. She’s lifted her head and appears to be following the conversation. “Those were our orders. To bring you in alive.”

“That settles it.” Tariq folds his arms and rocks back on his heels. “You go back. And you thank your lucky stars that you don’t go back in pieces.”

“No!” Vespyr’s voice cuts like a blade. “You can’t do that.”

“How can you be sure he’s not here to spy, Princess?” Tariq barks. “He’s already offered to train our troops. No doubt he’s been hoping to infiltrate our ranks. Estimate our numbers. Find out our plans of attack.”

“If you send him away, I’m going with him.”

Tariq looks thunderous. “I won’t allow that!”

“Oh, really? Why not?” Vespyr shoots back.

“Because he wants you for himself.” My response has Tariq whipping his head around to me. “You’ll send me to my death so you can have my mate.”

“Oh, my,” says Zydus. Nirem and Aidurn share a meaningful look.

“That’s bullshit!” Tariq shakes his head. “That would be dishonorable at best.”

“Murder at worst,” says Nirem. I sense that she’s beginning to feel some sympathy for my plight. Not that I want sympathy.

“I would never do such a thing!” The Dragon King glares at me.

“Tariq...” Vespvr is staring at him. “Tariq...no...”

“It’s not fucking like that, Vespvr!” he says.

“Then prove it!” she says. “Let him stay.” It’s a bold challenge. They lock stares, and I can sense the turmoil in him as his mind races. Because there’s truth in what I just said. With me out of the picture, he could make his move.

“Fire take it!” He flings his hands into the air, still glaring at me. “Let’s put it to a vote.” Looking around at the others, he says, “Who is in favor of the Orc spy staying?”

“He’s not a damn spy,” Vespvr bites out.

“I’m in favor.” Zydus raises his hand. Nirem does, too. After some hesitation, Aidurn’s hand also lifts. Finally, Timmir nods.

“I believe that the Lady Bridrod would agree,” says Zydus. I’m pretty sure he’s right.

“Fine,” Tariq huffs. “But one false move, and I’ll kill you myself. Do you understand?”

“Tariq, dammit!” Vespvr snaps.

“I understand,” I tell him. We eyeball each other for several moments until, eventually, he breaks eye contact. It’s done. I don’t know how long this impasse will stay in place, but for now, I’m safe here. And I don’t plan to give him any reason to doubt me.

But one thing’s for certain: the Dragon King wants my woman.

And I won’t give her up without a fight...to the death if it comes to that.

Tariq

There's a tense silence as we return to Morganeau Castle, all lost in our thoughts.

Mine are a mess.

Was the Orc right? Was I trying to get him out of the way so that I can claim Vespyr for myself?

The thought appalls me.

But still, I've spent the past couple of days following her with my eyes. Watching them together. Hungry for her.

It's a ridiculous infatuation. Means nothing. I'll get over it.

*You marked her.*

That means something.

I watch her now, moving with lithe grace beside Vidarok. She touches him occasionally, and I remember the sound of her moans when I overheard them together.

Overheard? I was eavesdropping while they fucked. Not my proudest moment.

Still, I'm glad that we were brought clothing when we landed and shifted back from our flight from Nirem's territory. I'm sporting a semi. What the actual hell?

"My Lord!" Grier is at my side, and I turn my attention to him. "I'm so glad you're back. We have a situation."

"Situation?" I try not to sigh. The sun is warm today, its rays touching my face and heating the stone beneath my feet. I wish I could get a moment just to enjoy it for a while.

It's not to be. It never is.

"There are Orcs at the gate." Grier's words have me whipping my head around to him.

"What?" I snap. I bristle immediately. "They're attacking?" Fuck. So soon. But why am I surprised? "Why aren't the guards assembled?"

*Fucking Vidarok! If he—*

"They're not here to fight, my Lord," Grier says quickly. The rest of our party have gathered to listen. Vidarok presses closer.

I frown at Grier. "Not here to fight? What are they doing here then?"

"They're asking for sanctuary."

"Sanctuary?" says Vidarok.

Grier looks at him. "They say they've fled Earomond. We haven't had a chance to get the details. Their leader is waiting in the receiving chambers."

Without asking more questions, I find myself striding in that direction. The others are close behind.

"King Tariq, don't act in haste," says Zydus as he catches up with me, his brisk footsteps ringing on the flagstones.

“We’re in the middle of a war. We’ve just learned these people are our enemy. What do you propose, Lord Zydus?” I ask him. We’ve stopped at the tall double doors to the chambers as I wait for his reply.

“Things are changing quickly, my Lord. Every day, we learn of some new developments. Let’s not approach every situation expecting hostility.” Clear, dark eyes fix on my face.

I purse my lips. “I’ll hear them out, Lord Zydus. But I think we need to question everything that we encounter now. Nothing is as it appears.”

“Just keep an open mind,” he says before pushing the doors open.

I walk forward and then take in the scene before me. Three Orcs are huddled at the far end of the room. One is staring pensively out the windows that offer a view beyond the castle walls to the town below us. The sunlight I’d hoped to enjoy earlier streams through the heavy panes, framing his massive form and turning his olive skin a warm green.

“King Tariq,” he says, facing me as he hears my footsteps. He dips his head low, then straightens. The Orc stands at least a foot taller than any of us, looming over the others in the room. His muscular arms are easily twice the size of a normal man, and his thighs could double as tree trunks. Rough-hewn features are dominated by piercing yellow eyes over a slit of a mouth from where two heavy tusks protrude. Long, pointed ears stick out from his grizzled tufts of hair, and a heavy sword hangs from his belt. My eyes are drawn to it now.

I brace myself but nod in greeting. “You seek an audience?”

“Yes, Sire. I am Barok, chief of the North Tribe of Earomond.” He jerks his head to the two others, who look much like him. “These are my generals, Kylol and Froag.”

I nod at each of them in turn and then turn my attention back to the Barok. “What is your business here?”

“We seek sanctuary, King Tariq.” His voice is a low rumble that’s deep enough to come from the very earth.

“Sanctuary?” Vidarok appears at my side. Barok flicks a curious glance at him, then stiffens.

*Does he recognize him?*

If he does, he gives no other indication.

“The situation in Earomond has become...intolerable,” Barok says.

“What do you mean?” Vidarok asks, cutting me off.

*Who the fuck does he think he is?*

I glare at him, then look back at the Orc. “What do you mean?” I repeat his question because it is a valid one.

Barok looks confused for a moment – probably at this strange interaction between me and Vespyr’s so-called mate. He continues, “Our Queen has become...” he huffs a breath, “a tyrant.” The Orcs behind him rumble in agreement. “Our lives were good under the reign of King Xuruul. After he passed, Bagrak took over and things went downhill. It started with the taxes, which all but bankrupted us – we were going hungry. Then, she imposed a string of new laws that meant we could be arrested for almost anything she deemed illegal. The last straw was when she began raiding the towns, rounding up our younglings for her armies.”

“And your people allowed this?” Vidarok frowns.

“Our people had no option,” Barok replies. Vidarok may be half-human, but his Orc side is unmistakable. “Those who resisted were imprisoned. I brought my tribe here because we rose up against her but were defeated. She uses magic, and we can’t fight that with force. She vowed to wipe out all survivors from our town. I didn’t know where else to go.”

*Shit. So now they’re my problem.*

“And what is it that you want from us?” I ask.

“A place to stay.” He looks at me. “Permission to set up quarters in Morganeau.”

I consider this. We’ve just managed to get rid of the Horde, who’d gained a foothold in our lands. Am I about to willingly let the Orcs move in?

“Why should I do that?”

Barok, who has been observing Vidarok, turns his focus back to me. “We will offer our allegiance in exchange. My fighters are some of the best in Earomond. We will be valuable in your ranks. If you provide a safe place for our young and for our mates, we will fight at your side against the Horde and Bagrak.”

So it appears that this war against the dragons hasn’t been a secret in Earomond. I was a fool for having approached the queen for her support. She must have been laughing behind my back all along.

“I think you should do it, Tariq.”

I slant an eye at Vidarok. “You would tell me what to do? You’re skating on thin ice, Vidarok. It’s enough that you’ve hidden your identity from us. You may be a prince, but I won’t have you telling me how to rule my realm.”

“Prince Vidarok?” Barok’s gruff gasp has us both swiveling to him. “You are Prince Vidarok?” His mouth hangs open. Suddenly, he’s dropping to one knee. “Sire! I had no idea!” He keeps his head bowed low, one beefy hand resting on his knee.

*Fire help me, this is ridiculous!*

“Dragh! Get up,” Vidarok says before I can. “Why would you kneel before me?”

Reluctantly, Barok rises but keeps his eyes lowered. “We have been waiting for you, Sire,” he says. “Ever since we lost our king, we’ve been

waiting for the rightful heir to return.”

“What are you talking about?” Vidarok snaps. “I was never recognized as Xuruul’s heir. I was his bastard.”

“Bastard or no, you carry his blood. You are the King.” Barok gives a snort. “More than that sniveling whelp that Bagrak is trying to put on the throne.”

“Bagrak’s son.” Vidarok takes in a breath. “I have a brother?”

“Not a brother, Sire.” Barok shakes his head. “The queen had a son before she married our king. He has no claim to the throne. You are the true ruler.”

“I’m not interested,” Vidarok mutters. “Let the whelp have it.”

“So he can rip our realm to pieces and suck it dry like his mother is planning?” Barok looks incredulous. “You think that’s a solution? No! We need *you*, my Lord!”

Vidarok’s expression turns hard. “I’m no king, Barok. I have no skills or talents to lead a nation. I don’t even want to be king.”

Barok’s gaze softens as he looks at my companion. “It is in your blood, my Lord. You were born for this role, and fate has chosen you to take it up.”

I consider this because it seems to be true. So much has happened that has led the male to this point. He could have been leading the Fae guards without any knowledge of what was happening in Earomond if he hadn’t pursued Vespyr and ended up here.

“Vidarok,” Vespyr’s voice is clear and decisive. “You have to do it.”

Vidarok runs his hand through his hair and sighs heavily. He looks around at the faces of my people as if searching for an answer or an escape route from this situation. But there is none to be found. The path before us is clear and unavoidable.



“I...” he starts, then pinches his lips together as he locks eyes with Vespyr.

“Your father knew the right path to take,” she says. “So do you.”

“My father chose a path that ended up with my mother dying,” he says sharply. “I won’t be the man who turns his back on his woman. My place is at your side.”

“So you plan to turn your back on your people when they need you?” Her expression grows scornful. “That is not the behavior of a man I would call my mate.

He’s silent in response, her words cutting deep.

“You may not want to take your throne, but I don’t think you have any option, do you?” I say to Vidarok.

His shoulders sag and then straighten. His jaw sets in determination. “No,” he says. “I don’t.”

I think he just made his choice.

*Vespyr*

I'm lying on my bed in the rooms adjoining Tariq's chambers; the thick, white comforter is soft beneath me, but I barely notice it. This is so surreal. All those days I'd spent alone with Vidarok seem like a lifetime away. But it had felt like something that made sense at the time – even though it was based on the fact that he was pretty much hunting me down. I knew who he was. Who I was.

Now, nothing is clear anymore.

*He's still your mate.*

I feel it like a constant ache in my chest. I huff out a breath and stare up at the ceiling. I can find a way through this. I *will* find a way through this. I always do. I consciously relax my limbs and try to make myself release the tension. Not easy when I'm not sure where any of this will leave me. With Vidarok at his side, as his queen? We haven't had a chance to discuss our future. Not before this new development. And certainly not now.

Now? Who the hell knows what's going to happen now?

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

The door swings open, and Tariq walks in without warning.

I sit bolt upright. “You never learned how to knock?”

“Were you doing something you didn’t want me to see?” He stops halfway into the room, running his eyes over me. I force myself not to squirm. Maybe I wasn’t doing anything I wanted to hide, but the way he’s looking at me makes me feel like I was.

“Of course not. But there’s such a thing as privacy.” I roll my eyes, swinging my feet from the bed, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. “What do you want?”

“I came to check on you. You seemed unsettled earlier.” His thick, gold hair is ruffled as if he’s been running his hands through it.

“Unsettled? That’s what you’d call it?” I scoff. “My world just blew up. Again!”

“Yes. I can understand that.” He sits down on the end of my bed.

I make a point of putting distance between us. “Where’s Vidarok?” He’d left abruptly after we’d met with the Orc refugees. I’d been too stupefied to go after him. So much has happened. And there’s more to come.

“He’s meeting with Barok’s followers. I imagine he wants to learn more about the people he plans to lead.”

I shake my head. This is all happening so quickly. But then again, this whole chapter of my life has moved along at breakneck speed. Getting to my feet, I move away from where Tariq is sitting. It’s hard to think with him so close.

Before I get far, he’s snapped out a hand and grasped my arm. I glare down at it. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No. It’s not obvious at all. You’re in my room. Uninvited.”

His jaw works as he considers this for a moment. “Aren’t we going to

talk about what happened between us, Vespvr? The other night, before..." He stops. He doesn't need to continue for me to know what he's talking about.

I count to ten as I breathe out slowly. "So, you're still on about that?" I grit my teeth. "There's nothing to say."

"I think there is. There just hasn't been time to discuss it properly. I've barely had a moment to speak to you alone."

So that's why he's here.

"And for good reason, Tariq. It wouldn't be a good idea."

"Because you're afraid of what you would do if we were alone again?" He raises a brow, stroking his thumb along the soft skin of my inner arm. It makes me shiver.

"I'm not afraid at all!" I pull my arm away. "I have a mate, Tariq. I told you that when you raised this before. We shouldn't have...done what we did." Even as I say it, I feel like a liar. Because it just felt so right.

*Get over it, Vespvr!*

"I bit you, Vespvr. Left my mark on your skin." When he says it, I get that uncanny tugging, tingling sensation again. As if I'm being slowly, irresistibly drawn to him. "My dragon wanted you. Still wants you..."

"Well, then I guess you should be having this conversation with your dragon. Tell him there's no chance of anything happening. Move along."

"It's not so simple. I don't want to convince him of that. Because... because I..." He takes a breath.

"You what?"

"I want you, too." It seems like the admission is torn from him.

I blink. Then, I shake my head. I don't know what to say. Instead, I turn and pace across the rug, my feet soundless in the deep pile. "You're only

saying that because now Vidarok is here and you've got some sort of macho competition thing going on with him." I wrap my arms around my waist, hugging myself.

He gets up and stands in front of me, stopping my agitated pacing. He grasps my arms, uncurling them from around me. "It's not that," he says firmly. "There's something between us. You feel it, too."

I swallow hard because of course I feel it. I feel it like a punch to the gut every time he's near me. Every time our skin brushes. Every time I catch him watching me. But I'm not going to admit that. Instead, I stare up at him, blinking stupidly. I keep doing that as his face begins to lower and then as his lips brush against mine.

*By Blood, this isn't a good idea...*

And yet, I don't resist. How could I? His lips are soft and warm on mine, moving gently as he kisses me. I can't help but respond, kissing him back just as softly.

It's a tender kiss, one that's almost like an apology. An apology for what, I can't say. For kissing me at all? For taking so long to kiss me again? For throwing my mind into turmoil over what we're doing?

His palms move from my arms to cup my face, his thumbs caressing my cheeks.

I don't know what to do with my hands, so I let them hang awkwardly at my sides. But then Tariq takes one of them and brings it up to his chest, placing it over his heart. It's beating fast under my palm.

He breaks the kiss and looks into my eyes. "I've wanted to do that again since the moment we got you back from those creatures," he says huskily.

"I wish you hadn't." My voice is hoarse, my lips tingling from the kiss.

“Because you liked it?” The words whisper across my mouth as his head dips again. “Tell me you don’t like it,” he breathes.

*Oh. God. Why must he do this to me?*

The little moan that sighs up my throat is all the encouragement he needs to close the distance between our mouths again. My moan deepens, and before I know it, my arms are twining around his neck, and I’m pressing against him.

Tariq responds impatiently, his hands roaming over my back and pulling me closer. His lips move hungrily against mine as if he’s been waiting for this moment for a long time.

I lose myself in the kiss, forgetting everything else as our bodies press together. It’s like there’s a fire burning between us, and all I want is to get closer to it. When his hands move to the top of my shirt, I don’t stop them from flicking open the buttons there. I tip my head back and groan as he slides his mouth away from my lips, along my jawline, and starts peppering kisses down my throat.

“Tariq,” I groan his name. My breath is coming quickly. “We shouldn’t…”

“Tell me to stop.” He doesn’t lift his mouth from my neck, and I’m glad he doesn’t because the sensation is making me burn from the inside out. I press my thighs together, my nails digging into his shoulders as I cling to him. “Do you want me to stop?” he asks again. Now, his hand is moving up my leg and pushing the hem of my dress with it. Without realizing it, I’ve spread my legs to let his fingers trail up my inner thigh.

“Oh…God…” I exhale when his fingertips graze the fabric covering my pussy.

“I can feel how wet you are, Vespvr. So fucking hot…” He groans. “I’ll stop if you tell me to.”

I don’t want him to. And for some reason, a part of me refuses to feel

guilty over it because it seems like it's meant to be.

“No,” I say, “don't stop.” And then my body jolts as his fingers slide past my panties and meet my bare flesh. “Fuck!” I choke.

“Mmm... I'm going to taste you again. I can still remember the flavor of your sweet flesh,” he says against my throat. His free hand is cupping my breast, thumb swirling over my nipple. The sensation combines with the ache from between my thighs, and suddenly, I'm squirming against him.

“Tariq! Fuck!” My breath is coming in rapid gasps now. Rasps that build and grow more urgent as he torments me with his lips and his fingertips with his breath on my burning skin. I'm lost in this madness. Lost in the sensations to the point that I can't think about why I didn't want to do this in the first place.

Until there's a sound behind us. We tear apart, and both swing to face it.

The blood drains from my flushed face.

Vidarok is standing in the doorway.

*Vidarok*

Tariq and Vespyr jump away from each other as if they can hide what I saw them doing. It's too late now. I caught him with his hand quite literally in the cookie jar. It would be pointless to deny it; I've been watching them for the last couple of minutes.

I could have continued watching, but that seemed wrong somehow.

*You're a sick fuck, Vidarok.*

"You seem to be getting along well," I say.

"Vidarok! I...we...it's not..." Vespyr trails off because it's exactly what it looked like. If I hadn't stopped them, they'd probably be fucking. And perversely, that doesn't upset me as much as it should. Right now, I should be ripping the damn dragon's head from his shoulders. I can't. My dick is too hard.

*Yip. Sick fuck is what I am.*

"I'm sorry, Orc." Tariq has the good grace to look repentant. "When I'm around her..." He plays his hands. How could I blame him? I'm the same way.

"That's not what I came here to talk about," I tell him. Vespyr looks



perplexed. Clearly, she's expecting some kind of consequences for what just happened. There will be. That will come later...when I tell them what I have on my mind.

"I have met Barok's people," I say, addressing Tariq.

He quirks a dark golden eyebrow. I can see why she's drawn to him. The man has a certain appeal. "And what did you find?"

"What he told us is true. They're on the run. Bagrak has been hellbent on oppressing my people. She has to be stopped."

*My people.*

That has a nice ring to it. I may have been fighting this for years, but now that the reality is facing me, I can't turn away from my responsibilities.

"I'll admit, what he said didn't sound good." Tariq rubs his jaw. I wonder if he can still catch her scent on his fingers.

"Didn't sound good?" Vespyr is incredulous. "Those people have been through hell. It's exactly what I was afraid might happen to my people."

"It would never happen," I assure her. "Bartholomew Bellingham is a fair ruler. A good man."

Her full lips pull into a tight line and then she heaves a sigh. "I know that now. I was wrong. I allowed myself to be influenced."

I don't tell her she's right because I have no intention of rubbing her nose in it. It's true, though. And it's why I've reached the decision I've come to. It's what I'll remind her of when she tries to oppose me. And of course she'll oppose me. It's in her nature.

"I'm going to overturn her rule. Take back my throne." I should have done it before. I would have if I'd known what was going on. Known about my father. The knowledge that he's dead still leaves a pang, even though I never knew him.

“This won’t be easy, Orc. Bagrak won’t give up without a fight.” Tariq is looking at me.

“I’m aware of that.” Now that I’ve made the decision, my path is set in stone.

Vespyr exhales, her eyes tortured. “You’re really going to do this?”

“Of course I am. This is my battle. You said it yourself; I can’t turn away from my people when they need me.”

She nods, her eyes warming. “You’re right. It’s the right thing to do.”

“So now you wage war,” Tariq says.

“Yes. I’m prepared to lead the charge against Bagrak and her pretender to the throne,” I say, standing tall, my chin high. “The warriors of Barok’s clan will stand behind me. Can I count on your dragons?”

He nods his head. “I’ll take it to the Circle of Six for final confirmation, but this is our fight, too. The Horde has plagued us for years. Now that they’re siding with the Orc, we have to make a stand against both of them.”

I’m relieved. Though, I expected nothing less. Tariq is honorable. He’s proved that from the start.

“It’s not going to be easy, though,” he adds. “If we’re going up against both armies, we may not have enough firepower.”

I scowl, considering this. “I’m willing to take that chance. I plan to stand with Barok at the frontline. It’s where I belong. Bagrak’s troops need to see me take up arms against her.”

“You may be going on a suicide mission, Orc,” Tariq goes on. “I saw you do it once for Vespyr. I don’t think you should assume you’ll survive a second time.”

He’s right.

*Tell him what's on your mind...Tell him, dammit.*

I purse my lips, building up the determination to say what I need to say. “That’s a possibility. That’s why I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” I slant a look at Vespyr before turning back to Tariq. “If I don’t make it out, I want you to take care of her for me.”

Vespyr gasps. “What?”

Tariq seems equally confused. “Take care of who?” He clearly knows who I’m talking about...but probably doesn’t believe that I said it.

“My mate.” I keep my eyes on her. “Vespyr has no one. You are a good, strong male. You have honor. I want you to look after her.”

“Are you nuts?” she chokes out. “You don’t get to decide that for me! Besides, you’re not going to die anytime soon. I won’t give you permission.”

I offer a small smile. This hurts my heart, but it must be done. I can’t leave her alone again. “That may not be your choice, my love.”

“You...” Tariq blinks. “I don’t get it.”

“You want her,” I say. “What I just saw when I walked in here – it’s not the first time. You’ve already had her...”

Vespyr’s mouth drops open. “You knew?”

“I’m no fool.” I shrug.

“And yet you said nothing? Don’t you care?” Vespyr is bewildered.

“Of course I care. That’s why I’m doing this.” I look at Tariq. “You would make her happy.” He’s still staring at me. I don’t think he hates the idea.

“How do you know that he’d make me happy?” Vespyr snaps. Her eyes are flashing, and she’s so damn beautiful it takes my breath away.

“Are you saying I wouldn’t make you happy?” Tariq cocks his head at her.

“I...I...” She searches for for words. “This is the most ridiculous fucking conversation I’ve ever had, dammit! Vidarok, you can’t be serious!”

I move toward her and slide an arm around her waist, brushing my lips over her forehead. She smells like heaven. “I’ve seen how he looks at you, Vespvr. And I’ve seen how you look at him. And what I walked in on now pretty much seals the deal.”

She shakes her head, but it’s a feeble gesture. “I think you’re reading too much into this.”

“Don’t try to deny it. If I wasn’t here, you would want this male. It would be a good match.”

“That’s irrelevant, Vidarok.” Her body is rigid, resisting me as much as her mind is. “You can’t just decide my future for me.”

“As your mate, it’s my responsibility to ensure your safety, Vespvr. When I found you, you were running. You’d been under the influence of a maniac who’d convinced you that you needed to start a revolution against your own brother.”

“That was a mistake. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Because of the Curse.” I can’t stop worrying about it. “You need someone who can help you control it, Vespvr. Tariq has done that.”

“I don’t need help controlling anything, for fuck’s sake! I have a handle on my...on my gift.” She doesn’t sound very convincing. We have no idea what her condition entails. She treats it as if it’s some sort of miracle, yet I’m worried that any day could be her last.

“And if that changes? This ‘handle’ you think you have? We’ve seen what happens if you go too long without feeding. What will you do when it becomes more intense?”

“I will deal with that,” Tariq joins in. “I can help.”

“Of course you do.” I give a tight smile. I know exactly how he intends to help. But that is the nature of my mate. She’s irresistible.

“Now you’re in on this, too?” Vespvr’s eyes are wide as she stares at Tariq.

“He has a point, Vespvr. Where would you go? You can’t return to Ryacyn unless you’re prepared to accept Bartholomew’s terms. You’re in exile. Homeless. But this could be your home.”

She’s shaking her head, but she’s not arguing anymore. I think we’re getting through to her.

“I’m not homeless,” she says in a small voice, and my heart clenches.

“As long as we’re around, you will always have a place where you belong, Vespvr.” I squeeze her tighter against me. “Don’t hate me for wanting what’s best for you.”

She gazes at me for a very long time, expressions playing over her face. Finally, she heaves a breath. “Fine. But I’m only agreeing to it because I’m sure you’re going to be okay. None of this is going to happen. You will come back to me, and we’ll forget this conversation ever took place.”

I brush my lips over hers and nod, my eyes meeting Tariq’s. “You’re right. Everything is going to be okay.”

There’s nothing to worry about.

I hope.

Vespyr

“I can’t believe you did that!” When I catch a glimpse of myself in a nearby mirror, my hair is flying around my face, and my eyes are wild. Which is exactly how I feel. My heart was twisting as I listened to Tariq and Vidarok discussing me as if I wasn’t even there. But I’ve barely had a chance to resolve it because all hell has broken loose. This is the first time we’ve been alone since that conversation. After Vidarok decided to tackle the Orc royals head-on, it’s all he’s been focusing on, first sending word out to Bagrak that he intends to take his throne back and then dealing with the expected fall-out.

*Are you jealous he’s not spending time with you?*

Of course not! I grew up in a royal household. I understand the responsibilities that come with the title.

“You’re talking about what I said to Tariq about you.” Vidarok’s features remain impassive, carved out of stone. After yet another gathering at the Circle, we’re back in Tariq’s chambers, which are now colored by two different sets of memories. Me with Vidarok. And me with Tariq. And both make my skin tingle.

Picturing both men now, I’m struck by the differences between them. Vidarok – huge and powerful, his dark hair and emerald eyes giving him an irresistible intensity. And Tariq, with his lean golden lines and quick manner. Dark against light. Power against elegance. How would I choose?

*Choose?*

What am I thinking? Vidarok is my mate. That's all there is to it.

But when I think of how Tariq had locked those ice-blue eyes on me earlier, my breath catches.

I drag my fingers through my hair, trying to tame it. It's pointless. I get back to the matter at hand. "Yes. I'm talking about what you said to Tariq about me."

"I had no option, Vespvr." He sinks onto the leather sofa that dominates the room and pats the seat beside him. I still can't see that piece of furniture without remembering what happened on it. I sit on a small chair nearby instead, pulling it up to him so we can face each other. This definitely needs to be a face-to-face conversation.

"I don't like it," I say, feeling like a child asking an adult for permission for something. If I stick my bottom lip out, the picture would be complete. Instead, I hold my head high and meet his eye. They soften, and so do his stony features; there's so much tenderness written in those hard lines that my heart stutters.

"I don't either, my love. But I can't leave you alone. I'm trying to think of every possible scenario I'd have to deal with, and the first one that worried me was the thought of abandoning you."

"But you're not abandoning me, Vidaork." I want to be with Vidarok. I don't want him to go on some heroic mission without me. I don't want him to risk his life and leave me behind.

I want him to take me with him so that wherever he goes, I'm there, too.

"Not in the conventional way. And if I have my way, I never will." He takes my face in his hands and stares into my eyes, a myriad of emotions passing over his face before settling on determined fire. "If I win this war,

Vespyr, you're going to be my queen. You know that, don't you? You'll rule Earomond with me." He pauses for a moment as if waiting for this to sink in.

It hadn't occurred to me before.

*By Blood, you're an idiot.*

"Your queen?" I say stupidly.

He leans toward me and speaks softly against my lips. "Yes, Vespyr. Did you think I wouldn't take you with me?" His voice has an intensity that makes something stir inside of me that defies explanation or logic. He presses his forehead against mine and closes his eyes.

I breathe in and soak in his warmth for a moment. "I hadn't thought that far ahead," I admit. "Everything's been such a whirlwind, Vidarok. If you get to the heart of it, we've barely had time to get to know each other."

"I know all I need to." He reaches for my hands and pulls them against his chest between us. "I know that I'm yours."

"And I'm yours," I whisper.

It's true. My soul has settled since he's been back at my side. Although, that's hardly surprising, considering the chaos we've both lived through these past weeks. But now, here, so close I can breathe in his earthy scent, I'm finally starting to feel at peace.

Which is why I can't tolerate the thought of him being gone.

"Why do you have to lead the army?" I try not to sound petulant. "It's dangerous."

"It's where I belong, my love." He leans back, putting space between us, and strokes my cheek with his fingertip. "I've been gone from my realm for too long. I thought I'd been forgotten, but now it seems I'd exiled myself. I'm wanted in Earomond. Needed. Sure, not by Queen Bagrak or her son. But by the people. *My* people. I've spoken to Barok. There's been talk of Xuruul's lost son for years. I had no idea."



“And there you were, a lowly guard working for the Fae.” I smile.

“Never lowly,” he growls. “I loved my work. And I’ll use it now to guide me. I learned a lot in those years away.”

“Why couldn’t you learn to stay out of harm’s way?” I grumble.

“I did. That’s why I’m certain I’ll be fine. But I won’t be able to focus if I don’t make sure that my affairs are in order.”

“You’re calling me an affair?”

“You know what I mean, Vespyr. Think of this thing with Tariq as just a precaution. No big deal.” He’s still stroking my cheek.

“No big deal? You basically handed me over to another man, Vidarok!”

“Only if I die.”

I choke. “And that’s supposed to make me feel better?” I swat his hand away from my face. “I don’t want you to die! And I don’t want to...” I stop because I was about to say I don’t want to be handed over to the Dragon King. But that’s not true. I can’t stop thinking about Tariq’s touch on my skin or the way he made me feel. Of how much I want him, even while Vidarok is right here in front of me.

I just wish I had a choice in the matter.

*Of course you have a choice!*

“Vespyr, I won’t rest if I’m thinking that something might happen to you if I was gone. It would be bad enough if you and I were just...a regular man and woman. But we’re not. You’re different. Special. Your...gift... makes you vulnerable.”

“I’m not vulnerable. I’m stronger!” I scowl.

“In some ways you are. In others, you need more care.” He runs a hand around the back of his neck. “I’ve seen what it does, Vespvr. When things go wrong. I know you believe that you don’t need the cure, but I’ve seen...” He takes a deep breath. “I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“It won’t! I can manage it.” I say the words, but part of me keeps wondering if it’s true. It was easier to feel invincible when I was with Magnis and his madmen. Now that I’ve been away from that influence for a while, reality is starting to sink in.

*This thing might kill you!*

Vidarok must be aware of my thoughts because he interrupts them. “Tariq took care of you. He kept you healthy when he took you before—”

“But that’s just it, Vidarok. He *took* me!” I shake my head. “You should hate him.”

“I should.” His expression grows contemplative. “I really should. But I don’t.”

“Even after you saw him...kissing me?” I gloss over the topic because there was a lot more than kissing going on.

“Yes.” Vidarok nods.

“There...” I clear my throat. “There was more. Before you came for me that night.” I cup his cheek. “I need to tell you everything.”

“I know,” he says. “He had you.”

I stare at him, stupefied. The leather of the seat creaks a little as he leans back. I’m still staring. “Wait... You knew?”

“The night I got here, I scented you on him. It wasn’t hard to figure it out. And he made no secret of it.”

“You knew...” I’m pretty sure my eyes are huge. “And it didn’t bother you?”

“Of course it did, Vespyr. You’re my mate. You were with another man. Intimately.” He chews his bottom lip, deep in thought. It’s a full lip, a kissable lip. I’d kiss it now if I wasn’t trying to make sense of what’s going on here.

“So then...? It doesn’t matter?”

“Dragh! It matters, woman!” He runs a hand through his hair, his expression growing exasperated. “I don’t understand it, okay? All I know is that I can trust him to do the right thing.” He leans forward again, cupping my face in both his hands. I can’t help myself; I gaze back at him, lost in the intensity of his green gaze. “Say you’ll do it. Humor me, if nothing else. But just say you understand.”

I let out a shuddering breath, then give him a small nod. “I understand. If you don’t come back, I’ll stay here with the Dragon King.”

“Thank you.” Warm lips brush mine again, and I melt. Which is crazy to me because I just told him that I’d be with another man if something happened to him.

*This is madness!*

But when his lips press more firmly against mine, I groan and let him kiss me. All thoughts of Tariq and Vidarok’s strange trust for him disappear as I lose myself in the passion of our kiss.

His hands move down from my face to my neck, then down further to my waist. He pulls me closer to him, his body pressed tightly against mine. Our mouths move together, hungry and desperate for each other.

I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss even more. And then there’s a sharp knock at the door, and a voice shatters the silence.

“Prince Vidarok?” It’s one of Barok’s men. Froag. Or Kylol. Big and brutish, I can never remember who’s who. It doesn’t matter. The moment is broken. Yet again.

Vidarok stands, then stoops down toward me. “Don’t dwell on this, my love. It may never happen.” He brushes his lips over my forehead, and I shut my eyes.

I pray he’s right.

*Tariq*

I've grown used to feeling Vespyr's weight when I fly. And I like it. She's perched between my wings now, her warmth soaking into my scales. If I wasn't about to head into battle, my dragon would probably be purring.

A light tap on the top of my head has me slowing.

"Put me down here," she says. There's a rise up ahead that overlooks Castle Earomond. I'm not sure I like the idea of her being so exposed, but I know better than to tell her that. I've already overstepped too many boundaries.

I steady my wings and swoop down to the hill. It's covered in lush, vibrant green grass that sways in the wind. It gently slopes upward toward a rocky outcrop at the top, where Vespyr has indicated she wants to be. The rocks are jagged and gray, jutting out at odd angles. As we land on the top of the hill, we get a clear view of the Orc stronghold, walls towering, and banners flying.

The castle is massive and imposing, with dark gray, rough-hewn stone walls lending an intimidating aura. Large, sharpened spikes line the top of the walls, a clear sign of its defensive capabilities. Orcish banners fly high, featuring aggressive symbols and designs. Smoke and fire are visible within the castle walls. I have no doubt that we're about to face a formidable enemy. But Vespyr has chosen well; from this angle, the hill is a perfect vantage

point for observing and strategizing.

Vespyr jumps off my back as soon as we land. As I shift, she flexes her arms and looks out over the landscape, taking in the sight of the castle. I half suspect it's because she's trying not to look at me standing naked at her side.

“It would be beautiful...if it wasn't for that...” She stares into the distance, where thousands of troops have amassed. “I wish it didn't have to come to this.”

“Did you think it would be any different?”

Vidarok had tried to reach out to Bagrak to negotiate some sort of treaty. We all knew where that would lead. The minute she knew he'd come out of hiding, she put a bounty on his head and then declared war. As if we weren't already. So much for our alliance – that was clearly a farce from the start.

Talks in the Circle had confirmed that we'd support the Orc refugees in this fight. Not just the refugees. Vidarok.

*Prince Vidarok...soon to be King of the Orcs. If we win this war.*

It's unbelievable. I've barely known the man for a month, yet somehow our fates feel interwoven.

Not just because of our common enemy.

Because of her.

I glance at Vespyr now, still bemused by what Vidarok had asked of me.

*I want you to take care of her for me.*

“Stop thinking about it,” she says, adjusting the polished breastplate she's chosen to wear today. Gleaming gold and silver in the afternoon sun, she's magnificent. A shining warrior. “Thinking about what?” I raise an

eyebrow.

“What Vidarok said. If he doesn’t come back...that you should...we should... He’s coming back, Tariq. There’s no question of that.”

“Of course.” I nod. “Absolutely.”

Still....would it be so bad if he didn’t?

I rein myself in sharply. As much as I’d like to explore this thing I’m feeling for the princess, I’m not planning on doing it at his expense. I hate to admit it, but the Orc is beginning to grow on me.

Looking into the distance now, I try to see if I can spot his burly shape at the frontline.

“Can you see him?” Vespyr asks, lifting her hand to shield her eyes as she looks out in the direction I’m staring in. Stealing a glance at her, I drink in her profile. The firm set of her jawline is matched by the determination in her eyes.

“Are you telling me that your superpowers don’t extend to enhanced sight?” I ask.

“Don’t be an ass, Tariq. I have no idea what I’m capable of.” Vespyr’s been testing out some of the powers she regained after I lifted the spell. She can hop in and out of our thoughts with such ease we’ve had to put a stop to it. The telltale tingle of her mind entering ours warns us when she’s snooping around in our heads. I had threatened to put the spell back on her if she didn’t cut it out. That doesn’t mean we don’t wonder if she’s trying to influence us.

“I’ll look for him once I’m in the air again.” My dragon can pick out a grasshopper a mile away. Right now, though, I’m more interested in looking at Vespyr.

It might be the last time—

*Fire take it!*

The damn Orc has gotten me imagining worst-case scenarios now.

“Tariq...” Vespyr turns to me, and I’m gazing into wide, molten eyes that seem like sunshine. “Take care of him for me?”

I swallow hard. Why’d she have to go and do that?

“Sure.” I clear my throat because my voice is hoarse. I have no idea why. Maybe because I find it hard to deny her anything.

And that’s ridiculous. It’s not like I’ve never had sex before – or felt connected to a woman. But this one is...different. She’s strong. Brave. Determined. Smart. All the qualities of a worthy queen.

*But my queen?*

Scales shift beneath my skin, and I know my dragon is just below the surface. For the first time ever, this feels like a decision that isn’t mine to make alone. The beast inside me wants her, too.

“Thank you.” She touches my hand. “I appreciate that. I realize this situation is complicated.”

I face her. “Complicated?” I scoff. “Weather patterns are complicated. The principles of flight are complicated. What’s going on here,” I wave my finger between us, “this is fucking impossible.”

“Don’t be like that.” Her brow furrows. A wisp of hair breaks free from her tightly woven braid and gusts across her face. I fight the urge to flick it away. “When all this is over, we can figure things out.”

“What’s there to figure out, Vespyr?” I turn away from her and look back out over the bristling armor of the soldiers spread before us. “You have a mate. You want to be with him.”

“But your dragon put his mark on me, dammit! Do you think I don’t feel that every time I’m near you?”



Oh. So she *does* remember that. I'd roll my eyes, but that's never been my thing.

"Yes. Because I feel it, too. But you didn't want to discuss that, remember?"

"I was wrong," she huffs.

"Yes. Well, now's not the time." It's not like I didn't give her more than one opportunity.

"It just felt...wrong." Vespyr slants a look at me.

"Funny. It didn't feel wrong to me at all." I hold her eyes. "Any of the times I touched you."

Full lips purse, and I want to kiss them. Her throat works. "That's not what I meant." Her voice has grown muted.

"Then what did you mean?"

"I have no idea. I'm confused. Things aren't supposed to work like this. I've always been sure that one day I'd find a mate; at least, I'd hoped I would. But just one. That's the way it is. We find our "one." We sense it immediately when the bond is formed. And I felt that with Vidarok. I know I did. It's just that..."

When she trails off, I hold her eye. "Just that what?"

"I felt it with you, too, Tariq. Don't ask me how. It's all wrong, don't you see?" Vespyr pinches the bridge of her nose. "Maybe it's because you're a dragon, and he's an Orc. Maybe it would be different with a vampire."

I bark out a laugh. "So you're thinking of bringing a vampire into the mix now, Princess? Don't you think you've got enough on your plate?"

"No, you insufferable man! I mean, maybe I can feel two connections because I'm not bonding with my own kind."

“And now you regret that?”

There’s silence for a moment, aside from the distant clatter from below and the wind in the grass behind us.

“No,” she says at last. “I’d always thought that I’d find my mate among the vampire realm. But now, I’m sure I won’t. Maybe it’s because of my gift. Maybe I’m different. But this is my destiny. I have no doubt of it.”

“To be with the Orc?” My gut twists. I can fight it all I want, but I can’t deny that I want her.

“To be with someone who’s not a vampire.” Vespyr looks at me, and silence falls again. For the briefest moment, I let myself feel a twinge of hope. “But you’re right.” She straightens her shoulders and lifts her chin. “Now is not the time.”

“It’s not.” I clench my jaw until my teeth grind together. The bustle beyond us is beginning to pick up. A bugle sounds. One of Barok’s, I imagine. I step away from her. “I’ll take care of your Orc, Princess.” And I mean it. I’ll guard him with my life if I have to. Because I hate the thought of her heart being broken.

Without listening to her reply, I shift.

And then I fly.

*Vidarok*

The battleField is bedlam. Blood, sweat, and screams fill the air as weapons clash and dragons swoop down from the sky, wreaking havoc on Bagrak's army.

The din is almost overwhelming. The air is thick with the smell of leather and smoke, and the clang of weapons echoes off the stone walls of the castle.

Castle? It's more like a fortress.

Barok's Orcs thunder around me, heavy footfalls rumbling through the earth below me. I stand at the front edge of the battlefield, my bloodied sword at the ready, my heart pounding in my chest.

I've trained for this moment, prepared for it my entire life. But nothing ever truly prepares you for the chaos and violence of war.

A loud roar erupts from behind me. I turn to see Barok, his massive frame towering over me, his eyes ablaze with the fury of battle.

"Come on!" he shouts, his voice thundering. He beats his chest with one huge fist; the sound of it pounding against his heavy breastplate is as loud as a drum. "Come!" he roars again, facing Bagrak's Orc masses. "I'm here. Minions of Bagrak, I am your reckoning!" He's worked himself up into

a crazed bloodlust, his fellow Orcs equally maddened for the fight.

I prefer to keep my wits about me. I'm determined to breach the walls, but I have plans beyond the towering stone that go further than simply smashing whoever's in my path.

I'm going to find Bagrak. Along with Gork, the stepbrother I never knew. I'll give them one chance to surrender the throne, and if they don't—

“Fight!” someone howls behind me; I think it's Froag. “Fight, you cowards!”

It's an unnecessary challenge, considering Bagrak's troops had met us with full fury just minutes after we'd charged onto the plains surrounding the castle.

It isn't the most sophisticated battle plan. We intend to overwhelm them with sheer force...and a fair amount of righteous fury. Of course, aside from a thousand of Barok's best fighters, we also have an entire fleet of dragons on our side. I'm aware of their presence now as one of Bagrak's Orcs lifts his eyes, his mouth dropping open as he stares up into a gaping maw. He screams as he's snatched up off the ground by a set of gleaming teeth. There's a gut-churning crunch, and then he's silent. A second later, a bloody helmet falls to the ground near me. There's still a head in it.

I don't dwell on the carnage. The ear-piercing screeches of the dragons are designed to strike fear into the enemy, so I ignore them – they're on my side.

I pause as something moves beside me, and I realize that I'm fighting arm-to-arm against Barok now. The male is huge, even by Orc standards. He grins down at me, at least two feet taller; his expression is manic. His teeth have been filed into sharp points, and they glitter from the green sheen of his sweating face.

“You fight well, Prince.” He nods his approval a moment before a swinging ax cuts through the air between us. I leap out of range, spinning to face our attacker.

Most Orcs are brutish, but this one takes things to extremes. He stands taller and broader than many of the others, though not as big as Barok. His skin is a sickening shade of green and glistening with sweat. Yellow teeth are framed by tusks that are sharpened to points, and his eyes gleam with a manic intensity from a face wreathed in battle scars. Right now, they're fixed on me.

I'm not intimidated. I've faced worse opponents.

He flails his ax again, and once more, I step out of range. The Orc lunges at me, grunting as he swings his ax with all his might. I step back once more and watch as the blade swoops harmlessly through the air where I had just been standing.

"You dance about like a coward," he snarls, swinging again. "Come face me like a true warrior!"

I smile, taunting him. Let him think I'm afraid. It will only make it that much sweeter when I defeat him.

"I don't fight for glory," I say calmly, dodging another swing of the ax. "I fight for what's right." I have faith in my own words. With every passing day, I've grown more certain of my place here. Earomond has lacked a worthy ruler for too long. I intend to fill those shoes.

The Orc lets out a roar of rage and charges at me once more. This time, I don't avoid his attack – instead, I let him come closer before grabbing his wrist and twisting it brutally as he hurtles forward. With a sickening crack, his arm breaks with the force of his momentum. He gives a low grunt as he barrels ahead, but nothing more.

*Dragh! He's tough.*

But I didn't come here expecting to face milkmaids.

When he comes at me yet again, his arm is hanging limply at his side, but it doesn't stop him from swinging his ax in a broad circle. I answer with a sweep of my own battle-ax. I've used it for so many years it's become an

extension of my arm, and it moves fluidly as I flex my wrist.

“Stop toying with him!” Barok calls out from behind me. He gives a snort of laughter that’s cut off by the sound of steel clashing against steel, and he probably has his hands full again. I don’t pay attention, keeping my focus on the lumbering brute in front of me.

The Orc’s attacks are becoming more frenzied as his anger grows, but I remain calm and calculated. With each strike, I find an opening to counter, while his strikes consistently miss the mark. He’s lost all control in his rage, and it’s making him predictable. I easily dodge his swings and strikes, taking my time to study his movements.

“You can’t defeat me!” he roars, charging at me once again.

But I’m ready for him this time. With a quick sidestep, I trip him up, and he crashes to the ground with a loud thud. His ax skitters out of reach, and I quickly move to pin him down.

“Pretender!” the Orc snarls as he struggles under me. “Our queen will mark the end of you!”

“Let her try!” I say through gritted teeth. I’ve wedged the haft of my ax beneath his chin and I press my entire weight onto the heavy wooden shaft. He bucks and writhes furiously, but I use my elbow on his broken arm to keep him down. Ugly orange eyes begin to bug out as he struggles for breath, the thick cords of his muscled neck beginning to sag against the weight of my ax handle. I feel the moment he gives in, his chest caving as the need for air becomes a frantic dance with death. There are no more taunts about his queen now. As he goes still and then completely limp, I rise and step over his motionless body. I don’t look down at him. I didn’t come here to make friends. We both knew the stakes when we came in here.

Retrieving his fallen ax, I grasp it in my left hand, my own ax still clutched in the other. There are Orcs battling and fighting all around me, and it takes me a second to get my bearings.

“Lord Vidarok!” I hear a sharp yell and spin my head to see Barok

looking wide-eyed beyond me. I duck just in time to avoid a heavy spiked mace.

The Orc bearing it has an expression of grim determination etched into his brutish features. I duck beneath his outstretched arm and come up behind him, about to bring my ax crashing into his spine. But he stopped, turned...now, he's staring at me.

“You are Vidarok.”

I nod. “Don't let that concern you. I'll kill you just as fast as my comrades will.” But for some reason, I haven't struck the death blow yet. He's eyeing me with a curious expression on his face. The mace drops to the ground, its sharp spikes chewing into the churned, bloody earth.

“You are the King.” His voice is gruff. His eyes meet mine a moment before he bows his head low. “The true King.”

*Fire and fury, what is this?*

I'm too stupefied to respond. A fact that is foolish because it could get me killed.

He raises his head. “Don't forsake us,” he murmurs, and then, without turning, he backs away into the throng behind him.

*What the fuck just happened?*

I don't get a chance to think about it further because a piercing scream fills the air above me. I glance up to see a streak of gold scales that marks Tariq's dragon flying above me. His mighty head is thrown back as he unleashes a stream of fire into a dense throng of harpies. They burst into flames, charred corpses dropping into the battling Orcs below. He's holding his own, which doesn't surprise me. He's a fearsome warrior. I knew that when I fought him that day. Now, as a dragon, he's a force to be reckoned with. He'd be a worthy male for a princess like Vespyr. That's if it ever happens. Which it won't.

But as I watch, I sense something shifting. The air crackles, prickling at my senses. I snort as it burns at my nostrils.

*Magic.*

It's Bagrak. I lift my eyes to the castle walls and catch sight of a hulking shape on one of the tallest ramparts. The Orc Queen is standing above us, arms lifted in the air. Bolts of light have formed between her upraised hands. As I watch in amazement, she gathers the shimmering energy into a ball. Without warning, she hurls it in Tariq's direction. It hits him with a force that knocks him several feet backward.

Twisting his giant head, he screeches at her with enough volume that the hairs rise on my arms. It's a hideous sound, but it doesn't deter her. Another ball of energy hurtles toward him, and I see him jolt as it shears through one of his wings.

*Dragh!*

His hovering flight begins to shudder, and he drops sharply before pulling himself aloft again. More of the Horde are surrounding him, and he bats them away as if they're mere insects, but they're still coming. And Bagrak is pulling together more power from the air between her hands.

When it hits him, he starts to go down. Down, down, down, beyond the line of the castle walls.

*No!*

Without realizing it, I find myself running, barreling through the tangle of bodies fighting around me, oblivious to their shouts and the grazes of weapons as I shove them aside.

"My Lord!" I hear Barok roar.

"Keep them back!" I yell, hoping he'll buy me some time. I keep an eye on the sky ahead. "Fuck!" I spit out as Tariq keeps sinking. His torn wing isn't doing much to keep him up, and Bagrak has just hit him with another



burst of light. He drops quickly and then disappears from sight. Right into the Orc stronghold.

He'll be helpless in there. Especially injured as he was.

I hit the wall and start climbing, seeking out footholds and crevices between the rocks to sink my fingertips into for grip as I haul myself up the side of the fortress. The rough stone bricks work in my favor as I keep climbing. Many are pitted and gouged – probably from previous battles. The warlike Orc are accustomed to fighting; this castle has seen more than one war.

Something heavy hits the stone beside me, but I don't look to see what it is. Bagrak's soldiers are probably trying to smash me down with whatever they can use as missiles. A surge of heat touches my skin and I risk a quick look back, just in time to see a dragon blast a group of harpies away from me. For a moment, it appears as if the beast is going to help me get to the top of the walls, but its flight is hampered by a sudden surge of the Horde that comes out of nowhere.

How many of the creatures are there?

We knew there were many, but this is impossible. I can only pray that Barok's men and the dragons can keep me covered for long enough to reach the top.

*And then?*

I'll figure that out when I get there.

It's arduous, and my arms and shoulders are screaming by the time I pull myself over the top lip of the ramparts. It's surprisingly clear, and I half-wonder if Bagrak has deployed all of her troops to the battle raging beneath me.

She hasn't. The sight that greets me as I peer over the edge has my blood chilling. Tariq has crashed to the ground below and is surrounded by Orcs.

He thrashes his tail, taking out half a dozen as he burns another bunch of them to a crisp. But they keep coming.

I sprint along the top of the wall and then leap down a flight of stairs that leads to the courtyard below where he's fallen.

*You're a fool, Vidarok! What the fuck are you doing?*

I don't think about that now. I'm too busy cutting a swathe through the Orcs, who seem intent on subduing the dragon. Metal clangs. Fire heats the air. And before I know it, I'm at his side, fighting them off as fiercely as he is. Until something churns through the air and hits me, center of mass. The air is knocked from my lungs, and I look down to see the front of my body armor is practically obliterated. If it hadn't been there, whatever struck me would have crushed my chest. It was still enough to force the wind from me.

I gasp, trying to right myself, but my knees are buckling. They collapse completely when another bolt hits me. I realize that the same is happening to the dragon. He's all but stopped fighting; just the occasional flap of his unbroken wing tells me that he's still alive beneath the blanket of Orcs swarming over him. And there's nothing I can do about it. I'm kneeling on the stone tiles beside him, gasping, still breathless. My ax is gone, and both my arms are suddenly in the rough grasp of a pair of Orcs. There's no point in fighting them.

There's a cackling laugh, and I look up into the leering face of the Orc Queen.

What did I expect? I came here without any sort of plan. All I knew was that I had to save him.

*What the fuck is wrong with you, Vidarok?*

"Well, well, well..." Bagrak smirks. "This couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it myself."

*Vespyr*

There's some sort of a commotion far ahead, but it's hard to tell what's going on. Between the clanging clamor of fighting and the whirlwind of chaos around me, I can't focus.

The harpy Horde emerged soon after the fighting began in earnest. There's a mass of them swirling around me now, their screeching cries filling my ears and their sharp talons aiming for my flesh. They are swift and agile, and I can barely keep up with their movements; it's all I can do to hold them off. The air is thick with feathers and the stench of blood. Normally, that would make me happy. But I can't bring myself to like the taste of harpy blood. Besides, I would have had more than my fill of it by now.

"Get her, sister!" Suddenly, two harpies dive toward me from above. One darts behind me while the other shoots in from the front, clawing at me, her sharp, beaklike mouth gleaming with rows of sharpened teeth. She'd be a terrifying sight if I wasn't used to it by now. Besides, in my vampire form, I'm no oil painting myself. I wait for a gap and grab hold of one of her wings, and she lets out an enraged screech.

Getting a firm grip on the flapping wing, I use it to swing her through the air, turning her into the weapon I use to fend off the other harpy. Their bodies connect with a crash, and there's a bloodcurdling scream as bones break. These creatures may be strong in numbers, but alone, they're as frail as birds, their bones hollow and their lean, sinewy bodies easily broken. I

whirl the now-limp harpy in a wide arc around me, smashing through some of the others who are attempting another attack.

“Go away from here,” I say firmly. Their minds are as frail as their bodies, and it hasn’t been hard to send waves of them from here, fleeing from the terrors that I’ve planted into their thoughts. Being up on the hill has been a good vantage point. I’ve been able to turn my powers on the masses before me. That had basically been the idea when we’d discussed the war strategy that Vidarok and Tariq had formulated. Personally, I would have liked to have done more, but the two of them were adamant that I stay out of the thick of it.

They treat me like a child.

Or maybe like something precious. I think I might just like that. It’s been a long time since I felt special to anyone. My brother was always closest to me, but I lost him when the Fae princess came into his world. I guess I can understand how his feelings for her had outshined me. It’s how I feel now when I catch glimpses of gold scales overhead or a flash of the red cloak Vidarok had insisted on wearing. He wants his fighters to know that he’s there with them. And he wants the Orc Queen to know that he’s brought this battle to her.

“Witch!” a hoarse female voice screams as a harpy shoots in my direction. I stare into maddened eyes and see the rage deep inside them. The rage turns into fear and then outright terror as I reach into her mind and pull her darkest nightmares into the foreground. It’s what I came here to do today. Sow confusion and chaos by getting into the heads of the enemy. It’s working pretty well so far. Although, strictly speaking, we’re outnumbered by Bagrak’s Orc army and the Horde, we’re pushing them back. *I’m* pushing them back – well, a lot of them, at any rate. The way things are looking, there’s a chance we may actually take the castle today.

*You’re going to be my queen. You’ll rule Earomond with me...*

Vidarok’s words ring through my head. I’d never considered it before, but I might have my throne after all. So strange to think that after all the fighting I’d done to win Ryacyn, I’m here now, battling for the Orc who’d been sent to capture me.

My world has changed completely.

It's a world I'm growing to love.

An Orc I've grown to love, too. My heart tightens as I think of him, and it drives me with more intensity.

I notice a cluster of Orcs charging toward a spot where one of the dragons has landed. The giant beast is spreading a wall of fire around it in an arc as it incinerates some of Bagrak's troops. But it quickly becomes obvious that the new attackers are planning to overwhelm it with brute force.

I see a giant hammer swing and crash into green scales as another Orc clambers onto its back. The beast screams and twists its head around, unable to use fire to get rid of the new threat without singeing its own wings. Yet another Orc is poking holes through its scales with a heavy sword, and I see green blood spurt.

*Fuck!*

If any of them were to try something like that on Tariq, there would be hell to pay. Just the thought of it makes my blood turn to molten lava. Concentrating on the Orc that's clambering up the dragon's shoulders, I focus my attention on the male's mind. The dragon screams another high-pitched shriek, and my anger ramps up with the intensity of it.

"Fiend! I will end you!" I yell. The voice of my vampire is far from my usual voice; the sound carries on the air like a guttural roar. Maybe the Orc hears it. Maybe he doesn't. But he certainly senses my intentions because he stops suddenly. And then he's staring at me. Even from this distance, I can see the horror in his yellow eyes.

*Good! Be afraid!*

I imagine a thousand deaths descending on him, and he releases his hold on the dragon, sliding and slipping down its sleek scales. He lands heavily on the earth at its side, then clutches his temples. Then he screams suddenly; it's a short, sharp sound that rings out a moment before his entire head explodes.

I blink.

*Well. That's new.*

I still haven't scratched the surface of the powers my gift has given me, but sometimes, even I am surprised at what I'm capable of.

The dragon has taken control of the other attackers, who seem distracted by the fact that their comrade seemed to be blasted from out of nowhere.

Not nowhere. *Me.*

My eyes meet those of the dragon, and I give a small nod. I see a flicker of humor there. I'm pretty sure it's Aidurn, but I don't have time to dwell on it because I'm already turning to focus on another gaggle of Orcs. And then there are harpies flying in from all directions.

War is hell. I want to go home now. I'm covered in stinking black blood, and the idea of stripping off and scrubbing completely is becoming more appealing by the second. Wiping my forehead with the back of my arm, I spin to face a screaming creature that's descending on me from the sky.

*Is this ever going to end?*

Bagrak's numbers seem to be never-ending. Behind me, I'm dimly aware of a heavy gust that could only be caused by a pair of giant wings – dragon wings – but I can't turn around until I dispatch this fucking harpy. Frustrated, I snap a hand out and grab her by the throat. The unexpected move takes her by surprise. Yellow eyes shoot wide as I tighten my grip around a windpipe that's surprisingly fragile.

She gasps and chokes, clawing at my arm, but her nails are no match for my heavy leather wrist protectors. There's a sickening crunch just as I hear someone call my name. I drop the creature and turn my head as she crumples to the floor. The figure striding toward me is heart-wrenchingly familiar, and my heart skips several beats. I look into a face that's drawn and grim.

*Why is he here?*

*Oh... Please! No!*

But when his expression shifts, I see a softness there that's unlike Tariq's usual intensity.

"Turin!"

"You must come with me, Princess."

"But Tariq... Vidarok!"

"Please," he says firmly. "There is trouble coming. We need to leave and return to Morganeau. Now!" His tone brooks no argument. Something's going on.

I nod, realizing that although he's as naked as Tariq always is after shifting from his dragon form, I've barely noticed. But now, he's transforming into the huge copper shape that I've come to recognize as Turin's beast. He towers over me, then drops slightly, and I find a foothold next to his wing and clamber onto him. We're in the air within moments, and I'm soaring above the battle I'd been part of just seconds before. There are still skirmishes among Orcs and dragons blasting flames, but I'm aware that something's happening.

Our forces are retreating.

*What's going on?*

The thought is as much for me as the dragon I'm riding on. But I get no response. Turin is intent on getting the hell out of here. I cling tightly to the heavy scales that bunch behind his neck as his wings expand and then retract rhythmically as he flies. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I see a dark wave building behind us.

*By Blood!*

The Horde has gathered in such numbers that it's like looking into a blackening sky. They're hovering over the castle, which is surrounded by a

growing white light.

The Orc Queen! She's using magic. We'd expected as much, of course. But if she's enhancing the harpies' fighting abilities with it, we may be in real trouble. Our Orcs are good for sheer strength, and our dragons bring firepower. But if the Horde can bring both from the air, it may take the wind from our sails. Barok's troops need the dragon forces as backup against Bagrak's greater numbers. We'd assumed that we could push back the Horde, but as I watch now, I see them advancing.

*Fuck!*

She's definitely using some sort of power to strengthen them against our dragons. And in the numbers they're coming in, fighting back is not an option. No wonder we're turning back.

Gritting my teeth, I duck my head and squeeze my eyes shut as Turin shoots forward. I'm still not getting any feedback from his mind aside from an overwhelming sense of urgency. I cling tighter, staying low to avoid the blistering wind that threatens to unseat me every time I raise my head.

I stay like that for the entire flight back to the skies that I've come to know as Morganeau. The mountains are different here. The crisp, clear air of the Steel Cliff Mountains even smells different from the mountains of Earomond. Everything about that place has been tainted by Bagrak and her evil.

Turin lands in the courtyard of Morganeau Castle and stands still as I slide down from him. It's a long way down...as far as the drop down from Tariq, and I'm struck by how similar they are aside from the slight difference in color. Almost identical. Twins.

I land on my feet and gather myself as a dozen other dragons touch down around us. The shifting and crunching sounds that accompany Turin's transformation into his human shape have become so familiar over the weeks I've spent here that I'm barely aware of them. But I'm aware of his expression as I turn to face him.



Torment.

“What’s wrong?” I demand as dread unfurls. I’m not going to be fobbed off without getting answers this time.

“It’s Tariq. And Vidarok,” he says, and that dread becomes a clawing animal.

“What about them?” I step closer. “By Blood! Turin, spit it out, or so help me—”

“They’ve been taken.” His jaw works. “The Orc Queen has them.”

My mouth goes dry in an instant. “Both of them?”

Turin nods. “We tried to get in there, but the castle is locked down. They’re inside.”

*No!*

“We have to go back! We have to save them!”

“It’s not possible, Princess. There’s no way in.” His face drops.

I spin around wildly. More dragons are landing. I recognize most of them. “Nirem!” I rush toward her ebony beast, but as she shrinks and changes and becomes the formidable female I’ve met in the Circle, she shakes her head, too.

“There’s nothing we can do, Vespvr.” Her eyes are dark, remorseful. I want to scream with frustration and anguish as I look around at the others who have shifted. They all wear the same expression.

I’m facing Zydus now. Wise, reliable, unwavering Zydus. Even he shakes his head at me. “I’m sorry, Vespvr.”

I can’t find air to fill my lungs.

Tariq and Vidarok are gone. Both of them.

I've lost both of them.

*Vidarok*

“Well, this isn’t the way things were supposed to work out.”

“You don’t say.” Tariq’s features are battered and bloody. “Though, from the looks of it, you had no idea how things were going to work out anyhow, Orc.” White teeth flash through mud.

I grin back wryly. “Is this the part where you call me out again for barging in without thinking?”

“Pretty much.” He looks around us. The prison cell we’re in is dank and stinking. The walls are grimy, covered in layers of dirt and filth. The dim light through a tiny barred window that’s high overhead highlights the dampness that clings to the rough, stone surfaces. Dark rivulets of water trickle down the walls, pooling on the floor.

I’m chained to the wall under a ton of heavy chain links. Tariq is wrapped in more chains and sits in a chalk circle of strange symbols. A spell designed to stop him from shifting.

We’re basically fucked.

“You’d think you’d have learned your lesson after what happened when you went against the Horde to try to rescue Vespyr,” he says.

“What are you talking about? I had that covered.” No, I didn’t. But I’ll never admit that.

“Sure. After I got you out of there when they had you outnumbered.” He’s still looking around, his features twisting. “You would have been dead without me.”

“So I guess we’re even, then.” I fix him with a stare.

“That remains to be seen.” He lifts an eyebrow, the implication obvious. We may still die here.

I try not to mull on that. “We’re not dead yet,” I say.

“No. Not yet.” He sucks in a breath and then stops. “Fire! This place stinks.”

He’s right. The air is thick with the musky scent of mold and mildew, intertwined with the stench of unwashed bodies and bodily waste. Beneath it all, the odor of rotting food lingers. It gives me hope. At least there’s a chance they’ll be feeding us at some point.

That’s if they intend to keep us around that long.

“Pity...please...” someone moans, and it occurs to me that we’re not alone down here. Hardly surprising after what Barok told me about Bagrak’s campaign to crack down on those who oppose her. Our fellow inmate’s next miserable whimper is joined by the sound of scurrying rats.

“Well, at least we’ll have something to eat if they decide to starve us out,” Tariq says, no doubt listening to our rodent companions, too.

My lip curls. “I don’t eat rat.”

“We may have no choice.” He changes position within the circle. Something crackles as his leg touches one of the chalk marks, and he winces. “Fucking witch,” he mutters.

“Do you have any idea how to get out of there?” I run a curious eye

over the markings. It's hard to believe that something so simple could be holding him at bay.

“No idea.” He scowls. “I never spent much time focusing on magic.”

“Aside from the spell you put on Vespyr, you mean?”

“That was Bagrak's doing.” Tariq jerks his head toward the window as if Bagrak is standing beyond it. “She gave me the spell. I just repeated it.”

“Bet you wished you'd never done what she told you now, huh?” I flex my muscles against the chains, but it's futile. I'm wrapped up tight. I'd go so far as to say it's overkill, but I guess they're not taking any chances.

“I don't know about that so much.” He looks at me. “If I hadn't, a lot of things would have unfolded very differently. You wouldn't have found out you were heir to the throne, for one.”

“And you wouldn't have met Vespyr, for another.” I lock eyes with him. We sit in silence until he looks away.

“There's that,” he mutters before looking back up. “Though, I suppose this puts an end to that plan of yours.” He gestures with his hand to where we're both bound.

“You mean asking you to take care of her if I didn't make it?”

He nods. “What the fuck were you thinking, anyway?”

“No idea. It made sense at the time. But after your little stunt, I guess it wasn't that bright after all.”

“Stunt? I was shot out of the sky by a firebomb, you big oaf!”

“Exactly. You weren't supposed to put yourself in the line of fire. That was my job.” My chest heaves as I inhale, because that didn't work out so well either.

“You're not much of a military strategist, Orc.” The Dragon King

looks down at where his hand has been resting in a puddle of something on the floor. He grimaces and looks around, probably for something to wipe his palm on. He's as naked as the day he was born, and I imagine he doesn't want to clean his hand on his own skin.

“Military strategist?” I cock a brow. “You think you could do better?”

“For a start, I wouldn't hinge my entire plan around rushing in and smashing everything in sight.”

“It's the Orc way.” I shrug. Though he's right. I've spent enough time with other cultures to be aware that there are smarter ways of doing things. I just figured I'd meet Bagrak on her own terms. Orc against Orc. It seemed the honorable way to do things.

*Honor.*

I scoff. This queen has no honor. The throne of Earomond deserves better than her and her son.

“Talking to yourself, Orc?”

“Just wondering how you would have handled this battle differently.” I look at him. It's clear to me that there's a lot more to ruling a realm than simply sitting on a throne. I have a lot to learn if I plan to lead my people well.

What am I thinking? I'm probably not going to live to do that.

“I'll tell you sometime. When we get out of here.” Tariq peers up at the window. It's barely big enough for our rat neighbors to wriggle through.

“We're not getting out that way, if that's what you're thinking.”

“I'm not. I'm just wondering what's going on out there.” He looks back at me.

“Does it matter?” I move again, trying to get comfortable. Which isn't easy when your entire body is tangled in chains.

“It may not have occurred to you, but the fight is obviously over.” Tariq turns back to the window.

He’s right. The uproar outside has died down to just the general chatter and clatter of everyday life. At least, everyday life after a brutal battle. Wagons roll by, metal clangs, Orcs shout at each other. It’s as if none of the madness ever happened.

“She’s using magic to fortify the Horde,” he says out of the blue. He’s clearly been thinking about this. “When I fought them, they were stronger.”

This isn’t great news. But it shouldn’t be a surprise, either. Which doesn’t speak well of our planning. We underestimated the queen’s powers.

“If the Horde has more in their arsenal than just simple numbers, your dragons are going to be in trouble.”

Tariq purses his lips. “We were already in trouble. No matter how many of them we kill, they just seem to keep coming.”

“They must have a lair somewhere. Some sort of breeding ground,” I muse.

“I just wish we’d gotten more information out of that harpy we captured.”

I chew on my lip. The interrogation of the creature hadn’t gone well. After Nirem’s initially convincing methods, the harpy had babbled a string of useless information that we’d already known. The next day, when Nirem had returned, the creature was dead. Nirem swore she hadn’t touched her again, and I believed her. Seems the beasts don’t last long in captivity.

“Let’s hope that the Circle gets a chance to work more closely with Barok to figure things out,” I say. “We know the Empress has brought her Horde here. But maybe there’s another stronghold where they train reinforcements.”

“Who can tell?” Tariq shrugs. “But I’ll figure it out when I get back.”

I like how optimistic he is. “I’m sure Turin will be doing a great job in your absence.”

“Fuck you,” he snaps. If he wasn’t determined to get out before, he certainly is now. “Though maybe he’s doing a good job with Vespyr, too.”

I freeze at that.

“Sorry. Low blow.” Tariq looks apologetic. “I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s a good point, though.” I exhale slowly, trying to settle my nerves. The nagging fear of what might happen to my mate keeps tugging at my mind.

“He’ll know what to do, Vidarok,” he reassures me.

“Will he?” I look down.

“If not, she’ll tell him. That woman is nothing if not resourceful.”

“You’re right. Though it bothers me that she’s determined to live in denial.” I flex my calves to stop my feet from going numb. “The Curse will kill her. I wish she’d understand that.”

“So I’ve heard. Although I don’t quite understand it. What she has seems to be a good thing.”

“She calls it her gift.” I huff. “But it’s not. I’ve seen how things go when a vampire is taken by it. They die, Tariq. They die horribly.”

The dragon’s jaw clenches. I have no doubt he hates that idea as much as I do. It’s why I asked him to be there for her.

“She needs blood,” he says.

“Yes. And…” I pause. “And somehow, I think the sex helps.”

He makes a little choking sound. “Okay. That might be true.”



“What worries me is that with us gone, she might resist it.” As much as I’ve resented the way Vespyr turned to Tariq, I don’t think it was a decision made lightly. There’s something between them I don’t understand. Something like what we have together.

*Dragh!*

I can’t think about that now.

“What happens then?”

“The madness will take her. It happens to all of them. You’ve seen the silver in her eyes.” I see him nod. “That’s the sign. It’s still in her. And when it takes hold, there’s no telling what she’ll do. She may turn on your people, and with her powers, she’ll be a killing machine. Or she’ll die.”

I don’t know which bothers me more.

“We have to get out of here,” Tariq says yet again, although this time, his motives may be different.

We lock eyes, and I feel a jolt of anxiety. The sensation is cut short as someone gives a shout. There’s a commotion beyond the heavy iron door that’s unnecessary, considering how firmly we’ve been trussed up.

“Heads up. The bitch is back.” Tariq scowls as the door flies open, revealing Queen Bagrak.

“You might want to save that mouth for begging your interrogator to go easy on you.” She snorts. Orc females are never beautiful. In fact, it’s generally hard to tell the males from the females, aside from a slight difference in adornments.

Queen Bagrak could cover herself in glittering gemstones, and it would still be a bit like putting lipstick on a pig. She’s hideous. Wisps of oily red hair have been pulled to the top of her green scalp into a topknot that hangs limply to one side. Her eyes are dull and yellow over a flat nose that has three bones through the bridge of it. Her wide slit of a mouth is flanked

by heavy tusks. And on closer inspection, it seems that she actually *is* wearing lipstick.

“Well, I see the two of you are getting better acquainted.”

“We already knew each other,” I mutter. “He’s a dick.”

“He’s an ass,” Tariq retorts.

“How sweet. A comedy team.” Bagrak chuckles, turning to the Orc at her side. He’s a male version of her, and there are no prizes for guessing who he is.

Gork.

I give him an appraising stare. He looks back at me dully. Not the sharpest tool in the shed. Bagrak probably plans to rule through him.

“I think they’ll put on a good show for us, Mother,” he says with a dim-witted smirk.

Tariq and I exchange glances.

“I see you’re showing your true colors at last, Queen Bagrak,” he tells her.

Bagrak tosses her head. “I don’t know how you ever believed that little ploy of mine. But at least you were useful. For a while.” She looks at Gork. “You’re right, son. He’ll put on a good show.”

“Show?” Tariq looks from one to the other. I’m getting a bad feeling about this.

“We’re going to execute you, dragon. Make an example of you.” Bagrak winks. At least, I think she does. The ugly slits of her eyes don’t show much emotion. “And as for you—” She turns to me. “We’ll get our share of entertainment from showing the people how we drive you to your knees, pretender. And then we can rule the way we’ve always wanted to. Completely. With an entire nation of Orc slaves to take our share of

Earomond's wealth."

There's not much I can do to retaliate aside from spitting at her feet. Which I do. "You stole the Orc throne, Bagrak."

"The people of Earomond won't believe that after you openly declare that Gork is the rightful heir." The queen claps a hand on her son's shoulder. He smirks.

"When I what?" I snap.

"You heard me. You're going to tell everyone that there's been a mistake. You were never destined to rule. Your mother was a whore who fucked so many others she could never tell who your real father was."

I hear Tariq suck in a breath. My own breath shudders out as a surge of rage rises.

"You bitch!" I snarl. "I will never say any such thing. Never!" My skin is hot with the fury burning beneath it.

"Well, that's a pity, *Prince Vidarok*," she sneers. "Because then you're going to die with your friend. And we'll make sure you both suffer through it."

*Vespyr*

I'm sure I'm wild-eyed as I look around the Circle, but I can't help it. It's been a whole day since that bitch took them...Tariq and Vidarok. My men.

*Mine!*

I don't care how crazy that seems, but it's the way I feel. My heart is racing, my skin is taut and uncomfortable. All I can think about is getting them back.

But equally important is the fact that I haven't fed. The stinking blood of the harpies on the battlefield had turned my stomach. And Turin's offer to feed me had repulsed me. I don't want him. I want my men.

"You need rest, Princess," Turin says now.

"I don't need rest, dammit!" I want to snap at him like a rabid dog. I can't. Not while I'm surrounded by the rest of the Circle elders. The fact that I'm being allowed into the Circle at all is a big deal. Nobody ever comes in here except those who have been inducted.

I guess things are different today. Their king is gone.

"Vespyr?" Zydus says. I draw in a breath and exhale it slowly, trying to calm myself. A sharp edge of fang grazes my lip, and I work to control it.

*I can do this!*

I meet his eye and nod. "I'm fine."

"Good." He smiles. "For the purpose of this meeting, you may take the seat of Tariq Firestarter." He gestures to one of the tall stone chairs that encircle the space I'm standing in. I go to sit down, running my palms along the wide armrests. I imagine Tariq's hands resting there and swallow down a lump that's formed in my throat.

"Right," says Turin, who's still standing in the circle. "As we are all aware, our king has been taken as a prisoner of war along with Captain Vidarok."

My heart clenches at his words.

"In the king's absence, I will take the throne as prince regent and second in line." He looks around. "Are we in agreement on this?"

Everyone murmurs their assent.

"The Orcs have shown themselves to be more problematic than we expected," he says. "Today, it is up to us to consider our options in terms of a solution."

"What options?" I interrupt. "We go in and save them. It's as simple as that." Even as I say it, I know it could never be that simple. But I don't care.

Zydrus shoots a sympathetic look at me. "It won't be that easy."

I sigh, because of course it won't be easy. But still. It hurts. "We need to gather our fighters and go in." My voice is hurt.

"The Orc Queen's army outnumbers us by thousands, Princess," Turin says, his expression firm. "We can't march in there."

"Plus, she uses magic," Timmir interrupts. "Powerful magic."

“The Horde had it,” says Nirem. “When I fought them, I felt it. She’s given them power.”

“Fire take it!” Aidurn mutters. “Maybe we should just throw caution to the wind and storm the castle again.”

“And face defeat?” Zydus says. “If Bagrak overthrows Morganeau, we know what she’ll do to our realm.”

“Strip it bare,” Timmir murmurs, his expression clouding as he taps his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“Exactly.” Zydus leans forward. “We’ve seen what’s been done to Earomond.”

“It’s been sucked dry.” Bridrod shakes her head. “The Orc chieftain Barok told us how his people are starving. She’s flattened their farmlands in her hunt for gems. Mined every vein of gold. Torn the mountains apart looking for minerals.”

“She’ll do the same to Morganeau.” Turin looks grim. “We can’t let that happen. We have to protect this stronghold. We have to use all our available fighters here to keep her from our borders.”

“What? So you’re saying you’ll just leave Tariq and Vidarok there so you can guard this castle and your lands?” I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “That’s ridiculous. You’re aware that you have to face them sometime, right?”

“Of course we do,” Turin says. His usual cheerful expression has been replaced by harsh lines and darkened eyes. “But on our territory, we hold an advantage. You saw what happened when we marched upon Earomond.”

“That’s because it was a foolish charge. I love Vidarok...” I pause because the words suddenly sink in, “But his battle plan was flawed.” Vidarok had proposed a basic penetration of the center of Bagrak’s stronghold using the strongest of Barok’s fighters, supported by flanking

attacks from his archers and cavalry. The dragons had provided air support while I occupied the high ground, turning the harpies away from the main battlefield.

“It wouldn’t have been flawed if the queen hadn’t used magic,” Aidurn muttered.

“Exactly.” I look at him. “We underestimated her.”

“So we can’t do it again. We stay here and hold her back with our own strength.” Turin seems determined to stick to this course of action.

“Then you know you’ll be fighting alone?” I look at him. “Why else would Barok bring his Orcs to fight for Morganeau? The whole point was an alliance to help him save his realm from her.”

Turin is silent for a moment. The others are, too.

“We’ll find a way to work with what we have. We’ve done it before. We held off the Horde for years without outside help.”

“That was before they sided with Bagrak,” I say. “With her Orc forces, plus her magic, you’re dealing with a very different threat. You have to face them, Turin.”

“It’s too risky,” Timmir says. “I say we stick to our old strategy. Fight them off as they come to us.”

“You’re choosing the coward’s way,” I say. It’s a bold statement, but not as bold as the one I’m about to make. I face Turin. “You’ll let him die there so you can take the throne for yourself.”

There’s a collective gasp.

Turin stares at me, his expression growing thunderous. “Never!” he snaps. “I would never do that! I love my brother. I care—”

I hold up a hand. “Of course. I’m sorry.” I believe him. Turin’s not wired that way. But I have to do something to make them see that they can’t

sit and wait for this war to come to them. They have to end it at its source. They have to take out Bagrak.

“For all we know, they could be dead already.” Timmir’s words make my blood run cold.

“They’re not. We’ve already received word that they’re being kept in her dungeons,” Turin tells him. “She has a purpose for them. That buys us some time.”

“Yes!” I say quickly. “Time to plan a rescue attempt.”

“We could send in a team to extract them. Use a stealth method,” Zydus muses.

“They’ll be expecting that,” I tell him. “They have the place locked down. Trying to get in would be fruitless. We’d be sending that team to their death.”

“And we wouldn’t be doing the same thing by engaging on the battlefield?” says Bridrod. “We can’t let people die like that, Princess.”

“At least, that would be an honorable death,” says Aidurn.

“We can’t simply sit by and do nothing.” I feel sullen. I’m also fighting an irrational rage that’s building. These people are maddening. But not maddening enough for the way I’m reacting. I want to tear things apart. I push down the fear that my condition is doing this. My gift needs to be managed and without feeding...

I stop thinking about it.

“Not nothing,” Timmir says in answer to my statement. “We’d be defending ourselves.”

“It’s a passive strategy at best, Lord Timmir.” Nirem turns to him. “They’ll eventually beat us through sheer attrition. Our numbers would dwindle until we had nothing left to fight with. As it is, the dragons are almost extinct.” She turns to me. “I think you’re right. We have to fight her.”



“And who would do that?” Timmir shoots back. “Who would go to their death?”

“I would do it.” Nirem sits straighter.

Of course, she would.

“We can’t afford to lose you, Lady Nirem.” Zydus looks grim.

“We can’t afford to lose anyone,” says Bridrod.

“We need to go in and fight smart this time,” I interrupt them. “We engage in one region while launching another attack into another. And while she’s preoccupied, we go in and rescue Tariq and Vidarok.”

Zydus looks at me thoughtfully. “Yes. Attack them in force. But that would take numbers, Princess Vespyr. Numbers we don’t have.”

“But we—” I stop mid-sentence. He’s right. Bagrak is too strong. Even with Barok’s warriors, it would be futile. But there’s a solution...one that rests with me. And I know what I have to do. I don’t want to do it, but there’s no other way. I look around at the members of the Circle. “I can get us the numbers,” I say.

“How?” Zydus tilts his head. The others watch me. It’s too late to reverse my decision.

“The vampires will join us. I’m going to Ryacyn to get help from my brother.”

Tariq

He's tough, I'll give him that. The Orc's been dragged out of this cell three times already, and each time they bring him back, he's battered and bloody.

“At least they're not ruining your good looks,” I tell him as he lies panting on the stinking floor after being unceremoniously dumped there once again.

“The queen wants me at my best for the coronation.” He gives a wry grin. It's forced. I'm pretty sure he's nursing broken ribs. Probably more. There are ugly slashes across his torso. I imagine his back looks worse.

“They still think they can beat you into submission?”

“They can try,” he scoffs, then flinches, holding a hand across his chest. Definitely broken ribs.

“At least they won't resort to any truly ugly torture methods. Like cutting off fingers or poking your eyes out.” I grimace.

“Thanks for the reminder. I guess I should be grateful.” He gives a slight cough. It leaves a speck of pink foam on his lower lip. If they've punctured a lung, he's in for a world of pain for the next couple of hours. Orcish healing powers are fast but nowhere near a dragon's.

“Ah well, at least you’re better off than I am. They’re going to put my head on a spike and parade it around the realm to teach the dragons a lesson.” I suppress a shudder.

“Mine will be there too if I don’t give in,” he says.

“And you’re not going to give in.” Of course he won’t.

“Of course not. I’ll never give her that. She can kill me, but my people will know that I never gave up my throne willingly.”

*My people.*

He’s definitely taken this new king thing to heart. But that’s exactly what a true king would do. You don’t need to be groomed for a position if it’s in your genes.

Vidarok’s a good man.

“Can’t say I blame you.” I scowl at the chalk circle that’s restraining me as effectively as any iron cage would do. “Though being king has its downsides.”

“You mean like being put to death by your enemies?” He rolls onto his side and then pushes himself into a sitting position, grunting.

“That. And the fact that you can never have a life of your own.” I take in a deep breath. “I can’t remember a time when I was able to make a decision that was purely for myself.”

That’s not entirely true. Making love to Vespvr had been pretty self-serving.

I don’t say that.

“You’re saying you’d step away from your role as king?” Vidarok looks curious.

“Not entirely.” I shrug. “Though some days...”

“Some days you want a break?” He cocks his head.

“You make it sound like I need a vacation.” I chuckle.

“Maybe you do.” He glances down at his chest and frowns. “Dragons live a long time.”

“Centuries. So do Orcs.” I pull a face. “And vampires.”

Our eyes lock. “I hope so.” His voice has grown husky.

“We’re going to get out of here, Vidarok,” I tell him. “We’ll get back to her.”

“Before it’s too late?” His question is weighted. There’s no telling how long she can last out there. I can only pray that Turin has things in hand.

“My brother will keep things in check,” I reassure him, even though I’m not sure that it’s true. “And she’s smart, Orc. She’ll figure something out. That woman...” I shake my head and give a small smile.

“She’s pretty special, huh?” He smiles back.

I nod.

The door crashes open.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Not him again.”

“Don’t fret, dragon. You’re safe...for now.” Gork smirks as he struts in ahead of two guards. They’re dragging a limp form between them. From the way that the creature is slumped, head dangling, it’s hard to tell what form of life it is, let alone its gender. All I can see is a wave of silver hair that covers its face. The body being held up by the two Orcs is slender, encased in some sort of flowing white robe.

Female?

Not that it matters.

They drop it and step away. The figure doesn't move.

Is it even alive? If they've dealt it the same treatment the Orc has received, it has to be crushed.

"It'll be your turn soon enough, dragon." Gork grins at me as he sees me eyeing our new companion. The gesture reveals a row of yellowing teeth. Some are missing. It all adds to his unique charm. "Though we might just kill you without wasting time on torturing you. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Can't wait." I keep my expression neutral.

Vidarok is sitting straighter now, and Gork looks over at him. Vidarok raises his chin. "Thanks for the visit. You can go now." He gives an imperious wave. He's doing it to bait the man. It works.

"Fuck you, pretender," Gork snaps. "It's only a matter of time before we break you."

"It's not working so far." Vidarok's lip curls. "You'll have to try harder."

"Oh, it's going to work. You're a half-breed. Your human side will cave eventually. You're weak. Just like your mother."

*Crap! Low blow.*

Rage flashes across Vidarok's features, but it's gone in an instant. "My mother had more strength than you will ever comprehend, boy."

Gork gives a cold little laugh. "Not enough to keep her claws in her man. My mother saw to that."

"How could she?" Vidarok asks. "He refused to even see her. Turned his back on her when she went to him."

"Your father never knew she was there," Gork smirks. "My mother

hid it from him. She kept it secret with magic. And then wiped the memory of your mother from his mind with a spell.”

Vidarok’s face drops as this information sinks in. “He never knew?”

“Of course not. Do you think my mother would tolerate another woman threatening her position? Especially one who was trying to convince him that he had a son?” Gork snorts. “A real Orc fights for her man. Your mother just... Well, she just died, didn’t she?”

Vidarok can’t hide his fury this time. “If Xuruul knew he had a son, I would have already been on the throne!”

Gork scoffs. “It was never going to happen. That’s why she kept you in the Orc ranks. Just one of thousands. Her magic had you hidden in plain sight. You’re lucky. She could have killed you...but your humiliation amused her.”

Vidarok is shaking his head. I can see he’s fighting to process this. I’m pretty sure that everything he’s ever believed about his life till now has just been turned on its head.

*Poor bastard.*

“So, did you just come here to share your family history, or are you going to do what you came to do?” I step in.

“I’ve already done it.” Gork glances at the fallen figure. “I have other duties to attend to.” He slants a smug look at Vidarok, who’s gone silent. “Royal duties.”

“Off you go then. Hop to it.” I gesture to the door. “I’m sure the whole of Earomond is waiting for your next instruction.

My sarcasm isn’t lost on him. “I was going to leave, anyway.” Gork’s expression is sour. He turns and stalks out the door, his guards slamming it shut behind them as they trail after him.

*Well, that was...insightful.*

I look at Vidarok. He looks like he's been kicked in the gut. He probably has – several times during his torture sessions. But I doubt anything had as much impact as what he just learned. I let him sit there for a few minutes as he tries to come to terms with all this.

“Are they gone?” The voice comes from the motionless form on the floor.

“You couldn't tell when the stench left the room?” I say.

“Nope.” The creature pushes itself up. “Everything stinks in here.” A pointed nose wrinkles delicately over precisely formed lips. They're teamed with high cheekbones and the most startling violet eyes I've ever seen.

But I'm sure that it's a male.

“Who are you?” he asks, pushing a silver wave of hair off his face. He's almost pretty. He'd definitely pass for female if it wasn't for the strong set of his chin.

“Tariq Firestarter. I'd get up to introduce myself, but as you can see... I look down at the circle of symbols around me. I'm sitting cross-legged in the center of it.

He eyes it, too. “Suppression spell. A little crude, but effective.”

“It's working for me,” I acknowledge. I've tried to breach the barrier dozens of times since we were thrown in here. I'd be incinerated if I crossed the threshold of those symbols. Ironic since I was practically born out of fire. “Are you going to return the favor?”

“Oh. Pardon my manners. Lucernas Eclipsos, at your service.” He looks over at Vidarok. “What's wrong with him?”

“You didn't hear?”

“Ah. That thing about his mother.” He heaves a sigh. “Never nice to learn things like that.” He waves over at the stupefied Orc. “I'm sorry for

your grief, um...”

“Vidarok,” I finish for him. “He’ll be fine in a bit. He’s tough.”

“I can see that.” He runs an eye over Vidarok’s burly shape. I frown.

*Is he checking him out?*

“So...” he turns back to me, “what are you in here for?” He eyes the dripping stone walls and slime-covered floor and gives a little shudder.

“Tried to start a war. I lost.” I pull a face. “But on the upside, it won’t be for long.”

“Don’t tell me you believe she’s letting you go,” he snorts delicately.

“Nope. She’s executing me.”

“Me too,” Vidarok suddenly pipes up. He’s finally pulled himself together.

“Only if you don’t renounce the throne,” I tell him.

“Same thing,” he says. “I’ll die first.” He narrows his eyes at Lucernas, taking in the graceful lines of the new arrival.

“Lucky you,” Lucernas huffs. “She’s never going to let me go. I’m too useful to her.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” I ask.

“Because I’m a mage.”

I blink at him. “You mean like a wizard?”

“Pfft! Stronger than a wizard.” He brushes a hand down his robe, dusting it off. It shouldn’t have any effect on the muck that’s soaked into it, but somehow it does. When he lifts his hand, the white of his robe is pristine. “Disgusting!” He grimaces. “How you tolerate this?”



“We don’t have much choice.” I sweep a hand around us. “The cleaning staff refuses to come down here. Back to you being a mage...?”

“An Elemental, if you want to split hairs.” He flicks at something on his sleeve.

“I’ve heard of you people.” Vidarok is still appraising him. “There’s one of you ruling the demon realm.”

“Yes. The Earth foundling. The Lumina. She’s of the Enigmos line. Very rare. I’m Eclipsos. There are more of us than the Enigmos, but I was chosen...because I’m the most special.”

“Of course you are,” I say.

Vidarok looks my way. I suspect he knows more than I do. “The Lumina. She mated two demons from different realms,” he says. “Now, all three of them rule together.”

My eyebrows lift. “Interesting,” I say, wondering how they make that work. I turn back to Lucernas. “So then you’re Lucernas of the Eclipsos?”

“*Lucernas*,” he corrects my pronunciation. “Like this: *Loo-ker-nis*.”

“Luke,” I say.

“Lucernas,” he repeats.

“Luke,” Vidarok says.

“Oh, for God’s sake, whatever.” The mage rolls his eyes.

“So why are you here?” I get back to the point.

“I already told you: because I’m useful to her. She wants to harness my powers.”

“And what powers would those be?” Vidarok asks.

Lucernas takes a breath. “We control the skies...the light...the night...the powers of nature.”

“That sounds dangerous.” I frown, looking over at Vidarok, who remains impassive – as he always does.

“It is,” says Lucernas. “When unleashed, we’re deadly.”

“So how come you’re not unleashing yourself now, Luke?” I ask.

“Funny you should ask that.” He splays his hands. “You know that suppression spell you’re stuck with?” When I nod at him, he goes on. “I taught her that. And now she’s using it on me. Annnnd—there’s a little matter of an amulet.”

“Amulet?” I repeat.

“It’s kind of my home.” Lucernas is walking around the small space we’re locked in. “Where I go when I’m not out here.” He sweeps an arm, then pulls a face. “Whoever has it controls me.”

“You’re kidding. Like a...like a genie?” I try not to laugh because it sounds so ridiculous.

The mage glares at me. “I am *not* a genie. I am an Elemental. Lucernas Eclipsos.”

“Right.” I grin. “You’re the ‘most special.’”

“I don’t expect you to understand it, dragon.” He rolls his eyes.

“How can you tell I’m a dragon?”

“You’re naked, so you’re probably a shifter.” He shrugs. “And you have a giant dragon tattoo on your chest. Probably so you don’t forget or something.”

“Smart ass. If I wasn’t in this circle—”

“Okay, enough,” Vidarok interrupts. “So the queen is planning to harness all that deadly force of yours?” He frowns.

Lucernas nods. “It will make her unstoppable. Invincible. No one could stand against her.”

“Now you’re just bragging.” I scowl at him.

“Actually, I’d say it’s an understatement,” he says. “And that’s probably not going to be good for you.”

Vidarok and I exchange glances as realization begins to dawn.

Lucernas goes on, “Not good at all. Because if you’re who I think you are, she’s planning to use my powers to defeat you.”

*Vespyr*

“You can’t go on like this for much longer, Princess. It’s been two days.” Turin’s expression is earnest. It’s been equally earnest every time he’s tried to convince me to feed from him, and I’ve declined. Now, there’s an edge of desperation to it. Probably because we’ve just emerged from the portal that leads to Ryacyn, and he’s worried I’ll have a meltdown before I reach my brother.

“I told you, I’ll be fine.” I’m not fine. There’s a small but growing, burning sensation deep within that I’ve been fighting since yesterday. Part of it is because of Vidarok and Tariq, I imagine. But the rest...

“If you’re certain.” Turin doesn’t look convinced.

“I’m certain.” I set my jaw and look into the distance where the seat of Ryacyn is visible through the trees of the estate. Steel and chrome; so different from the spires of Morganeau. This is my home.

*Not anymore.*

“Then you’d better do something about your eyes,” Turin grumbles. “They’re...” He points at my face. He doesn’t have to say more to remind me that they’re gleaming silver. The rings around my irises have expanded. “They’re never going to let you in looking like that.”

Perhaps he's right. If I go in, I should at least try to seem harmless.

"Fine." Impatiently, I reach out a hand to grasp his outstretched wrist. "Just enough to make me look...respectable." I pull a face. My stomach is roiling. The sensation grows worse as my lips touch his skin. By the time my teeth sink through his flesh, I'm dry-heaving. The first drops that trickle over my tongue taste like pure acid. I recoil in horror, swiping the back of my hand over my mouth. The blood that smears my skin literally burns.

"Vespyr?" Turin looks confused.

"I...I...can't!" I choke out past a growing unease.

"Perhaps it's because I'm male, and you're mated? Your system may be rejecting it. Try Lady Nirem." He gestures to where the she-dragon is standing. She steps forward, and my eyes go wide.

"No!" I start to backpedal. Bile rises up my throat, but that's all there is. There's nothing in my belly. I look around at the others. I can almost hear the pumping of the blood through their veins...and it disgusts me.

Turin looks concerned – even more than he already was. "You can't feed from anyone?"

"I..." I trail off because I can't answer that. I never had this problem with Vidarok or Tariq. But aside from them, the only creatures I've fed from were the harpies. And even they turned my stomach during the last battle. "I don't know," I finally say.

"You have to try," Bridrod presses on. "If you don't, you will die, Princess." Her gentle eyes are stricken.

"I won't!" I say firmly. Or will I?

"Let's try again," Turin suggests, but I'm already shaking my head so wildly that my carefully arranged hair flies free from its braids. I've taken care to dress appropriately for this meeting...as a princess. Hopefully, it will help if Bartholomew sees me as the sister he remembers. But that's all going

to go to hell if I arrive in a state over this damn feeding issue.

“Leave her,” says Zydus. “She’ll be fine. Won’t you, Princess?” His voice is soothing.

I nod quickly. “Yes,” I say hoarsely.

*What the fuck?*

“This is going to be a problem,” I hear Timmir mutter to Bridrod. She gives a sad sigh.

“I said I’ll be fine, dammit!” I snap. “Now, can we just get this over with? Once they’ve made me take the cure, none of this will make a difference anyhow.”

“Good point,” says Turin.

I manage a tight smile. Giving up my gift is a high cost to pay, but it will be worth it.

I need them back.

I don’t feel quite so certain when I’m standing in the doorway that leads to the throne room. It’s crisp and modern, in muted colors, with tall windows that let in the sun. So familiar and yet so unwelcoming. I can’t believe that I wandered these halls so happily before.

*Were you ever truly happy here?*

Maybe not. Certainly not since my parents died.

I put those thoughts behind me now. There’s work to be done.

I shoot a side-eye at the heavily armed vampire guards who flank me. There are more behind me and another two in front. The elders of the Circle of Six have been instructed to wait outside. I’ll have no backup once I’m in there. Essentially toothless. One of the conditions of my arrival here. It’s hardly surprising, considering I took Aurora hostage mere weeks ago.

*Weeks? Or was it a lifetime?*

By the time I'm standing in front of them, it's clear that the memory of that day is still fresh in her mind. The Fae female who is now my brother's mate shrinks back slightly as I get to the foot of their tall seats. Bartholomew reaches for her hand and squeezes it before looking at me.

"Sister," he says, dipping his head. He's wearing a gold brocade coat that sets off his gold hair. It's formal attire for a formal reception. Maybe he's as determined to keep up appearances as I am. Aurora, on the other hand, is wearing a pale green cotton sundress that wouldn't look out of place at a picnic.

"Grand Overlord Bellingham." I give a low curtesy, keeping my eyes lowered when I rise.

"Cut it out, Vespyr. That's not necessary." Bartholomew obviously isn't impressed. Or maybe not convinced by my act. But keeping my eyes lowered serves more than one purpose right now. When I raise them, they both suck in a breath. It's impossible to hide the silver rings that gleam from my eyes.

"Don't panic. I'm not here to kill you." I try to keep my tone light, but it's not easy. There's a rough rasp to my voice that I can't quite get rid of.

"I think this was a mistake." Bartholomew is frowning at me. He looks at Aurora, who shakes her head and gives a small smile.

"Let's hear what she has to say, my love," she says gently, which surprises me, considering our history. When he doesn't immediately agree, she points toward the guards around me. "We've taken precautions. Let her speak."

He nods, then fixes his eyes on me. "You have five minutes to make your case."

"Thank you, Bart," I take a breath. "I need your help," I get straight to

the point. “I mean, the dragons of Morganeau do. And the Orcs, too. Most of them, at any rate. At least those who don’t support the evil queen. You see, before she allied with the Horde – who are horrible flesh-eaters, by the way – she took over the throne wrongfully, and now she wants to put her asshole son Gork there. But she’s an oppressor, and she’s planning to strip Earomond of its resources and then do the same to Morganeau. We can’t let that happen, don’t you see? And to make things worse, she took Vidarok. And Tariq. We have to save them. Before it’s too late!”

I stop when I realize that I’m babbling.

“I’d ask you to say that again, but I wouldn’t know where to begin,” Bartholomew says drily. “Shall we try a little more calmly?”

I rub both hands over my face and take in a deep breath. This is not how I planned to handle this. I had every intention of coming in, giving them the details, negotiating an alliance, and behaving like a queen.

So much for that.

Now that I’m here, I’m desperate. There’s too much riding on this. I can’t help feeling that they’re our last hope.

Tariq and Vidarok’s last hope. A lump forms in my throat.

*Pull yourself together, Vespvr.*

“I’m sorry,” I say. I take a deep breath and start again. “You may have already heard about the Horde?” When Bartholomew nods, I go on. “Well, they’ve been at war with Morganeau for years. The dragons have held them off, but now they’ve sided with Bagrak, the Queen of the Orcs. She’s planning to take over Morganeau because of its resources. She’s already stripped Earomond and starved out most of its population.”

“Sounds charming,” says Aurora.

“Exactly.” I smile at her. She smiles back. “When Vidarok learned that he was the true heir to the Earomond throne, he—”



“Wait!” Bartholomew interrupts me. “He what?”

“He’s the illegitimate son of Xuruul, the late king.” I look from him to Aurora, who’s wide-eyed. “Without another heir, that makes him the true King of the Orcs.”

“Hollyhocks!” she exhales. “Vidarok is a royal?”

I nod. “He’ll rule one day.” At least, I pray that he will.

“I can’t believe it.” She shakes her head. “My Vidarok?”

“My Vidarok. My mate,” I say firmly. “And now, Bagrak has taken him. Tariq, too.”

“The Dragon King,” my brother says. “We met him here when he came to tell us you were with him at Morganeau.”

“Yes.” I nod. “We have to get them back as soon as possible.”

“Vidarok.” Bartholomew is mulling over the name, still bemused by this new information.

“And Tariq,” I add quickly. “She has both of them.” Just thinking about it makes me frantic.

“Vidarok...your mate.” He finally acknowledges this fact. “And Tariq.” Bartholomew cocks his head. “And what is this man to you?”

“He... I...” How do I answer this when I don’t even know myself? “I don’t know,” I whisper. “I just need him out of there. Please, Bart. Please!” I feel like the small girl who used to tag along after her big brother. When his eyes rest on me, I think he’s feeling the same way. There’s tenderness in that expression.

“But this is more than just a rescue mission, Vespyr. You are aware of this, right?”

“Of course I do.” I press my lips together. “This is a war.”

“A war you want to drag us into.”

“I’m sorry. Where else can I turn?” I’m starting to get desperate.

“This isn’t our fight,” Bartholomew mutters. My desperation begins to build as he speaks.

*He has to do this. He has to!*

I curl my hands into fists but stop when I realize that my nails have formed sharp talons and sliced into my palms. A drop of blood falls to the floor at my feet. Aurora looks down at it, then up at me. Something flickers in her expression.

She turns to my brother. “It may not be our fight now, but it could reach us eventually, my love. It’s already started.”

He frowns at her, tapping his fingertips on the arm of his chair. “You’re talking about the refugees.”

*Refugees?*

I tilt my head.

Aurora answers my unspoken question. “We’ve had Orcs coming into Ryacyn. Autumnburn, too. Many of my private Orc guards have requested asylum for their families. We knew something was up, but I didn’t press for more information because...” She heaves a sigh, then cups Bartholomew’s cheek. He presses a kiss into her palm. They’re so damn sweet. “We’ve had a lot on our mind,” she finishes.

“I can imagine,” I mutter, trying not to be moved by their little show of affection. Although, this news is surprising to me. If Bagrak’s reign is beginning to touch the other realms, she may have plans to invade more than Morganeau. “So you see, Bart? Do you see how important this is?”

“I do,” he says reluctantly.

“Then you’ll join us?” I wish I didn’t sound so eager. Still like that little girl, dammit.

“We’ll join you, Vespyr,” he says, and relief floods me. “But you know my condition,” he adds.

I nod without hesitation. “You want me to take the cure.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll do it. Right now.” I sound breathless.

Bartholomew smiles. “I’m glad you said that. Because as it happens...

A shape steps out of the shadows. I hadn’t even noticed the elderly Fae standing beside us. Tall and grizzled, his silver beard reaches his chest.

“Grand Father Silverwing has been waiting with the cure. We knew you’d see reason.” Aurora is smiling. The Fae elder reaches out his hand. There’s a small, gleaming vial between his fingers.

“You’re ready for this?” Bartholomew asks me.

“I’m ready for anything.” The vial is already in my grasp. “I don’t care what it does to me. That I’ll lose my powers forever. Just help Vidarok and Tariq. Help us win this fight.” I pop it open and tip it into my mouth. It tastes bitter. Everything tastes bitter lately. But at least it doesn’t burn.

My brother raises his hand. “You won’t lose them forever, Vespyr. The cure isn’t permanent.”

My mouth drops open. “Not permanent?”

“No.” Aurora has her fingers threaded through Bartholomew’s. “We’ve been searching for something that will work, but so far...” She splays her hands, her expression bleak. “Nothing.”

“We’ll find something soon, my Lady,” Silverwing says gently. “But for now, it will do.” He turns his attention to me, watching me intently. I glance around at them, realizing that they’re all watching me now.

“What happens next?” I ask. The taste of the mixture is still on my tongue. “Does it take a few minutes?”

Silverwing is frowning. He moves closer to me and looks into my face. He turns to the others. “They’re still there.”

“What’s still there?” I ask.

“The rings,” he says to me. “The silver rings. The mark of the Curse.”

I want to correct him and tell him that it’s a gift. But now doesn’t seem to be the time.

“It’s not working?” says Aurora.

“Maybe it needs more time,” I say quickly. “I took it. You saw me take it, right?”

Bartholomew is getting down from his throne to get closer to me. I see Aurora grasp his hand as if to stop him, then thinks better of it. She’s still afraid of me.

I hold up the empty vial. “I drank every drop. I swear it!”

“I believe you, Vespyr.” Bartholomew is peering into my face. “Why isn’t it working?” he asks the Fae.

“Perhaps she’s too far gone?” Silverwing taps his bottom lip.

“I’m not too far gone! Give me another vial!” I’m on the verge of mania. When Silverwing reaches into his robes and takes out a handful of small glass tubes, I grab a couple, open them, and pour the contents down my throat. I try not to choke. The taste is vile. Worse than before. But still, Silverwing is shaking his head.

“That’s more than we’ve ever given anyone,” he says. “It should be working.”

“If her condition can’t be managed—” Bartholomew starts to say.

“But it *can* be managed!” I’m suddenly so frantic that I almost grab at the front of Bartholomew’s jacket. “Please...I’m doing my best. You have to help. I’ve been controlling it, but you can lock me up again if you don’t trust me!”

The heat inside is still growing. The thirst is building, and the only blood I can imagine drinking belongs to the men locked in Bagrak’s dungeons.

It’s not just my heart that aches for them now. My life depends on it.

I need them back. I need them back now!

*Vidarok*

“You want me to what?” I’m staring around a spacious bed chamber that looks nothing like the bare room they took me into for my last beating.

“Get cleaned up and put those clothes on,” Gork repeats. He gestures to the bed, where a full set of ceremonial armor has been laid out.

“I don’t think that’s going to fit me.”

“Probably because you’re the runt of the litter, half-breed. Find a way to make it fit. Mother wants you ready in half an hour.” He turns to the door.

“Ready for what?” I pick up a huge helmet.

“The coronation ceremony.” Gork pauses with his hand on the doorknob. It’s an ugly lump of steel that complements the equally ugly door it’s attached to.

“I told you, I’m not renouncing my throne.” I drop the helmet.

“We’ll see about that. Be ready in thirty minutes, or you’ll regret it.” He opens the door and steps out, slamming it shut behind him.

“Dragh!” I look around the room. Rough-hewn wooden furniture is carelessly scattered about, and the giant bed on which the armor has been laid

is huge and covered in poorly cured pelts. Pretty much what you'd expect from an Orc.

I look down at the armor again and wonder if I should ignore his instructions and not put it on. Probably no point. They'll just beat me and then force me into it anyway.

I reach for the oversized breastplate and reluctantly put it on, struggling to fasten the straps and fighting claustrophobia as the metal encases my body. It's heavy and uncomfortable, but I have no choice but to wear it if I want to survive.

As I continue to dress in the unfamiliar armor, I try to come up with a plan. How can I escape this fate? How can I possibly fight against an entire clan of Orcs who see me as their enemy?

My thoughts are interrupted by a knock on the door. "Ten minutes left," a voice calls out from outside. It's Gork again.

I take a deep breath and steel myself for what's to come. As much as I hate it, this might be my only chance to make a move and try to escape.

I finish dressing and head toward the door, my mind racing with ideas. But as soon as I open it, my heart sinks at what I see.

Standing in front of me are at least a dozen Orcs, all wearing ceremonial armor like mine. At the center stands Gork, flanked by two other Orcs who are even more heavily armed than the ones who now surround me. If I'd hoped to take a chance and find a gap, there's no hope of it now.

"Good," Gork says when he sees me. "You're ready."

"I don't see the point in all this. I'm not going through with it."

"Humor me," he smirks, then continues down the hall to a flight of stairs that leads down to a large foyer. Whoever handled the bedroom decor seemed to have left their mark here, too, because it's all just as charmless. Heavy candlesticks attached to the walls drip wax onto the rough stone floor

tiles, and the stench of tallow permeates the air. When the heavy wooden doors to the foyer swing open, I see that it's light outside, but the interior is so dark it needs the guttering candlelight.

As we step out into the bright sunlight, I'm immediately hit with a wave of heat and dust. The smell of sweat and unwashed bodies fills my nostrils, and I have to resist the urge to gag.

I quickly scan the crowd, trying to assess the situation. There are hundreds of Orcs gathered here, all looking at me with a mix of curiosity and hostility. Some are dressed in armor similar to mine – although with fewer adornments, while others seem to be wearing whatever they could find – scraps of leather and metal fashioned into makeshift protection.

*Dragh!*

How am I supposed to fight against this many Orcs?

And what about Tariq?

I look around the large central court we're overlooking, trying to get my bearings. The walls of the fortress encircle the huge building we've just emerged from. And from what I can tell, the cells we've been kept in are situated in the basement of the same building. He's probably still down there. I can't see much chance of getting in there to get him out.

*Do I really need to?*

I shake my head at that thought. Of course I must. Aside from it being the right thing to do, Vespvr would have my nuts if I left him behind.

That's assuming I find a way to escape. When a voice booms out from behind me, I wonder if that's going to be possible.

“Citizens of Earomond!” Bagrak's voice is like a foghorn. “Citizens, you are here to witness a momentous event.”

Someone shoves me from behind, and I stumble forward. The crowd jeers.



Okay. Maybe I was mistaken when I thought one of Bagrak's warriors was pleased to see me yesterday.

"You see before you, the half-breed Vidarok, pretender to the throne," she yells. There are shouts and then some low-level rumbles as they take this in. "Now you all know that the true king stands right here before you." She indicates Gork, who throws both his hands into the air. The crowd roars with approval.

"Greetings, loyal subjects!" he shouts. His words are met with a thundering sound as the Orcs thump their fists on their chests in response.

"Of course, you may have heard that this halfling..." Bagrak's lip curls, "has a blood-right to the throne of Earomond."

"No!" someone shouts. "Pretender! Put him to death!"

Bagrak laughs loudly. "Yes, yes. We understand your outrage. But it would be wrong for us to overlook the possibility that this fool...this Orc may have a right to rule." When she turns to me, she toys with a heavy gold chain that's draped around her thick neck. If she's trying to look coquettish, she's failing miserably.

"Never!" the same voice shouts out. "Death! He should be executed!"

I scowl in the direction the voice is coming from.

"So, in the spirit of fairness and honor, we have brought this man forward to give him the opportunity to stake his claim. Or..." she aims a pointed look at me, "renounce his seat so that the rightful king can reign."

"Fuck you," I say evenly.

A dark form steps up next to her and silvery eyes fix on me. "So this is the prince you would have us find for you?" the creature hisses. "He doesn't look like much." My lip curls at the sight of the harpy. The beasts are all very similar, but I'm pretty certain it's the one who had Vespyr. She's

bigger than the others I've seen up close. Of course, most of those were either dead or dying.

"If you'd done a better job, this situation would have been a lot simpler, Empress," Bagrak mutters, then turns back to the crowd. "You all remember the Empress Ceceris? Our ally who has helped our battle from the sky."

The harpy lifts her bony arms into the air, and the Orcs roar with approval.

"With the Horde beside us, together we will be a stronger force. A force that will dominate our enemies and seek new wealth!" The Orc Queen seems to be enjoying whipping the crowd into a frenzy. "All of these things I bring to you as your ruler. Things that this pretender could never offer. Power...riches...what more could you ask?"

"Riches which you'll share with us," Ceceris says. I get the sense it's a subtle reminder.

"Get rid of him!" an Orc calls.

Bagrak looks smug.

"Those riches are stolen," I say coolly. "Your people are starving, and most of them hate you."

"Really?" A beetling eyebrow lifts toward her greasy red hairline. "Does it look that way?"

I have to admit, it doesn't. But I know that what I learned from Barok is true. The Orcs in this fortress are just the tip of the iceberg. What lies beneath looks nothing like this.

Bagrak gives me a dismissive look then turns back to the crowd. "But first!" She makes an expansive gesture. "Some entertainment!" As she speaks, I hear a loud clanking sound and look up. There's a cage overhead, being winched down. As I see the occupant, my stomach drops.

“Surprise,” Tariq says drily. He’s leaning against the bars of the cage, looking too calm for his own good.

“And now!” Bagrak cries. “I give you...the Dragon King!”

Ceceris makes another hissing sound, her eyes narrowing on him.

“Boo!” shouts the crowd. Gork practically rubs his hands together.

“Yes, yes, you hate him as much as the rest of us. Especially after he waged war on our beloved realm.”

Someone throws something. It hits the bars of the cage and splatters.

“But since I’m such a good queen, I thought I’d give you the chance to decide his fate,” Bagrak smirks, twisting the length of gold around her fingers.

“Death!” the asshole in the crowd shouts.

“Execution!” another one yells.

“Well, that goes without saying.” The queen grins. “But how would you like him to go?”

I’m beginning to feel sick. I look up at Tariq, and he shrugs.

“Beheading!”

“Nah...too easy. Burn him!” someone suggests.

“Boil him in tar!”

“Impale him!”

“Let us eat him!” Ceceris pitches in.

The list begins to grow more colorful, and I stop listening. Tariq is

unperturbed by it all.

“Or...!” Bagrak turns to me. “You could spare his life as your last gesture before renouncing the throne, Prince Vidarok.”

I blink at her. So this is how she plans to play it. If I don't do as she says, she's going to kill him. Probably horribly.

The Orc female gives me a smug look. The Horde Empress is eyeing the Dragon King like he's her next meal.

“I...” I look up at Tariq, who shakes his head. “I...” I look around at the crowd, which is now hushed.

“Would you like a little more inspiration?” Bagrak asks.

I have no idea what she's getting at.

“How would you like it if he was struck by lightning?” Gork leers. “I hear that the electricity will shoot through his body and boil his blood. His eyeballs will burst right out of his skull.”

Fire and fury, this is beyond my tolerance.

“I think I'd choose lightning.” Tariq's voice has me looking up again.

Smart thinking. What are the chances of that happening?

“I was hoping you'd say that.” Bagrak is playing with the gold chain again, this time lifting it. Attached is a small, glowing purple orb entwined in a filigree of silver threads.

*What the hell?*

“Citizens! Today, I give to you our newest ally!” She flings out an arm.

“Don't forget our deal,” Ceceris murmurs to her.

The door behind us opens again, and I hear feet scuffling. When they stop beside me, I look over into gleaming violet eyes.

“Luke?”

“Lucernas, dammit.”

“Behold!” Bagrak bellows. “The Eclipsos!” As she says it, she holds the purple object aloft. Lucernas gives a little jerk and eyes her with hatred.

*The amulet!*

The Orcs before us seem confused but applaud nonetheless.

“In my quest to be the kind of queen Earomond deserves,” Bagrak announces, “I have found for you a mage of the highest power. Lucernas Eclipsos!” she shouts proudly. There’s another smattering of applause. They’re still confused. But I’m guessing she’s about to let us all know what this is about.

“Tell us what he does,” someone calls out. This audience might not be the easiest to please after all.

Lucernas draws himself to his full height and flicks a wave of silver hair over his shoulder. “I am the guardian of the night! The giver of the day!” He doesn’t shout, but his voice carries eerily. “I bring the sun. The moon. The stars. I bring the wind and the snow and the rain. And for those who deserve it....I bring darkness!” He glares at Bagrak, who’s unmoved.

“That will do,” she says. When she gives the purple globe another shake, the mage jolts more abruptly and clutches his chest.

“How may I be of excellent service, Mistress?” he grumbles.

“A display of your powers would do nicely. Show them your lightning.”

The mage raises his hand, and a streak of light bursts from his fingertip. It shoots across the courtyard, hitting a nearby tower, which

explodes. The crowd roars with approval.

“Very nice.” Gork nods, then looks over at me. “Imagine what it’ll do to your friend here.”

“He’s not my friend,” I mutter.

He’s not. He’s more, somehow. I just can’t explain it.

“Show us something else!” someone bursts out.

“Go on.” Gork nudges Lucernas, who looks at the queen. She nods her approval. I suspect he can’t do much without her permission. He tips his chin up and looks to the sky. Clouds begin to pull in, and soon, they’re a roiling gray mass over our heads. Even though I’m fighting down dread, I can’t help but be transfixed at the sight. Lucernas jerks his head, and lightning bounces between the clouds. A bolt shoots down, hits another tower and it goes up in flames. There are more shouts of delight from the crowd. Then, with a gesture that almost seems like he’s bored, the mage flicks his wrist, and rain begins to pour. It puts out the fire.

*Fuck.*

He’s impressive.

Another bolt of lightning strikes. Two more shoot forward, then stop as he wiggles his fingers. They intertwine over our heads in a shimmering river of light. It would be beautiful if it wasn’t so deadly. Because I have no doubt that it’s deadly. The mage weaves more strands of light, and then suddenly, a ball of fire flashes by, close enough to singe our hair. It blasts into the building behind us, and shards of rock shower down on us.

“You can stop that now,” Bagrak says beneath her breath.

“I didn’t do that,” says Lucernas, looking confused.

Another flaming fireball whizzes past. It’s followed by a deafening roar. And then several more as a troop of dragons fly in at full speed.

“Attack! We’re under attack!” someone screams.

And then the world goes crazy.

*Vespyr*

“Are you alright, Vespyr?” Bartholomew asks.

“Yes,” I reply grimly. It’s a lie. I’m not. I have no idea how much longer I can keep this up. It’s like I’m burning from the inside out. And the hunger...

*Get a grip!*

Yet again, we’re facing Castle Earomond. It’s like *deja vu*.

Except this time, we’re prepared. Bartholomew’s vampires have amassed around us in a shimmering wave of gleaming armor. Barok and his troops have just hit an Orc enclave on the southern border of Earomond. There’ll be another attack from the north by the Fae. I’d been speechless when Aurora had pledged her armies to this war. She’s nearby now, with King Nightfall, the Fae I almost thought I’d marry. What a different world I live in now. I can’t imagine how things would have turned out if those plans had gone through.

*Maybe you wouldn’t be facing death.*

I shake my head. I wouldn’t change anything if it meant not being with Vidarok.

“You said you were alright. I don’t believe you,” Bartholomew says,



and I realize that I've been muttering under my breath.

"I told you I can control this, Bartholomew," I snap. "You have nothing to fear from me. I know how to use it."

"Then why were you talking to yourself?"

"Just thinking out loud, brother. How are you?" I feel terrible, but he doesn't look so good either. Though, I suspect that for him, the strain of keeping things together is weighing on him. Aurora is so set on finding a permanent cure that I suspect she thinks of little else. I think he views carrying the Curse as a betrayal to her.

*It's a gift!*

It doesn't seem like one now. My hand trembles as I reach for the sword at my side. Weapons are so unnecessary to me; I don't need them to fight. But it keeps the others happy to see me dressed up like some kind of warrior woman. I adjust the strap on my gleaming silver breastplate and run a finger under the neckline of my chainmail tunic.

"I'll feel better once I can get my mate away from this place." Bartholomew's brow furrows. He'd been reluctant to let Aurora join this fight, but she's not a woman who likes to be told what to do. Much like myself.

I like her.

Funny how I once thought of her as expendable. Then again, I thought that about a lot of people.

*Because you were being manipulated!*

"We'll find a way through this, Bart. You're going to be okay." I smile at him. My lips pull stiffly as I do it. My skin feels too tight.

"Are you ready, Sire?" Lord Mortas asks as he comes up next to us. He gives me a silent nod of greeting. Not everyone was thrilled to have me back, and Mortas has always been more suspicious than others. Annoyance

rises, and I tamp it down. I can't tell the difference between real emotions and those brought on by my...condition.

“Ready as I'll ever be,” Bartholomew says grimly. He looks ahead of us to the castle. We're on the same hill I'd occupied when I was last here. It's a good spot, giving a clear view of the castle. It's not so scenic this time. The battlefield is still littered with the debris of the last battle. Bagrak didn't bother to clear her fallen, and the place stinks of death and despair.

Not our despair, though. Today, we're here to win.

“Something is going on.” I frown as I cast an eye to the dark clouds that are pulling in. The sky was clear when we arrived, and there's something unnatural about it now. My fears are confirmed when a bolt of lightning shoots directly inside the walls of the castle. There's a crash as it hits something. More lightning forms, but this time, it twists and twines into a spectacular light show.

“What the hell?” says my brother. A gust of air above us is followed by the sound of wind over our wings, and a vast copper form swoops over us.

Turin.

Within seconds, the air is filled with gleaming dragons. Turin's dragon hovers in front of us, and bright, intelligent eyes meet mine for a moment.

*This is it.*

“It begins,” Bartholomew says from beside me. I don't respond. I'm too focused on watching the huge beasts forming a squadron. They streak toward the castle. A fireball hits a wall and then another as they begin their attack. Seconds later, shapes begin to emerge on the ramparts. The Orcs are assembling to turn back the onslaught. It's hardly a concerted effort, but maybe Bagrak is overconfident after her previous victory.

But then it happens.

A column of pale purple light shoots directly into the sky from inside the castle, disappearing into the churning clouds. And then it snaps back. Everything goes dark in an instant.

“By Blood! What is happening?” I hear Mortas from nearby. It’s impossible to see him because the darkness has fallen like a blanket, blacker than night.

“Can you hear that?” somebody says. I don’t look around to see who it is because it would be useless. Instead, I concentrate on the sound. It takes seconds for me to figure it out.

Wings.

Thousands of wings.

For a while, it’s the only sound around us.

“It’s the Horde!” I bite out, gathering my wits and bracing myself because there’s no uncertainty now. Our fight has just started.

“Where is Aurora?” Bartholomew says sharply. “I need to find her.”

Fuck. If he’s going to spend the entire battle worrying about his mate, he’s going to be a liability.

“Right here!” It’s her voice now. “We’re ready.”

A pale gleam cuts through the darkness, and I look back to see a line of Fae stretching along the top of the ridge. Leading them is Aurora, looking fearless. I hear my brother’s sigh of relief; then his shape comes into focus. He raises a fist and then swings it down.

“Now!” he bellows. His voice rises over the noise of wings, which is growing, joined by shrieks and cackles. Armor clanks, boots thunder, and a wave of vampires wash down the hill to the castle. Some run, some ride, and some are airborne as they crash into the Horde. The previous quiet is shattered by the clash of weapons and battle cries. Along the ridge, Aurora’s

Fae fight the darkness with sweeping gestures and beams of light that seem inadequate against this unholy darkness. But they'll overcome it. Fae magic is strong.

I wait as I try to make out what's happening below us. Bagrak's Orcs have begun to peel out of the castle, swarming onto the field surrounding its walls as they fight along with the harpies. There are scores of them, giant shapes silhouetted by the Fae light that is the only thing allowing our people to fight in the dark. That, and the flash of fire each time a dragon breathes flames into the mass of battling warriors.

My breath comes faster as I take it all in. The carnage. It feels like it's seeping into me. It burns and twists like a knife in my chest. The sensation grows until I'm sure surrounded by it. When I look down at my hands, they're gleaming. My arms, too. My whole body is glowing.

My gift...the Curse – whatever it is – is taking hold, and if I don't channel it, it's going to consume me.

I can't wait here any longer.

I charge forward, screaming at the top of my lungs.

“Vespyr!” Bartholomew yells from behind me. We're supposed to be creating the last line of defense and using our powers from the ridge, but I'm not satisfied with that now. Tariq and Vidarok are inside there somewhere, and I'm not going to stand around waiting for someone else to get them out.

“Whatever happens, make sure that they're safe!” I yell over my shoulder an instant before I crash headlong into a screaming harpy. She puts up a fight, but not for long. It's almost a relief when I sink my fangs into her throat. I don't drink. I can't. But I can kill.

I keep moving, allowing the building madness to fuel me. I've completely transformed now. Bigger, stronger, brighter...when I look through the halo of light I've formed and into the eyes of the warriors coming at me, I know that I am a terrible sight. Fear colors their faces, but there's no mercy in me. I barely recognize the side of me that starts to take over.

*It's not madness. Hold it together!*

Above me, lightning has begun to cut through the darkness again. Streaks of it hit the earth, striking dragons, vampires, and Fae. I see a dragon go down, then get covered by Orcs. Clambering over bodies to reach it, I let out a howl that isn't even my voice.

“Die!” that voice roars. It's a word that becomes a mantra as I fling the Orcs away from the struggling dragon who gets to its feet and takes off again. Bodies litter the earth around me as I cut a swathe through the throng. I lose track after that. All I can feel is the thirst that drives me. A thirst that can't be fed by the blood of my victims.

*You're going to die here, Vespyr.*

But I find that I don't care. If my last act is to save them, then that will be enough.

It's only when a huge Orcish hammer crashes through the air beside my head that I realize I'm facing the giant drawbridge that leads to the castle walls. I release a bolt of power that sends my would-be attacker flying through the air, and then I fix my attention on the drawbridge. The timber is thick, heavy, and pitted. And it has to be destroyed. Except when I raise my hands, they're shaking.

*Thirsty!*

The pain of it is killing me.

The rage that has driven me feels like it's turning on me now. My flesh burns as I focus on the wall of wood in front of me. Another Orc flings himself at me, and I sweep him away with a snap of my arm as if he were nothing.

*Strong! I'm still strong!*

If I can open the gateway to the castle, our people can get in there.

Squeezing my eyes shut against the agony, I raise both hands and concentrate my energy on the drawbridge in front of me; power rushes from my palms. There's an explosion, and then splinters of wood are showering down over me.

I sink to my knees, gasping for air.

*Thirsty!*

I can barely think of anything else as bodies rush past me. The fighters are breaching the castle gates. Metal clashes as weapons meet armor. Boots thunder. Warriors scream out their battle cries. And I'm on my knees. I drop to all fours, my hands clutching the blood-soaked dirt in front of me. I'm panting. Burning.

"Here!" someone shouts from inside the castle walls. "They're here!"

I raise my head. I see a glow of light coming from ahead.

There's a call: "King Tariq!"

*Oh, thank God.*

"We have the Orc Prince!"

It's the last thing I hear before I drop.

Tariq

This is not a good place to be.

The cage I'm in dangles precariously above the fight beneath me. As objects fly by, narrowly missing the bars, I'm like a sitting duck.

Far below, I see Vidarok standing on the stairs near Bagrak and her half-wit son. He's being restrained by a group of towering Orc guards. I can see that he's doing his best to get down toward the fight that's unfolding. It would probably mean death, but that's never stopped him before.

The mage is hovering nearby, also looking like he's hoping for a chance to escape. It's not a hope that means much because Bagrak suddenly reaches out and grabs him by the scruff of his neck.

"Don't think of going anywhere," she growls. "You still haven't finished."

With a silent nod, he starts weaving patterns in the air with his hands, and something crackles. The tower of light he created has disappeared and has been replaced by a low glow that illuminates the courtyard we're still in. The crowd that had been here has scattered since the dragons arrived.

*Fire take it!*

I have to get out of here. Tugging at the door to the cage proves futile. Which is no surprise since it hasn't budged any of the times I've pulled at it. I clamber around the cage, kicking and pulling, ducking when objects fly by.

This is fucking ridiculous.

Then, there's a sound from below. I look down. Bagrak is tussling with Vidarok, who has managed to squirm free of the guards and has launched himself at her. I doubt he'll do much damage because the guards are already grabbing at him, but the mage has perked up.

Lucernas blinks at me, and then something flashes in his eyes. The instant I realize that he's trying to tell me something, a blast of light jolts through the air and shears through the bars of my cage. The impact knocks it sideways, and suddenly, it swings over, and I tumble with it. I land heavily on the lower side, where a hole has been torn through the metal that held me. Now all I can do is not fall out of it. I slip, drop, and catch myself just before I go out of the hole.

It's a long way down.

The cage crashes against the wall nearby, but with the commotion all around me, it's hardly a big deal. Bagrak is still focused on getting the Orcs out of the courtyard to the fight outside the walls. Another dragon swoops past, breathing fire. A flock of harpies is hot on his tail. It's Aidurn. I recognize the red scales. He's holding his own against them, though they're clearly not as frail as they once were. Something has strengthened them. Bagrak's influence, I imagine. The Horde Empress has darted down the stairs and is screeching orders at her soldiers.

Meanwhile, I'm still clinging to the bars of the cage. And my hands are slipping.

It really is a long way down.

*Wings!*

Just as my grip fails me, I shut my eyes and concentrate hard on



pulling my dragon to the fore. In the split second it takes me to plummet toward the stairs, I've shifted. The instant before I hit them, my wings unfold, and I haul myself aloft.

Okay, that was too fucking close.

But I'm up and flying.

"The Dragon King!" screams Gork. "He's getting away!"

"Leave him." Bagrak waves a hand. "He won't get far. Ceceris will get him."

A cloud of dark wings is swooping toward me, but that's not why I can't go.

I can't because the damn Orc Prince is still stuck there with her. I can't leave him behind. And I can't unleash my flames at them because Vidarok is still grappling with the guards right next to her. I'll fry him. And the mage, too, which would be a pity because he's entertaining. Although getting rid of Lucernas would take away her advantage of using his magic against us.

As I fly in a sweeping arc over the courtyard, cutting a swathe through harpies, I fix my eyes on the mage.

*By the flame!*

There are too many reasons I can't fucking kill him.

My best bet is to get rid of Bagrak.

*How?*

There's an ear-shattering crash from beyond the ramparts of the castle. Orcs scatter everywhere, boots loud on the flagstones, their shouts ringing out. The harpies on my tail swing away to turn their attention to the new threat. Bagrak shrieks orders, but nobody is listening. I swoop down and incinerate a few stragglers, then keep circling.

“Your Majesty!” someone yells out. A huge brute has clambered up the wide stairs to Bagrak. “Your Majesty, the enemy has reached the outer walls.” He’s battered and bleeding, a thick gash marring the line of his chest. The edges of the wound peel open.

“Then send in more fighters,” she snaps.

“There are none, Your Majesty.” He wipes a filthy hand over his forehead. It’s covered in gore that might be his own.

“None? What do you mean none?” She scowls at him.

“They were sent to fight at the northern and southern borders, Your Majesty. There have been attacks by Orcish dissidents there.” The Orc looks uncomfortable. He shuffles his feet.

“What?” Bagrak barks. She’s on the top step, in front of the giant entrance doors, and she looms over him. “Why wasn’t I told of this?”

“We were instructed not to bother you during the ceremony, Your Majesty. Under pain of death.”

“So you just let a war unfold without letting me know?” It looks like her head’s about to explode.

“Under pain of death, Your Majesty,” he repeats. I can only imagine what that would entail. “What shall we do about the attackers here?”

“I’ll make a plan. And my guards can add to the numbers,” she says, flicking a wrist at the group of Orcs gathered around her. “Fucking idiot.” She brushes the big male aside and turns to the mage. “Come on. We need more than this little light show of yours. Work your magic.”

“What do you want me to do, Mistress?” Lucernas eyes her coolly.

“I have no idea. When I bought you, you didn’t come with an instruction manual. Improvise!”

“You didn’t buy me. You bought my amulet.” His tone is sullen.

“Same thing!” She holds up the purple object that’s been hanging between her dangling breasts. That’s probably the amulet he told us about. “Now, do whatever you do.”

With a huff, Lucernas turns and looks beyond the throng in front of us. He flexes his fingers and mumbles something unintelligible. He flexes his fingers some more. I can see that he’s stalling. I have no doubt that this is a fight he doesn’t want to be part of.

“Come on!” Bagrak cuffs the back of his head. “Or shall I crush this little bottle of yours?” She holds it up. “I wonder what that would do...”

“No!” he says quickly. He keeps casting furtive glances my way, and I suspect he’s hoping I’m going to do something useful. I wish I could. Aside from whittling down their numbers with bursts of flame, I can’t do what would really make a difference, which is to get hold of Bagrak.

“You!” Vidarok suddenly shouts out. There’s only one Orc holding him now, and although the male is huge, Vidarok is determined. He swings an arm free. “You hide behind your mages and guards. When you’re just a fucking coward. A scheming bitch who would be nothing without the legacy my father gave you.”

Bagrak turns her attention to him. “It’s more than your mother got, isn’t it?” Her ugly lips curl.

“Only because you lied to him. You lied to everyone. He died without knowing her love.” Vidarok is still trying to pull away from the Orc. He’d probably do a better job if he wasn’t so intent on verbally assaulting the queen.

“Oh, boo hoo!” She shrugs carelessly. “It’s all part of the game, half-breed. All’s fair and love and war, don’t they say?” She gives a contemptuous snort as Vidarok flails at her with his free arm.

“You have no honor!” Vidarok snarls. “You are lower than scum.

And your son...that filth is just like you. Not fit to rule. Not fit for anything. He's a fucking half-wit!"

"Hey!" Gork shouts in objection. Lumbering around his mother, he takes several steps forward, focused on reaching Vidarok, who he probably thinks he'll be able to take out since the man basically has one hand strapped behind his back. The movement puts distance between Gork and the small cluster standing on the stairs.

And I see my chance.

Shooting through the air like a flaming arrow, I aim a narrow stream of flames from my nostrils and hit him dead-on. The short yell he gives is the last sound he makes before he disintegrates into a pile of dust.

"Gork!" Bagrak lets out a bloodcurdling scream. "Gork!" Shoving the mage away, she charges to the ashes. She drops to her knees, her fingers scrabbling through the dirt. "Why?" she screams up at me. It's a pretty stupid question because it's obvious why I did it. She flings her dusty hands into the air and bellows into the sky.

I keep flying in swooping circles.

And Vidarok makes his move. Twisting free of the guard, he flings himself across the distance between him and the queen. He hits her square in the chest, and they both go down hard. And then they're tumbling down the stairs, a flailing jumble of heavy arms and legs. She may be bigger than he is, but he's got brute force and fury on his side. And a lust for vengeance for his mother. When they finally stop tumbling, Bagrak's arm is twisted at an awkward angle. It's broken. Vidarok has it in his grip, and she shrieks when he twists it cruelly.

"Get him off me!" she shouts, but there's no one to come to her aid. Her son is dead. Her guards are fighting. It's just her and the bastard son she sent into exile all those years ago. And he wants his pound of flesh.

"You deserve every bit of pain I'm giving you now...and more," he snarls into her face. She spits back at him, the wet glob dripping down his

cheek. He barely acknowledges it.

With his free hand, he reaches up and rips the amulet away from her chest. At the top of the stairs, Lucernas gives a fist pump, which seems out of character for a mage. But then again, what do I know about Elementals who live in amulets?

Bagrak howls in outrage as Vidarok dangles the purple amulet over her face. He's lying heavily on top of her, still twisting her arm. But he's not watching the good one. And that's not smart because it's snaking up. Something gleams between her fingers. I throw my head back and let out a screech of warning, but I doubt he can figure out what I'm trying to tell him. Luckily, instinct does the job because he catches sight of the blade an instant before she plunges it toward his throat.

Lucernas yelps as Vidarok drops the amulet and grabs her wrist. They're suddenly wrestling again, but this time, the vicious dagger is the focus of their attention. Between the grunts, growls, and the thrashing limbs, it's hard to see what's going on. Until they come to a stop.

I hold my breath.

*Come on, Orc...*

I let it out when he disentangles himself from her lifeless limbs and pushes himself up and away from her motionless body.

"The Queen is dead!" he roars, holding up a bloody fist. "Long live the King!"

I doubt it's customary for a king to announce his own ascension to the throne, but there's no one else to do it. He throws his back and roars again. The few Orcs fighting around him stop what they're doing.

"The queen is dead," one of them says.

"Kill the pretender!" a cry rings out.

"He's the true king!" a reply meets the call. And there's more

clashing as the Orcs begin to fight among themselves. Vidarok stares, bemused, as do I. I barely notice the mage trotting down the stairs to where Bagrak is lying on the ground. Reaching down, he snatches up the amulet and cradles it against his chest. There's a look of sheer bliss on his fine features. Then he stoops again and thumps his fist against the earth.

For a moment, there's nothing...and then a creaking, groaning sound begins...and grows louder. Suddenly, the ground opens up. A long fissure forms between the stones of the courtyard, and purple light begins to stream out. The fighting Orcs stop short and look around in confusion. Probably trying to figure out what the hell is going on...as I am.

They find out soon enough as the light touches them. Some seem unmoved, while others start to scream. They scream louder as the light beams out of them in streams. And then they explode. All around me, things are popping and screeching. Harpies are falling from the sky like black-winged rain. Ceceris and her Horde amassed here for this war...and they will die here for their efforts. Within a minute, the skies are clear, and the din below has settled.

“That should do it.” Lucernas dusts his hands off and smiles at the new Orc King. “The ones who died were the bad ones, by the way.”

Vidarok just stares at him.

And then a throng of familiar faces floods in. And some not so familiar...but all of them are on our side. Which makes a nice change.

Dropping from the air, I land in a section of the courtyard that isn't cluttered with fallen Orcs and make my way to where a group of people have clustered around Vidarok. Zydus, Aidurn, Nirem...there's Lord Luther of the vampires, with Lord Mortas, one of the elders. King Nightfall is there, along with a string of Fae. As I join them, I see Vidarok's eyes scanning the faces, and I know that like me, he has only one question in his mind.

“Where's Vespyr?”

Some of them exchange glances before Zydus speaks, “They took her

back to Morganeau.” He looks from me to Vidarok. “She’s dying.”

*Vespyr*

“Please!” My scream is agonized, and my back bows as my body arches clean off the bed I’m lying on.

“My Lady!” a voice says. A cool cloth is laid over my forehead. It’s Bridrod. Sweet Bridrod.

*If I take her with me...*

No! I won’t do that.

I scream again.

“How long must she endure this?” Bridrod sounds as tortured as I feel.

“I have no idea. None of the others have lasted this long,” I hear my brother's voice. “It’s amazing she hasn’t succumbed already.”

“I can’t take this,” the she-dragon murmurs. She’s dabbing at my face with the cloth now. It doesn’t help. The air is filled with the scent of burning. It’s me. I’m ablaze. At least, it seems that way.

I twist and writhe as the flames inside threaten to consume me. I’m fighting off the fire. Right now, I don’t know how or why.



*Let it take you.*

Anything has to be better than this.

I scream yet again. It's barely human, although my vampire form is long gone. The power that had kept me strong has evaporated, and all I'm left with is pain. That and the madness that lurks just beyond the borders of my control. If I let that loose—

*I can't let it loose!*

They were right. This isn't a gift. It's a curse.

“Make. It. Stop!” My throat burns with the effort of screaming. Or maybe it's just burning. If I die now, it could only be better.

“I'm sorry, Vespyr. There's nothing we can do.” Bartholomew sounds so damned sad, it's breaking my heart. Why didn't I listen to him? Maybe if I'd taken the cure sooner—

“Where is she?” someone outside roars.

“Get out of the way!” There's a crash, and then boots thunder. The bed dips. “Vespyr... My love...”

The effort to open my eyes is insurmountable, but when I do, I'm sure I'm dreaming. Two shapes swim above me, their features blurring.

“It's not too late. She's still here...” Tariq says to Vidarok. I squeeze my eyes shut, breathing hard as another wave of heat threatens to take hold of me. I scream again.

“For God's sake, what are you waiting for?”

Something touches my mouth, warm and silken against my parched lips. Then warmth trickles onto my tongue and floods my mouth, and it's the sweetest thing I've ever tasted.

Blood.

“Mmmm...” I groan as I start to drink. And drink. And drink.

“It’s working. Look!” Vidarok...or Tariq says. They’ve both blurred in my mind now. But I realize that after the first mouthful, my cheeks have stopped flaming.

“Out! All of you, get out!” one of them commands. I’m vaguely aware of the other presences in the room withdrawing as the two men settle more comfortably on the bed beside me.

“Mmmmm...” I moan again, fastening my lips more firmly. I draw in deeply. Though the blood is warm, it feels like a cool flood down my throat and into my body. The coolness spreads, soaking into my pores. The shuddering begins to ease.

“Definitely working.” It’s Tariq now. He’s stroking my hair, and my eyes lock with his when I finally open them. His lips quirk up. “Welcome back.” It’s his wrist beneath my lips, his blood I’m gulping at thirstily. I reach a hand up to clasp his forearm more firmly, sucking harder. He’s still watching me, a fingertip tracing the line of my cheek.

“Her color’s coming back,” Vidarok says. I flick my focus to him. Things are less hazy now. I can see that his face is streaked with dirt. They both bring with them the scent of fire.

Tariq makes a small sound deep in his throat. The heat has all but dissipated...except in my core. And that seems impossible. But then again, not. I always desire those I feed from. But now, it’s only them.

I whimper when Tariq pulls his wrist away.

“She needs more.”

“I’m done.” Tariq rocks back, his face pale.

*I’m draining him!*

But I don't have time to worry about it because Vidarok is gathering me against his chest. He cups the back of my head and nestles my face into the curve of his neck. The skin is warm there, the pulse beneath my lips an unmistakable invitation. When he presses my face closer, I don't hesitate. This time, he's the one who groans when my teeth sink in.

I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him, making small moaning sounds with each hungry swallow. Something touches my back, and I realize that Tariq is behind me, stroking the curve of my spine in long, sweeping motions. I sigh through my nose and melt into the sensation.

Without realizing it, I've twisted so that I'm straddling Vidarok, who's leaning back against the headboard. I'm panting when I raise my head and meet his eyes. I didn't think it was possible, but I've drunk my fill.

"I thought I'd lost you," he says a moment before his lips brush over mine.

"We both did," Tariq says from behind me. His arms slide around my waist as he buries his face into the back of my neck. I'm enveloped by them. And I don't think I've ever felt safer.

I heave out a breath and let cool oxygen flood me as I inhale.

"I was so afraid..." My voice is hoarse. "I was so afraid of what she'd do to you."

"Shhh..." Vidarok says, his mouth closing over mine again.

"We're here." Tariq is holding me from behind in an embrace that's pure heaven. And more...

When the others had brought me here, they stripped me down to just the light shift that was beneath my armor. I can feel Tariq's naked body through the thin fabric of it. He's hot in a way that's different from the fire. Good. So good. And he's hard against me. His cock pressing against my back. Between my legs, Vidarok's thick girth is pressing against my mound through the leather of his pants.

*What's going on here?*

Whatever it is, I don't want it to stop.

Firm lips move up the line of my neck as Tariq grazes his mouth against my skin. Then warm hands slide up my belly, and my inner walls clench with need. I can tell that it's Tariq because Vidarok's hands are cradling my face as he dots kiss from my chin to my forehead.

"I'm never letting you out of my sight again," he whispers.

"Me neither." Tariq's voice is a warm breath against my ear. I make another of those pathetic little whimpers, but I guess I can be forgiven since I almost burst into flames a few minutes ago. Now, flames of a different sort are licking at me as Tariq slides his hands up my torso to cup my breasts. My head drops back onto his shoulder as he thumbs my nipples through the fabric covering them.

He's kneeling behind me, and I can feel his shaft throbbing against me. When I reach behind me and grasp it in one hand, his breath hisses. He groans and grazes his teeth along my shoulder, which sends a jolt right through me.

Vidarok's eyes grow hazy, and I realize that I'm grinding against his cock, hungry in a different way now. His eyes widen when I reach down between us to free him from his pants, my fingers fumbling with sudden desperation. My breath comes fast, my lips parted as I work to get my fingers around his shaft. Behind me, Tariq has begun to pump his hips as I slide my hand up and down his shaft.

Vidarok pushes the hem of my shift up my thighs, baring my skin to his roving touch.

"Oh!" I cry out when a fingertip meets the entrance of my pussy. I'm totally drenched with need.

Vidarok groans as I drip into the palm of his hand. "So needy..." His voice is a rumble that tugs at the pit of my belly.

Tariq is still swirling his thumbs over my puckered nipples, which are so tight now they're almost aching.

“God!” I choke out when Vidarok rubs his thumb over my clit. I’m sure it’s going to explode. He slides a finger into me, and my back arches, pushing me closer against Tariq, who’s still pumping into my hand.

I roll my palm over the head of Vidarok’s huge cock, feeling the sticky pre-cum sliding against my skin. He grits his teeth as his hips pump up. He’s pushed another finger into me, scissoring them apart, though there’ll be no need to stretch me wider to take him in now. I’m more than ready. Without thinking about it, I lift myself, hovering over his thick head, and then begin to slide down the length of him.

“Yesssss...” I hiss out, the slight sting making my eyes water. He keeps his hands on my hips, guiding me slowly.

“Fuck!” Tariq is staring down between us to where Vidarok has spread me open around his massive girth. “Holy fuck!” Tariq adds, his voice hoarse. I speed up my hand along his cock and start to rock my hips in time to the motion. Soon, his hips are pumping more erratically.

“Watch her come,” Vidarok says, and I realize he’s talking to Tariq, who doesn’t really need any prompting. Neither do I. There’s a flutter between my legs as my pussy tightens and clenches around Vidarok’s shaft. “Do it, my love. Let me see you!” he says through gritted teeth. The rolling motion of his pelvis has him touching every part of me inside.

My first hoarse cry is echoed by Tariq’s as he thrusts into my hand, and then I’m spiraling into an ocean of pure pleasure that washes away any trace of the fire that had tormented me before.

“Yes! Like that!” Vidarok urges me, his own movements getting rougher and more urgent. Tariq chokes out a rough sound and then stiffens against me, his cock jerking in my fist and his fingers closing almost painfully around the flesh of my breasts. It only adds to the sensations flooding through me as Vidarok gives his own guttural cry and explodes inside me.

The warm stickiness of Tariq’s cum streams through my fingers as Vidarok’s begins to drip from inside me. Tariq gives a few spasmodic jerks against my back and then slumps over me, his face pressed into my hair. Vidarok has his arms wrapped around me, and he’s kissing me so sweetly I can barely remember how we got here. But I’ll never forget what we’ve just

done.

“What have we done?” It’s Tariq. He’s straightened and moved away. I look over my shoulder at him, and his face is a mask of confusion.

“It’s okay.” I smile gently. It’s more than okay, though I can’t quite explain why. Except he’s drawing back, putting distance between us as he scrambles off the bed and gets to his feet.

“What have we done?” he says more urgently. I frown.

“Tariq...” Vidarok begins. He’s still holding me like something precious, still buried deep inside me. I’m not ready to accept the expression on Tariq’s face as he stares at us in...horror.

“I have to...I have to get out of here!” he chokes out, backing away. He snatches at a robe hanging near the door, flings it open, and then slams it shut behind him.

I turn my head back to look at Vidarok.

“Fuck,” he says.

Tariq

*I can't!* I just can't get my head around what just happened in there.

“Fire!” I bark out as I stride down the hallway, putting distance between us. Between me and them...

*What the hell did I just do?*

My breath is coming in sharp bursts; my body is still humming from the orgasm that just crashed through me. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before. But I just watched another man fuck the woman I've been aching for...and I loved it. Not only that, but my dragon had been there all along, and he loved it too.

*This is fucking madness!*

I run a hand through my hair, pulling it at the roots as I glare ahead of me. I can still feel her against my skin and smell her scent.

“Fire take it! All of it!” Long strides chew up the hallways as I charge ahead without knowing my destination.

“My Lord?” A servant ducks out of my path, then scurries away in alarm as I keep storming forward.

I finally stop when I realize I've reached the end of the gardens. The stables are nearby. This is close to where Vespyr was taken that night.

The night when everything changed.

"Fuck." I'm breathless. "Fuck...fuck...*fuck!*" I rake both hands through my hair as I pace in a circle. A low growl builds in my throat and turns into a rough roar that I throw into the sky with my head tossed back.

"You're going to churn up the grass."

I spin to face the source of the voice. "Luke! What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came to see the horses." He strolls toward me. "And it's Lucernas."

"No. I mean why here?"

"Because I like horses." He smooths a hand over his sleek silver hair. His eyes glow a little. The amulet is on a chain around his neck.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! I mean here in Morganeau. Why did you come here? Who brought you?"

He shrugs. "Nowhere else to go, really. And I figured you owed me for saving your realm and all that. So I flew in on one of your dragons."

"Vidarok was the one who killed Bagrak. He's the one I owe a debt to." Did I just say that?

"Believe what you wish." He shrugs again. It's a delicate motion of his shoulders. "But enough about me. Why are you charging around your garden like a wounded buffalo? And in a woman's robe, no less."

"I don't want to talk about it." I look away.

"Really? I think you have a lot on your chest." He drops his eyes to where my robe has dropped open.



I really should have found something else to wear. I wasn't thinking.  
"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine. Let's talk about something else then." He strolls across the lawn and stops at a tree. There's a bright flash, and suddenly, he's perched on one of the lower branches.

"I don't want to talk about anything." What I want to do is stay out here until my blood stops boiling.

"Let's talk about love," the mage says, completely ignoring me.

"Luke..." There's a warning in my tone. He ignores that, too.

"What do you think about it?" He cocks his head. He's turned to lean his back against the thick trunk of the tree.

"I... I don't think anything about it." I sound surly.

"Of course you do. Everyone thinks about love." He raises a knee and sets his foot on the branch he's sitting on. I realize that he's wearing white cotton trousers beneath his robe.

*Why the hell am I noticing that?*

"So are you going to tell me?" he presses.

I heave a sigh. "You're not going to let this go, are you?" A soft breeze ruffles my hair, which probably looks wild, considering how much I've been tugging at it.

"Never."

"Fine. I think love is complicated." I hope he's going to drop this. Of course, it's too much to hope for.

"It's only as complicated as you make it,"

I give a snort.

*If only you knew...*

“If only I knew what?” He looks at me.

“What the...? Luke! Are you reading my mind?”

“Maybe.”

“Fire take it!” I throw my hands up. “If you can read my mind, why are we even having this conversation?”

“Because I like the sound of my own voice.”

“Well, there’s a surprise,” I say drily.

“Okay, let’s stop beating about the bush, shall we?” He turns on his branch to face me. “This is obviously about the princess.”

“Sure,” I acknowledge.

“Do you love her?” He holds up a hand when I open and close my mouth stupidly. “Wait. Don’t answer that. Do you have feelings for her?”

“Yes,” I admit. Although, as much as I’ve been fighting it, the word “love” keeps popping into my mind.

“So what’s stopping you from exploring those feelings?”

“The fact that she has a mate.” I grit my teeth.

“And what does he think about these feelings you have?”

“I...” I’m back to running my hand through my hair. “I don’t know. He doesn’t seem to mind.”

*Oh, boy! Now, there’s an understatement.*

“So, you think he’d be open to the idea of sharing her?”

“What?” I snap. How the fuck did we just circle around the very topic I was trying to avoid?

“You know... The three of you. Together.” Silvery eyebrows bob.

My mind is flooded with images that I’m trying to forget. Images that make me burn. “No. Maybe... Yes,” I grind out.

“So why not just do it? Be a ‘throuple’ – the three of you together. What do you have to lose?”

“That’s easy for you to say.” I frown. “You’re...” I trail off.

“What? Not a hulking brute amped up on testosterone?” He pulls a face. “We Elementals live a long time, dragon. A very long time. I’ve loved women before. And men. And...” He winks at me. “You get my drift. And if I’ve learned anything, it’s that we should take love where we find it. It doesn’t matter where it comes from, as long as they’re worthy.”

My shoulders slump. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

There’s a sound of footfalls behind us. Lucernas looks past me. “I’ll leave you to it,” he says. Without a word, he vanishes and I’m looking into clear space. Of course he’d do that.

I turn around.

“What do you want?” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at Vidarok.

“Vespyr sent me.”

“And do you do everything that Vespyr tells you to do?”

“Yes,” he says simply, and I can’t argue that because I’d do it too.

“Why?”

“Don’t be an ass. Why do you think?” He rubs his jaw, looks around, then walks over to a bench and sits down.

“Being an ass is your job,” I grumble sullenly. He can sit if he wants. I’m standing.

“You’re doing it better right now.” He leans back on the bench. “So, shall we talk?”

*Fire! Not another one.*

“We can’t avoid the topic forever, dragon. May as well get it over with.”

“Why?” I stick my jaw out. He can browbeat me into this conversation, but I’m not making this easy for him.

“Because there’s more to what just happened, and you know it.”

“Look, if you’re here to kick my ass about touching your female—”

“I’m not,” he stops me. He leans forward, setting his palms on his knees, and fixes me with a level stare. “Look...Vespyr wants you.”

“So?”

“That means I want you, too.” He raises a hand when my eyebrows shoot up. “Not like that. But...” He rolls his shoulders. “Did you hate what happened back there?”

I shake my head because I’d be lying if I said yes.

“Would you do it again?”

I pull in a breath. “I... No. I think... Okay, under the right circumstances...”

“What if we made the circumstances right?” He tilts his head.

I truly can't believe I'm having this conversation.

“Why?” I ask.

He thinks for a moment, then starts to speak. “My mother died not knowing the love she deserved. I will never do that to a woman of mine. I'll give my mate all the love I have to offer...and if she needs more, she'll have it. I don't care if it has to come from someone else. Someone like you.”

I blink a few times, not sure that I heard right.

“You're a good man, Tariq Firestarter. Strong. Capable. You do the right thing. Vespvr finds you...physically appealing, so I guess there's that too.”

“Thanks.” I have no idea of what else to say to that.

“What do you think about me?” His stare turns hard.

“I think you're a good man, Orc.” I can't deny it.

“Thank you,” he says back, then leans back again. “I heard you tell the mage you had feelings for Vespvr.”

“Great. Now I can't even have a private conversation, goddammit!”

“So do you?”

“Yes, I have feelings for her. After all that we've been through, how can you even ask that question?”

“Is love one of those feelings?” He waits after he says it. He keeps waiting because I'm not answering. “Is it?” His voice grows more forceful.

*Fire! Just say it!*

“Yes! I fucking love her, okay!” The minute the words are out, a

flood of relief washes over me. I find myself breathless. Though, I quickly suck in air when I hear a choking sound from nearby.

“You love me?” Vespvr has her hand clasped to her heaving chest. Her lush, beautiful, heaving chest. She’s standing a few feet away with the light streaming from behind her.

“Oh, my fucking god!” I fling my hands into the air. “Is *everybody* out here today?”

“Just the ones who matter.” She’s beaming as she walks to me, like a dancer across the grass. “You love me!”

“Yes.” I exhale. It’s out now. Everybody may as well know it. Her most of all. “I love you, Vespvr Lynede Bellingham, Crown Princess, sister to the Grand Overlord Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham.” My lips quirk up. Why did I never realize how good it would be to say it?

“I love you too, King Tariq Firestarter.” She stops in front of me and cups my cheek. I squeeze my eyes shut. When I open them, I’m drowning in pools of molten gold. How the fuck am I ever going to walk away from this?

“This is good. Very good.” Vidarok smiles at Vespvr and pats the seat beside him. She goes to join him but trails her fingertips along my arm as she moves away. A ripple runs through my skin, and my cock jerks.

*Enough!*

I go back to pacing in a circle. My hands are in my hair again, and I swear I’m going to pull all of it out before the day is over.

They’re both watching me when I turn back in their direction. “I don’t know what to do,” I huff.

“We can all be together, Tariq,” Vespvr says. “We’ll figure it out. We can make it work.”

“But it’s impossible!”

“No it’s not. You’re my mate, Tariq. And I am yours,” she says simply. Vidarok doesn’t object to that, and I don’t try to deny it because it’s true. I’ve felt the pull. My dragon knew before I did. Just having this conversation is getting him worked into a state. Answering a mating call that shouldn’t be feasible.

“What about the Orc?” I jerk my head at him.

“He’s my mate, too.”

“And you are mine.” He smiles gently, reaching for her hand and kissing her fingers.

“How?” I demand.

“I can’t explain that. It just...is.” She lifts one shoulder. The movement is so graceful that I find myself transfixed.

And she’s right. It just *is*.

But it’s not how it’s meant to be. Everyone knows that. “It’s not supposed to be this way,” I mutter.

“Who decides that?” Vidarok asks.

“Exactly,” says Vespvr. “Who decides how we should choose our mates? Or how we should love? The way I see it, when you find love, you should grab it with both hands. All of it. Not a drop of it should go wasted.”

“My mother died of a broken heart, Tariq. Vespvr’s did, too. You’ll break my mate’s heart if you turn her away. Don’t do that.” Vidarok’s jaw is steely.

“Stop fighting this, Tariq,” Vespvr continues. “You want it. So does Vidarok. And I need you both. The blood has taught us that much. We’ll figure the rest out as we go.”

“The blood,” I repeat as things begin to fall into place. Bartholomew had told us that she hadn’t been able to feed while we were away. The cure

hadn't worked, and their blood had burned her.

But not mine. Or his.

I look at Vidarok, certain that he can tell what I'm thinking.

"She needs us both. To feed. To survive." He confirms what I'm thinking.

"You saved my life," she whispers. "You own it now. Both of you do."

There's silence as they let me mull this over. And I find myself picturing a world in which we could all be together. As much as I can't imagine that world without Vespyr, somehow, the notion of her goes hand in hand with this damned Orc.

"So, how is this supposed to work?" I look from one to the other because I'm pretty sure that the three of us being together is going to lead to an entire clusterfuck of confusion. If not for us, then for everyone else.

My princess's face breaks into a radiant smile as she sees me starting to cave.

"We start where we were an hour ago," Vidarok says, and again I'm reliving those moments. "As for the rest... Like Vespyr said, we'll figure it out as we go."

"Is it really that simple?" I'm certain I'm about to dive headlong into a rabbit hole, but I can't help myself.

"We'll make it that simple," Vidarok assures me.

"Okay," I hear myself saying. "I'm not going to fight it." It's like I'm sagging all of a sudden; the rage has left me. I raise my head as a seed takes root and begins to grow. "I'm not going to fight anything anymore." It's an admission that leaves me so much lighter that my lips twitch up.

"You're not?" Vespyr's eyes are wide.



“I’m not.” Determination starts to take hold. I can’t believe what I’m about to say. “Let’s do this thing.”

*Vidarok*

“I can’t understand why we can’t meet in the Circle.” Timmir looks put out. Which is silly because it’s lovely here beneath the trees, with the soft grass beneath our feet.

“Because this is going to be an unconventional discussion, and it calls for unconventional measures.” Tariq glances at me and smiles tightly. We’ve spent the better part of a day working this out. But still, I feel a tug of anxiety.

What if they refuse?

*Dragh!*

I am the Orc King. I decide how I choose to live my life. If these people put up resistance, we’ll fight them. All of us.

Taking in the sight of my princess, I realize what a formidable force we make.

Orc. Vampire. Dragon.

Vespyr smiles back at me, and my heart melts. She is nothing like my mother, and yet, in the fierce way that she adores me, and has fought for me, and risked herself for me...she’s so much the same. The way she loves is all-

consuming. It's the sort of love I've dreamed of. I'd be a fool to turn away from it simply because I have to share it.

And if I have to share it, who better than the Dragon King? It's hard to ignore the many qualities that Vespvr is drawn to. Not to mention that he's saved my life at least once. He's a worthy mate.

Now, we just have to convince the others of it.

"With respect, King Vidarok, can we get to the matter at hand?" Zydus is looking at me. The rest of the Circle have gathered with us in the garden where we spoke to Tariq last night. It seemed like a good place to meet. And now it looks lovely with tables set out beneath the shade of the trees. Casual seating has been arranged, and a server is pouring wine. He offers some to Vespvr as he passes her. She wrinkles her nose and raises her hand.

"He's not king yet," says Timmir, who's such a stickler for detail that he's a bit of a pain in the ass.

"He will be," Tariq tells him. "The coronation is a formality, but it will take days to arrange, and right now, we have something to discuss that can't wait. Besides, his people have already pledged their allegiance to him."

"You mean he's king to all who are left?" Timmir raises an eyebrow. "The mage destroyed any who followed Bagrak."

"Is that such a bad thing?" Vespvr steps forward. "Those people were your enemy as much as Vidarok's. Bagrak. Ceceris. They wouldn't have given up. Your wealth was too tempting. The Horde plagued you for years, and with Bagrak's Orcs on their side, they would have brought you a war you couldn't win. Morganeau's wealth is too great, too tempting. And there are too few dragons left to protect it indefinitely."

"Which brings me to our point." I look around at Vespvr and Tariq. He gives an encouraging nod and moves up beside me.

"Could everyone take a seat?" he begins, gesturing to the chairs that

have been arranged casually around us. It had been his idea to do it this way rather than facing everyone in the Circle. I think he's right. It takes the edge off.

"I really don't understand why this is necessary," Timmir grumbles as he sinks onto a comfortable lounge.

"Please, put your feet up, Lord Timmir." Vespvr grins at him.

"Princess! I'm all for informality, but can we please get on with it?" Nirem is straddling a chair with her arms along the backrest. She's dressed in black leather. Tough as nails. I like her.

"Right," I say. "Now that you're all comfortable..." I look around. Only Tariq, Vespvr, and I remain standing. I launch in, "We wish to propose a union between the dragons and the Orcs."

There's a heavy silence for moments that seem to stretch out forever.

"Are you in a position to offer such a proposal?" Timmir asks. "You haven't taken up your official duties yet."

"I'm confident that it will be acceptable," I say firmly. "From my conversations with Barok, I've learned that the Orcs have been kept in isolation for too long. A promise of unity with their neighbors will be welcomed."

"An alliance could be useful." Zydus is thoughtful. He leans back in his seat, his legs stretched out in front of him. "We may have defeated the Horde, but our mineral wealth will always make us a target."

"More than an alliance," I correct him. "A union," I emphasize the word I used before. "We plan to join our territories. We share a border, after all. It would be a simple matter to combine the two realms as one."

Someone hisses out a breath. The others seem speechless.

"You mean we'd give up everything to the Orcs?" Aidurn doesn't look happy.

“No, Morganeau would still be independent. Have its own ruler, its own seat of governance. And so would Earomond. But we’d share those duties between the two royal families,” I explain.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Bridrod gnaws her bottom lip.

“Our dragon numbers are a fraction of what they once were before the Horde struck, Lady Bridrod.” Tariq is facing her. “Many of our villages are gone. There’s not much to rule anymore, to be frank. We could use the strength of the Orcs to build our world up again.”

“And as for Orcs...” I join in, “Earomond is in disarray, too. Bagrak left the realm in tatters. I need someone at my side who can help pull it together. Tariq will be that person.”

“But what of Morganeau? If Tariq’s duties are split...” Timmir is frowning.

Tariq has raised a hand to stop him. “I plan to share the throne of Morganeau with Turin.”

“You plan to what?” Turin looks aghast. He’s blinking quickly. A leaf floats down from a nearby tree and lands on his shoulder. He brushes it away.

“You’d make a good king, Turin. Unless you’d prefer not to?” Tariq raises an eyebrow.

“No! I want to! I’ve always wanted to.”

“Then it’s settled.” The brothers share a meaningful look. “Of course, I’ll always be the older brother.” Tariq grins.

“By less than five minutes!” Turin grins back.

“Five minutes were all I needed!”

“Okay, that’s all well and good,” Timmir interrupts the banter. “But how do we know that Vidarok can be trusted?” he asks. “How can we be sure

that he won't change his mind in a year and come after our gold and our gems just the way Bagrak did? He's an Orc, after all, And the temptation—"

"Because we will be mated," I blurt. "As life partners."

There's a collective gasp.

"Well... This is unexpected," says Zydus.

Nirem is giving me an appraising stare. "I would never have guessed that you're...or you..." She takes in Tariq.

"No, it's not like that!" Tariq says quickly. "Not that I have any problem with a male choosing to be with another male." He looks over at Zydus, who gives a nod. "But I digress..." He takes in a breath. "We will be mated as a triumvirate with the Vampire Princess Vespvr. She will rule both realms with us as our Queen."

"What?" Aidurn is frowning.

"The three of you together? As heartmates? In the conventional sense?" Bridrod seems confused.

"Well, it would be unconventional, to be sure." Vespvr's arm is around my waist. Tariq joins her on the other side and puts his arm around her, too; the three of us interlinked. Facing them together. From now on, we'll face everything together.

Having spent most of my life alone, it's a notion that makes my heart swell.

"I don't know how that could be done..." Bridrod is shaking her head. "Two males with one female..."

"Oh, we'll deal with the intimate details, I can assure you," Vespvr winks at her. Bridrod's cheeks go red.

"I've never heard of such a thing!" Timmir says.

“Actually, there’s a triumvirate in the demon realm,” Nirem tells him. “Two demons have mated with a powerful entity, and they’re running their two realms together.”

“The Lumina.” Zydus rubs his chin. “I believe it’s working very well.”

“It can be done.” Aidurn is sitting with one knee raised and his chin resting on his palm. He’s looking thoughtful.

“Yes, it can,” Vespyr says firmly. “And I have enough love in my heart for both of them. Please let us make this work.” Her expression is so earnest I can’t imagine how anyone could turn her down. I couldn’t.

“I think that matters of the heart are yours to take care of, Princess,” Zydus says. “But as for the ruling of our realms. I think that’s something for us to vote on.” He takes a slow look at the others sitting around us. “It’s unusual to handle affairs of state outside of our ancient Circle. But I think we’re dealing with something that has never been done before, at least not in our realm. Perhaps this is a good place to do it. Who is in favor of the union of our two realms?”

Vespyr’s arm tightens around me as we wait for our moment of truth.

“I am in favor,” Nirem says without hesitation. I knew there was a reason I liked her.

Aidurn raises his hand. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“If they can manage the emotional side of their mating, I think it could be done.” Bridrod still seems concerned.

“We can, Lady Bridrod,” I assure her.

Timmir is brooding, his features clouded. He absentmindedly shoos away a bee that’s buzzing around his head.

“Come on, Lord Timmir,” says Zydus. “This all rests on you right now.”

Timmir huffs. “Fine, I’ll go with it.”

I release the breath I’ve been holding. Vespyr does the same

But Timmir’s not done. He never is. “Aren’t we forgetting something?”

*Dragh!*

There’s always something with this man.

“What about the Curse?” he says.

My heart drops. Fuck. I hadn’t forgotten it, but we hadn’t factored it into this conversation.

Bridrod hums in agreement. “Lord Timmir is right. How can you rule confidently, when you’re afraid that your mate might die any day? You’d never be able to focus.” They’re harsh words, but she has a point.

“My brother rules with the Curse hanging over him. He’s managing just fine.” Vespyr is still holding me tightly.

“But he has the cure to help him. It may be temporary, but at least it’s something. You don’t have that.” When Zydus speaks, I begin to feel like we may be losing them. “We’ve seen what the Curse can do to you, Vespyr. If it happens again, your mates—”

“The Curse of Darkness that afflicts the vampires?” a voice rings out. We all swivel to see who’s speaking. There are murmurs of recognition.

“Luke!” Tariq says. “Why are you here?”

“It’s Lucernas!” The mage looks put out. “And I came to see the horses,” he says. “I told you I like them.”

“I like them too.” Vespyr grins.



“I knew that,” Tariq says.

“About the Curse...?” I remind them.

“Yes. We have concerns about the welfare of the princess,” says Zydus.

“I can cure it.” Lucernas waves a hand casually.

“You can cure it?” Vespyr’s eyes are wide.

“Of course. I have magic from the farthest reaches of the Universe. This affliction of yours is the kind of thing my line of Elementals specializes in. I was chosen for it.” He tilts his head. “That’s if you want me to.”

“I...” Vespyr looks around. The elders of the Circle look like they’ve been faced with more than they can deal with for one day.

“I mean... Sure, the powers are addictive,” says Lucernas, “but there’s the little matter of you going mad, bursting into flames, and dying,” the mage adds. “Besides, you can keep the powers if you want. I think you’ll need them in your new role.”

“I...” Vespyr says again. Her mouth is opening and closing. “I can keep the powers?”

“Sure,” he says. “So shall I do it?”

“Of course she wants you to,” Tariq says quickly.

“Yes,” I add. “I can’t take the thought of going through that again.” The memory of my woman screaming in agony will haunt me forever.

“Good. That settles it.” He steps up to Vespyr, traces his thumb over her forehead in a circle, then clicks his fingers. “There you go, all fixed. Could I get a glass of wine?”

“What? That’s it?” I’m expecting some fanfare. Thunder, lightning bolts. *Something*.

“It’s done,” he says. “You can take a look if you don’t believe me.”

Vespyr looks like she’s seen a ghost. But I’m staring into her eyes. Into irises that are circled with violet. “You’ve made her eyes purple,” I say to the mage.

“Do you want the silver back?” He cocks his head.

“No...but...” My brow furrows. Everyone is talking around us. And I’m almost overwhelmed.

“You...” Vespyr is breathless. Her hand hovers at the base of her throat. “You’ve cured me?” When the mage smiles, she rushes over to him and throws her arms around him. “You’ve saved my life!”

“Oh, I do that sort of thing a lot,” he says when he’s managed to extract himself. “I told you. I’m special. You might say I was chosen.” He winks at Tariq, who pulls a face at him. It’s not an expression that hides his gratitude, though. I’m still standing in bemusement. It’s all unbelievable. I’ve found my mate. We’ve forged a union. And we have the blessing of the elders. The Orcs will be more than happy to be joined with such a wealthy kingdom – even if it means bringing an extra king into the mix. Besides, after surviving Bagrak’s oppression, I doubt they’ll be phased by my proposal of a triumvirate.

It’s all coming together. And it’s even better when Vespyr is suddenly wrapping her arms around me. I nuzzle my face into her hair, feeling an extra warmth when Tariq nestles up behind her. We stand like that, just breathing each other in, Vespyr’s face in my chest, Tariq’s arms linked with mine. I hear Zydus proposing a toast, but I don’t want to leave our small circle. Nobody seems to mind.

Except for the mage. “Enough of that, you three. You’ll have plenty of time for it later. Now let’s get to the really important stuff...” He claps his hands. “We have a wedding to plan.”

*Vespyr*

“You are the most beautiful bride I have ever seen.” Vidarok is staring at me as if he’s never seen me before. Tariq’s expression is very much the same. In a floor-length gem-encrusted gown, I’ll admit, I feel more than pretty.

“If anyone had ever told me I’d be this lucky, I’d have said they were delusional.” He strokes my cheek. The ceremony that’s just ended was unusual, to say the least. Zydus had presided, and Aurora had insisted on sending Grand Father Silverwing, and they’d combined the traditions of vampire, Orc, and dragon to form a set of vows that covered all of us.

I don’t care.

I have my mates, and I’ve never been happier. I heave a happy breath as I take in the sight of them, tall and imposing. Dark-haired and intense, Vidarok towers over everyone, aside from Barok and his entourage. Tariq is golden and gorgeous, and for once, he’s wearing clothes. It’s ironic because I’ve finally reached a point where I truly appreciate him being naked.

*Naked...*

My mind wanders off, leaving me flushed and ready to leave the grand ballroom of Morganeau and rush straight to our chambers.

But I can’t because Turin has emerged from the group of well-wishers

and is kissing me soundly on both cheeks. “Brother, you’re lucky you got her first because I’ll admit I had an eye for your beautiful wife when I first saw her,” he says to Tariq.

There’s a growl from Tariq, and Vidarok bristles openly.

“I’ll take that back,” Turin says quickly, laughing.

“Good thinking. Though, at some point, you’ll need to get a wife of your own. And sooner rather than later. Morganeau is going to need a queen of its own.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Turin’s eyes are wide.

“Deadly serious.” Tariq fixes him with a firm look.

Turin rubs a hand around the back of his neck. “I’m not so sure about that. Settling down...”

Vidarok laughs. “Dragon, you’ll be settled the minute that crown rests on your head.”

“Not to mention that the seat of Morganeau will need another heir. Our realm must see its leader stepping up and focusing on rebuilding our nation...with drakes of his own. You’d better start quickly.” Tariq winks at me. “We’ll be doing our part, too.”

I can’t help it. I blush. Because having babies is something I hadn’t thought about. But I love the idea. I never thought I would, but I truly do. Though I have no idea when we’ll get around to it.

“Wait. Are you telling me that I have no choice in the matter?” Turin looks horrified.

“You can’t expect our people to follow a leader who can’t commit, Turin. It’s time to grow up. And, as I said, our numbers are dwindling. Seriously...we need someone who can focus on that problem. Morganeau needs to be repopulated.”

Turin shakes his head. “Fuck.” He looks around almost anxiously. “I need a drink.”

“Don’t worry. We don’t expect you to singlehandedly boost the population of the realm.” Vidarok smirks. “But a dozen young drakes with your good looks should do the trick.”

Tariq is laughing.

“A dozen! Are you nuts?” Turin throws his hands in the air. “I’m getting out of here before you hook me up with one of your wedding guests. I’m not ready for love, or commitment, or a dozen freaking babies. Hell no!”

“It’s funny...but I’m not joking, brother,” Tariq calls after him as he stalks away. He turns back to me. “He’s going to have a hard time getting used to the idea.”

“But it’s unavoidable?” I ask.

“Pretty much. But he’ll come round to it. Especially when he realizes how important it is.” Tariq grows a little quiet as he watches his brother move off. Then he turns to me. “Ready to go?” He shoots a meaningful look at Vidarok, who winks at me.

I raise a finger. “Not quite yet.”

There’s one last thing to attend to before we can make our excuses and get out of here. I look around until I spot the person I’m looking for.

“Bart.” I reach for my brother’s hand when we meet in the center of the ballroom. He gazes down at me with all the love I remember from our childhood. I have him back. My best friend. My throat tightens.

“Vespyr.” He squeezes my hand.

“Are you ready?” I ask. He dips his head. I ignore the telltale silver that rings his eyes. That’s going to be gone soon. I look around for the mage and find him at my side already. He’s holding a flute of champagne.

“I’m surprised it took you so long to get here, Overlord,” he says to Bartholomew. “I thought you would have rushed straight to me for the cure.”

My brother looks over at his mate. “We had something to attend to. A Fae ceremony for...” He looks down. Aurora is running her hand over her belly and my eyes widen. “...for the welcoming of a little one.”

“Oh! Oh my...” I swallow hard, my fingers tightening on his hand. “I’m going to be an aunt?”

He grins. Aurora beams back at me. “I wanted him to see the mage immediately, but Bart demanded we do the ceremony first.”

“It promised long life and good fortune for our child,” he says. “Aurora’s Nana Bee did the magic...and I don’t mess with Nana Bee’s magic.”

“Well, of course not,” says Lucernas. “She has great power.” He sounds as if he knows her. Then again, he seems to know everything.

“So...” Aurora looks at him, and then Bartholomew. She’s breathless.

“The cure.” Lucernas hands me his champagne glass and then steps in front of Bartholomew, who’s standing dead still. I’m pretty sure he’s not breathing.

The mage raises both his hands, drops his head back, and begins to chant. Purple light streams from him in beams that reach to the high ceilings of the ballroom. Everyone halts what they’re doing as his voice reaches a crescendo. Suddenly, he stops and reaches toward Bartholomew’s face. Flickering violet light is swirling around them as if it’s being blown by a tornado. As he touches my brother’s face, there’s a sound like a choir of angels singing.

“Bartholomew Oberon Bellingham! I pronounce you healed!” he cries out dramatically. The lights go out, and the music stops. I look at my brother, who appears shell-shocked. And his eyes are ringed with purple.

I don't get a chance to get up close to check because Aurora has flung herself at him and is sobbing and pressing kisses to his face. They're so engrossed in each other that I don't want to interrupt them. The mage looks pleased with himself.

"Luke," I say under my breath as I hand him back his champagne. "What was that about? I never had any lights or choirs when you healed me."

He shrugs. "You all seemed to want a big show the last time I did it. So I just made one."

"Oh, good grief!" I shake my head.

Silverwing is hovering nearby, his gaze set on Bartholomew and Aurora. "Only a chosen one, blessed by both Night and Day, can break this Curse and restore balance to our realm once more," he says.

Lucernas nods. "That's me. Lucernas Eclipsos. Night and Day. I told you..." He looks at Tariq. "I'm special."

"The chosen one." Tariq chuckles wryly. "I didn't realize you meant it literally."

"I mean everything literally, dragon." Lucernas takes a sip of champagne. "Now...I see a very fetching maiden who may need my attention. I'm going to need a little diversion before I get down to the business of ridding the rest of Ryacyn of the Curse." He moves off in the direction of a delicate blonde Fae who's standing near Bart and Aurora. I recognize Aurora's handmaiden, Lily, and feel a pang of guilt. I never apologized to her for all the madness I inflicted on them before.

But there'll be time for that later because right now...

"Should we get out of here?" Vidarok murmurs into my ear. Tariq has his hand on the small of my back. I try to hide a smile because I'm sure it's going to be a guilty one, but I can't help myself. With the reception in full swing, we sneak out the door and hurry through the hallways, until we reach

the doorway to Tariq's rooms. Our rooms now. Though I guess we'll have another set in Earomond.

I'm breathless with anticipation, and that makes my cheeks burn because I know exactly what I'm anticipating.

We all stop as we enter the room, facing each other in silence. And then Vidarok stoops and picks me up, holding me in front of his chest. I drape a hand around his shoulder and giggle.

Tariq has gone ahead and is swinging the bedroom doors open. "This is the part where we carry you across the threshold, Princess. Vidarok may be doing the lifting, but I'm here to make sure he doesn't drop you." He winks at me, and I giggle again, which is odd because I'm not a giggler.

The giggling stops when Vidarok sets me down at the foot of the bed. He stands in front of me and loosens my hair while Tariq stands behind me and begins working on the dozens of little gemstone buttons that hold my dress closed. By the time he pushes the gold satin from my shoulders, my skin is an expanse of shivering gooseflesh.

"So beautiful," Vidarok breathes as he runs his fingers through my curls, freeing them. I gulp as I lock eyes with him and feel the flood of love there. Tariq is trailing his fingertips down the sides of my arms, his lips dotting along my shoulders.

I'm going to melt.

I almost do when he leads me to the bed and then sits me down. Vidarok unclasps my bra while Tariq kneels at my feet and slips my shoes off. I give a little gasp as he presses his lips against my instep. I give another gasp as Vidarok presses me down until I'm lying back on the mattress. They both kneel back and then I'm trying not to squirm as they run their eyes over me.

"Perfect. You're fucking perfect," Tariq breathes. He sinks down at my feet and strokes his fingertips over my ankles. Vidarok is near my shoulder, tracing a path between my breasts. My breath is coming faster.



When he bends down and takes one nipple into his mouth, my back arches.

“Oh!” I choke out. I’d press my thighs together, but Tariq has his hand between my knees. The other hand is at the top of my panties. He starts rolling them down my hips. He tugs them over my feet, then lifts one up and kisses my sole. My hips buck up, and I writhe, my hand sliding into Vidarok’s hair as he keeps swirling his tongue around my nipple.

“Ummmm...” he moans, the deep sound rippling through my flesh.

Tariq’s lips move up my calf as Vidarok moves to my other breast, and soon, I’m struggling to keep track of where all the sensations are coming from.

“Oh...God...” I breathe out. Their touches and kisses are like a dance over my skin. “Did you choreograph this or something?”

“Yes,” Tariq chuckles.

I blink at him as I lift my head. “Wait. You planned this together?”

“Of course,” says Vidarok. His voice is muffled. He’s painting circles down my belly with his tongue. He stops and looks up. “If we are going to rule together, we have to be able to take care of our mate together.”

“I...” I trail off because oddly it makes sense. “Fine, then. Carry on.” I’m giggling again. I can’t keep giggling when my breath starts to hitch. And it hitches a lot when Tariq spreads my legs wide and trails a fingertip along the line of my pussy.

“She’s dripping,” he says to Vidarok.

“Mmmmm,” he replies. But he doesn’t say anything because his mouth has just closed over my clit.

“Fuck!” I half-yell. “Oh... My... Fuck!”

Tariq’s fingers dip into me at the same time, and I almost come right there on the spot. I grab at the bedclothes with both hands, trying to stop

myself from lifting off the bed. Tariq, still beneath my widespread thighs, is slipping his fingers in and out of me while Vidarok is suckling on my clit, and I'm certain I'm one step away from going out of my mind.

My body is tense as I try to hold on. My hips are jerking; I'm panting and moaning. But they keep going, Tariq's fingers moving faster inside me, Vidarok's tongue swirling and flicking over my clit. I can feel my orgasm building, the heat spreading and intensifying until I can't take it anymore.

"I'm going to come," I gasp out.

"Let go, my love," says Vidarok. His voice is rough with desire.

I let out a loud cry as my orgasm hits me like a wave, washing over me in ripples of pleasure that make my whole body tremble. Tariq keeps moving his fingers inside me, prolonging my climax until I can't take anymore.

When it finally starts to subside, they both move away from me, leaving me panting and shaking on the bed. I open my eyes to see them both gazing down at me with satisfied expressions.

"How was that?" asks Tariq with a smirk.

"Amazing," I reply breathlessly. "More than amazing. By Blood..." It's like nothing I've ever experienced.

"It's only just begun," says Tariq with a wicked grin. And before I know it, he's up on the bed beside me, pressing his lips to mine in a heated kiss.

Vidarok joins us on the other side, kissing and caressing my skin with soft hands. They seem to be everywhere at once, their touch igniting sparks of pleasure all over my body.

I reach out and grab one of each of their hands, pulling them towards me until we're all intertwined on the bed. The three of us are tangled up in each other's limbs as we kiss, touch, and explore each other's bodies.

“You’re so...different,” I murmur as I find myself pressed between them, holding a cock in each hand.

“Yes. I’m bigger,” smirks Vidarok.

“And I’m better.” Tariq nips my neck.

“And I’m in heaven,” I sigh, gripping their shafts and stroking smoothly.

And then Vidarok moves between my legs now, this time sliding into me slowly but deeply. My back arches off the bed as he fills me completely. Tariq’s hands are on my breasts, his fingers plucking and teasing my nipples.

My head falls back onto the pillows as Vidarok moves inside me, his pace increasing with each thrust. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer and deeper. Tariq’s hands are still on my breasts, but they’re joined by Vidarok’s as well, both of them squeezing and stroking me until I’m sure I’m going to burst.

I’m getting close again, my body responding eagerly to their touch. Vidarok leans forward to kiss me, and I can taste myself on his lips.

“Vidarok...I’m going to—”

“Not yet,” he stops me, then rolls onto his side, taking me with him. Still deep inside me, he hooks my knee over his hip as Tariq sinks down behind me. He’s trickling kisses down my spine and then up to the curve of my neck. And then he’s pressed close, the thick ridge of his cock pressing between the cheeks of my ass.

*Oh...fuck!*

I’m starting to understand the logistics of having both of them.

And I want it.

“Is this okay?” he breathes into my ear.

“Umm...yes...I think?” I manage to say. His fingers are between my thighs, trailing around where Vidarok is feeling me, slipping through the juices, coating his fingers in them. He slides those sticky fingers between the crease of my butt and stops against the puckered entrance there. When he presses in, I suck in a breath, my muscles clenching tightly.

Vidarok makes a choking sound, his jaw tightening. “Dragh! If you do that again, I will dishonor myself.”

“Relax,” says Tariq, and I work to do as he says because I want this so badly. His finger slides in, and I groan at the sensation.

“Yes...that’s good...” I squeeze my eyes shut when I realize that the next pressure I feel is no longer his finger. I yelp as the thick head of his cock breaches me, my body stiffening again.

“Gently,” growls Vidarok. “If you hurt her, so help me...”

“I’m doing my best.” Tariq’s voice is strained. “Are you...are you good, Princess?”

“Yes, don’t stop,” I say in a rush, wincing at the sting and then exhaling deeply as he slides in deeper. And then deeper still. When he stops, the tight curls around his cock are grazing my ass. Vidarok’s cock is still wedged so far in that I’m certain they can feel each other. And I’m sandwiched between them in a quivering mass.

“Ohhhhhh...” The groan I make is so low and guttural I don’t recognize myself.

“Good?” Tariq says again.

“Yes. Good. So so, good!” I babble. Vidarok has begun to move, and Tariq joins in the rhythm. One in and then one out until I lose track of who’s doing what because it’s just one wave of sensation.

“Sweet. So sweet...” Vidarok’s features have pulled tight, his brows pulled together as if he’s concentrating on the sensation. Tariq’s hand slides

over my hip, snaking between my mound and Vidarok's thrusting hips. The pinch on my clit pulls a hoarse cry from me. It's a cry that becomes a wail as Tariq's finger vibrates over the tingling nerves until I can barely take any more. Vidarok's thrusts have become harder and faster, and the heat starts building in my core.

"Please..." I gasp, not sure what I'm begging for – more or less?

Tariq's movements have grown faster, too, his hips snapping erratically, and it's all I can do to cling to Vidarok as he pounds into me. Vidarok's hands grip me tightly as the pleasure becomes overwhelming.

My eyes are hazy with lust when he cups my cheeks and looks into my eyes. His are glazed too, but he seems determined to say something.

"I want more," he says, and I can't imagine how much more either of us can take, But when he angles his head to the side, exposing his throat, I know exactly what he means. And I don't need any more encouragement. I drop my head and sink my teeth into his skin with such eagerness that I barely hear his low grunt. But I do feel the hard thrust of his cock as the feeding pleasure hits him.

"Me too," I hear Tariq from behind me, which is confusing until he grasps a handful of my hair, and his mouth closes over my shoulder. When he bites down, he gives an animal growl that would terrify me if I didn't recognize the sound. His dragon is with us, and yet again, he's staking a claim. I don't need reminding. I've been his since the first night he took me.

But that's a lifetime ago, and this moment is all I can think about because the pleasure is reaching a fever pitch. A white-hot wave of ecstasy washes over me, and it's mind-numbing. I would scream if my mouth wasn't still fastened to Vidarok's neck. I buck and writhe, both of them still pounding into me until they, too, reach their own peaks. Vidarok is first, his cock swelling and then jerking. His arms are so tight around me that I can barely breathe...but I like it.

Then Tariq makes a rough groaning sound, his breath quickening as he plunges deep and then stops. His hand is still in my hair, pulling almost

too tight as he shudders against me. Panting heavily, we lay there tangled together for several blissful minutes before Tariq pulls out of me with a groan. The sudden sense of loss almost has me reaching to pull him back. But I doubt I could move if I tried. My muscles have turned to jelly.

“Did we go good?” Vidarok asks. Tariq has nuzzled his face into my neck, breathing in so deeply it’s as if he’s trying to inhale me.

“Yes!” I’m still panting. “Yes! You did sooooo good.”

“I’m glad.” He tips up my chin. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I sigh out, then reach my hand up cup Tariq’s face, up near my shoulder. “And you...I love you too.”

“Always, Princess.” His breath grazes my ear. “I’ll love you always.”

I sigh happily. More than happily. Because how does it get better?

“I think you should get some sleep,” says Vidarok.

“Yes,” says Tariq. “Because we’re going to do that again in an hour.”

And I’m ready for it.

I’ll always be ready for it.

*Vespyr*

When I wake up, I'm lying between Vidarok and Tariq on our large, soft bed. The sun is pouring in through the windows, casting a warm glow over the room. For a moment, I'm disoriented and unsure of where I am.

But then memories of last night come flooding back to me – and I can't decide what distracts me more, my flaming cheeks or the tightening in my core.

I shift slightly, trying not to disturb their sleep. But my movement must have woken them because both men stir awake and look at me with concern etched on their faces.

"You're awake," Vidarok says softly, reaching out to brush a strand of hair away from my face.

"How do you feel?" Tariq asks, his hand resting on my bare arm.

I take a moment to check in with myself. Surprisingly, I feel better than I can ever remember. The darkness of the Curse is long gone, and only lightness remains. "I'm really good," I say slowly, still trying to process everything. "I feel..." I swallow hard. All of a sudden, something is off.

Vidarok frowns. "We took too much from you. It was all too much!" He draws my head toward his throat. "You should feed. Your strength..."

But I'm pulling away. "I can't! I..." Suddenly, I'm scooting across the bed. My hand is over my mouth.

Tariq and Vidarok exchange glances. "No!" Tariq chokes out. "The Curse...it's back. He didn't cure it!"

But I don't reply. I'm off the bed and stumbling toward the bathroom. I make it just in time to hunch over the toilet. I'm still there, retching, when they both rush up behind me. Vidarok is on his knees with his hand rubbing my back while Tariq gathers my hair away.

"By Blood!" I groan, then heave again.

"What can we do?" Tariq's voice is urgent.

"Get the fucking mage! This is his doing!" Vidarok is furious. I sit back on my knees. Tariq has a damp cloth and is wiping my face. My mouth tastes terrible.

"It's not..." I'm so confused. This is nothing like what happened before.

"What are we going to do?" Tariq is talking to Vidarok over my head. "If she can't take our blood either—"

"It's not the same," I interrupt him. I lick my lips, looking around. Tariq presses a glass of water into my hand. Vidarok is stroking my shoulder. I lean against him, a little limply. I'm drained.

"What's not the same?"

"The last time...was..." I gnaw on my lip. "I can't explain it. I was disgusted by the thought of anyone except them coming near me. The thought of their blood horrified me. This wasn't like that."

"What was this like?" Tariq has sunk to his knees on the other side of me. They're both searching my face.



“This time, I was simply sick to my stomach. It came out of nowhere. I woke up, and then it hit me.” Thinking of it now makes my stomach roil again. It must show on my face because Tariq is dabbing my forehead with the cloth.

“You woke up this morning and felt sick?”

“That’s it.”

“And has this happened before?” Vidarok’s head tilts.

“Um... No...” I think harder. “Actually, there have been a couple of mornings when I haven’t been myself these past days. But so much has happened. The wedding. The Curse being lifted. Do you think he was wrong? That I wasn’t cured?”

Vidarok is beginning to smile. “I don’t think he was wrong.”

“What are you smiling about? Our woman is ill. She may be dying. Take this seriously, dammit!” Tariq looks furious.

“Oh, I am taking it very seriously.” Vidarok is grinning now. “I’ve seen this before. When the Fae King brought his pregnant human female back to Autumnburn.”

“What are you talking about?” I’m going to swat him if he doesn’t stop talking in riddles.

He tips up my chin with his fingertip and looks into my eyes. “When was your last moon cycle, my love?”

“My what?” I ask. Then I suck in a breath. “Ohhhh...!” Realization is beginning to dawn.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Orc? Is she sick or not?”

“Our mate is with child, Tariq.” Vidarok’s smile is radiant.

Tariq sits flat on his ass with a thump. “She’s what? But how? I mean,

I know how...but how?"

"It's simple. It's been at least two months since our first time together. And my seed must be strong." Vidarok looks smug.

"Your seed?" Tariq shoves his shoulder. "How do you know it's not mine?"

"Because the timing is..." Vidarok pauses and taps his bottom lip. I was eight weeks ago, and you were around six, so..."

"It could be either of yours," I finish.

"I think it's mine." Tariq sticks his chin out.

"Mine." Vidarok's chin is out, too.

"Ours," I stop them both. I curl my arms around each of their necks and pull them both closer until all our heads are pressed together. "We're having a baby," I whisper.

And there...right there, the three of us huddled on the bathroom floor...my life becomes complete.

We've forged our bond.

\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*

*Have you loved the "Becoming the Queen" series? If you've read through *Becoming the Demon Queen*, *Becoming the Fae Queen*, *Becoming the Vampire Queen*, and *Becoming the Orc Queen*, you may be in the mood for something a little different.*

*My new wolf shifter series, *The Shadow Wolves* is due to be launched in January 2024. ["Alpha Bond" is on preorder now.](#)*

*Read on for a taste of the first chapter.*



# Alpha Bond - 1

*Sierra*

“Submit,” Rack growls, the sound deep and guttural as it rumbles from him.

I shrink back against the bars, pressing myself into the far corner of the cage.

“Get away from me!” My lip curls to bare my teeth. The male in front of me hesitates. There’s wariness in his eyes, although he hides it. I’m sure the lacerations on his forearm made by these same teeth I’m baring have given him a sense of what I’m capable of. Of course, that bite was inflicted by my wolf during my last escape. The wolf who I can’t seem to summon up now.

“Stop fighting me, Sierra.” He moves closer, ignoring my next warning growl. “You know you want it. You’re my mate...your body is designed to take mine. Don’t waste your time resisting me.”

I shake my head. Though he’s right. Even as I fight down the revulsion, something in my belly is swirling, clenching...needing.

*This is all wrong!*

How could my body be craving this male when everything about him disgusts me? It’s not that he’s bad-looking – tall, muscular, powerful; pale eyes in strong, rugged features. He’s appealing in a primal sort of way, as most of our kind are. But he’s had me locked in this cage for days now.

Ever since the raid on my village.

The horror I still can't think about.

I've managed to escape this cage twice since my abduction, and each time, he's tracked me down within a day. Yesterday's attempt left freedom so nearly within reach. I want to cry as I think about it. I'd made it past the outskirts of the compound where I'm being held.

So close...

"Do it. Now!" he snarls again now. I ignore him. In spite of the compulsion to give in, something about him makes me recoil. There's a stench about him that I can't come to terms with. It doesn't make sense; if he's my mate, as he keeps telling me, the scent of him should make my mouth water...and part of it does. At the same time, another part of me keeps fighting it.

Maybe it's from when I ran off before. There'd been an industrial area not far off, and I'd found a building that appeared to be some sort of chemical plant. I'd been sure the noxious stink would disguise my scent there. Yet just hours later, I'd heard the hunting party coming. I'd managed to shift, letting my wolf bolt from my hiding place, but he'd been upon me before I could get far. That's when I'd sunk my teeth into his forearm. Ripping through flesh and sinew. He rewarded me with a blow to the head that knocked me senseless.

When I woke, I'd been chained in silver.

*Bastard.*

"Submit, or I will force you." He's looming over me, and I'm surrounded by a wave of raw pheromones that leaves me breathless. My nails bite into my palms as I fight back the surge of desire that responds mindlessly.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Do your best!” I force bravado into my voice. His dark chuckle mocks me as he drops onto his haunches where I’m bound. I’m helpless. I barely had the strength to shift the first time. I have no chance of fighting him off now. Between exhaustion and starvation, I know it would be useless even trying.

He doesn’t need to know that.

I growl again, the sound feral. There’s a faint flicker in his eyes, and then he swoops in and buries his nose into my hair. When I snap at him, his hand slides up to cup the other side of my head, fingers tangling cruelly into the dark waves, holding my teeth away from him.

“Your scent of lust, little wolf,” he murmurs into the shell of my ear. Then his tongue follows his words, running down my neck and into the curve of my shoulder. I shudder, disgust mingling with desire as he pauses in that hollow. It’s the place he would leave his mark if he were to claim me. I feel his teeth, and my body goes rigid.

*If he bites me... If he bites me...*

The mating bond will be sealed.

“Don’t!” I manage to get out.

“If not me, it will be another, Sierra.” His breath moves over my skin. “It’s why you’re here, after all. My breeding bitch. If you won’t take my seed, I’ll let my males fill you with theirs. You’ll be grateful for my attention after that. Except then, I won’t know whose pups will be filling your belly,” he says, confirming my darkest fear...that he knows what I’m capable of. The gift I have of being able to conceive young with any male. It’s not unheard of, but it’s very rare outside the mate bond.

I squeeze my eyes shut, horror unfurling as I wait for the sharp tear of his fangs. But nothing comes. As if thinking better of it, he stands, turning from me to face the guard.

“Release her,” he says, then turns back to me. “Make yourself presentable. There is fresh clothing on the bench. Water, soap...you’re filthy.”

I scowl at him. As if I’ve had any control over the state I’m in. He’s the one who’s had me stuck in a cage for over a week. The one who dragged me back through the dirt not once but twice to lock me in here. The tiny bowl of water in the corner is barely enough for drinking, let alone washing. I haven’t seen a scrap of food since I arrived, which is probably why I’m so weak. Although I’ve lasted longer without meals before. I can’t understand why I’m so powerless.

“You will be brought to me tonight, female.” He’s leering as he says it. My stomach churns.

“I don’t want you!” I hiss.

“I don’t care.” He shrugs. “One way or another, that tight little furrow of yours will be plowed today. Whether it’s by me or my males is up to you.”

I stare at him in horror. It seems impossible that a male would pass his mate around the way he’s threatening. But I say nothing. When he strides from the room, the guard approaches me hesitantly, unlocking the cuffs around my ankles and wrists. He backs away quickly and moves to the door.

“A little privacy, please?” I say, rubbing my chafed skin. It’s not a request, though it’s brazen; I’m not really in a position to give commands. He hesitates, then steps outside. I hear the door lock behind him. As I’m left alone, I feel the defiance fade, and I sag.

I have to get out of here.

Have to!

But how? I roughly brush at my neck and shoulder, rubbing away the trail of spit Rack left on my skin. It makes me sick to think of his mouth on me.

And yet it doesn't.

*This is all wrong.*

The skin of my throat is sensitive, and my fingers explore the nicks and scratches that are taking too long to heal. It's been days since they were made. Since they took me. The raid on my village was swift and brutal. There'd barely been time to heed the warning calls before I'd been grabbed by the scruff of my neck and hauled from my feet, a hand over my mouth. And then the darkness descended. Since then, survival has been my primary thought, but pain throbs in my heart.

*What happened to the others? My family...?*

I drag my thoughts away, frowning as my fingertips run over a bump in my shoulder where his mouth had grazed. There'd been a small wound in my neck when I'd first regained consciousness in this place. A wound that should have healed, yet there's a hard lump beneath my skin now. I press on it and flinch. It's unpleasant...but there's something more. I feel a tug inside that tingles down my spine and then spreads deep into my belly. Into my core. It makes my thighs clench against the emptiness in me.

*This isn't right.*

I move to the pile of clothing beside the jug of water and the washrag. Rack has let a small mirror so I can "make myself presentable."

*For him? I'd rather die!*

But I use it now to check the lump beneath my skin. The tiny knot of scar tissue he'd run his tongue over. I press it again and feel my thighs press together again.

*No...not right. Definitely not right.*

Sucking in a breath, I glance at the door, then slam the small mirror against the jug. It shatters easily, leaving a jagged shard in my hand. Clenching my teeth, I hold it against the small bump, sawing through flesh as



I try to reach for it. My fingertips encounter something hard, not organic...an implant of some kind. I tug at it blindly. When I pull, there's resistance, as if it's wired into me somehow. But now I know more than ever that this thing has to come out.

I tug again, gritting my teeth against the blinding pain that ripples through me. I can feel it dislodging, but it doesn't want to come free. I grip the object firmly and then wrench it loose, clamping a hand over my mouth to muffle the tiny scream I can't fight down. When I get my breath back, I stare at what's in my palm. A small electronic chip attached to blood-slicked tendrils. Tiny wires – most likely silver from the way they're making my skin throb. This has to have been why I've been so weak these past few days. When I see a flickering glow from the chip, it occurs to me that it's quite likely it's some sort of tracking device.

*Dear God! They put a tracker in me!*

Like livestock.

No wonder they found me so easily. I press my fingers to my neck, trying to stop the bleeding. Removing the device has left my head a little clearer, but it's left a hole in my flesh that's strangely deep and ragged, considering the size of the device.

I look around the room quickly, reaching for a rag to hold over the wound I've left with the broken glass. Rack has left a dress of some sort and shoes – heels too high to be of any use to me, so I ditch them; I'll run barefoot if I must.

I pull the dress over my head and scowl at how revealing it is. Clingy scarlet satin with crisscrossing straps barely holding up a neckline that plunges past my navel. The back isn't much better. He'd planned to dress me like some kind of whore. It's all I have now, though. Along with the rag, which I wind scarf-like around my neck injury. I'm going to have to tend to it at some point. But right now, I need to get out.

I move to the door, the shard of mirror in my hand, and stand beside it, tensing in anticipation.

“Hello?” I call out. “Hello! I need some help in here!”

“What is it?” The guard steps closer to the door.

“Uh...it’s personal...” I fumble for some sort of reason to get him to come in. “I...um...have a need.” My attempt works. “Please...” I lace the word with desperation.

He chuckles darkly. “Rack’s little box of tricks got you all in a froth to come play with us tonight, pretty?” Keys jangle. I cringe, though his words confirm my suspicions about my unnatural response to the man. Something is off. They’ve done something to me. Not drugs...maybe the tracker?

The guard is still talking. “Thinking of getting a sample of what you can expect from being a pack bitch?” he goes on.

“Maybe...” I say because what I have in mind has nothing to do with any kind of pack activity. What I’m planning involves some one-on-one action between my knee and his groin. I release a breath as I hear the key turning in the lock.

“You’ll need to keep this just between us, though, huh?” the guard says. “What Rack don’t know won’t hurt him.”

*Yeah, but it’ll hurt you, dickhead!*

I brace myself as the door opens, and the burly male steps through, his hand already working the top of his pants. Thankfully, he’s completely underestimated me because when I leap on him, slashing at his face, he’s totally unprepared. I may not be as big as he is, but I have adrenaline and desperation on my side.

“You bitch!” he snarls as realization dawns. Not the brightest bulb in the socket, but he’s finally realized he’s been played. I feel a glancing pain as his fist connects with my jaw, but I forge forward anyway. There’s a pang of satisfaction as I feel the sharp glass connect with something soft and meaty. I hear him choke out a sound and then gurgle. Somehow, I’ve managed to

slash his throat. It could only be the hand of fate on my side because I'd had no real plan when I'd called him in here.

Except to survive.

He clutches his neck, blood bubbling past his fingers. For a human, it would be a fatal injury, but a wolf... I've probably got five minutes tops before he's on his feet again. I leap over his writhing form and make my way into the corridor beyond my prison cell.

From my previous escapes, I know they've been holding me in a warehouse of some kind. My cell was probably once a storage room. I slide along the wall, snatching glances in both directions as I make my way to the entrance I managed to get to on my last attempt. There are voices from behind me, and I know if I don't get beyond that door, I'm screwed.

And then it dawns on me; I'm still holding the blood-covered chip.

*Shit!*

They're going to know I'm on the move. I make a mad dash to the door to the world beyond, then pause and look around. The yard outside is abandoned, but that won't be for long. I raise my hand and fling the tracker as far as I can from the doorway. Knowing that it's coated in my own blood turns my stomach. But if I can get them searching in the opposite direction, maybe I'll have a chance to get free this time.

Free before my so-called mate reaches me...and turns me into a toy for his pack of animals.

# About the Author

Hello there!

I'm BE Brouillard, and I am absolutely thrilled to welcome you into the captivating world of my latest creation in the "Becoming the Orc Queen" series. For the past two decades, writing has been my ultimate passion, and creating Blood has truly ignited my imagination.

As an author, I find immense joy in weaving tales of paranormal romance that whisk you away from the ordinary and into the extraordinary. The intricate dance between forbidden love, ancient mysteries, and the allure of the supernatural has always fascinated me. In this latest book, I delved deep into the realms of passion, power, and heart-pounding suspense.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of crafting this story was bringing to life the fiery dynamic between our protagonists, Aurora and Bartholomew. The electric friction between their characters ignited sparks for me, and I can only hope that as you read, you'll feel your heart race just as I did while writing their journey.

Thank you for embarking on this supernatural journey with me. I hope my words will sweep you off your feet and immerse you in a world where love knows no bounds and mysteries abound. Let's stay connected, and until our next magical encounter, may your days be filled with love, laughter, and of course, a touch of the extraordinary.

Warmly,

BE Brouillard

I would love to hear from you, so please look me up:

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Your feedback is incredibly important to me, and I would be absolutely thrilled to hear your thoughts on this new chapter in the series. Whether you're left breathless, caught up in the whirlwind romance, or simply hungry for more of the supernatural intrigue, your reviews mean the world to both me and fellow readers. Please take a moment to leave your thoughts by [clicking this link to Forged](#) – your words are the motivation I need to continue crafting enchanting stories.

## *Join My Mailing List*

If you're as captivated by the world of paranormal romance as I am, why not stay in the loop?

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