







# A Cage of Magic and Darkness

**Author:** *Marissa Farrar*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** I freed my half Incubus stepbrother from his cage... now he means to conquer me and my kingdom one sinful touch at a time...

Taelyn...

When my Fae mother married the ruler of our kingdom, moving us into the castle of Highdrift, my new stepbrother was banished.

Now a dark force is working to destroy our lands, leaving us with nothing but desolation in its wake.

When it takes both my mother and the king, I have no choice but to step into their shoes.

A kingdom needs a ruler, and I am to be it.

But there are places in the castle that have been forbidden to me, and when I come across a key in the king's belongings, I discover a secret room in the dungeon.

I don't know what draws me down there, but I can't resist its pull.

It unlocks a magic that's kept my stepbrother—and his wicked carnal enchantment—a prisoner for years.

He draws power from seduction, strength from sensuality, and, no matter how I fight it, I can't say no.

Ruarok Loftborn doesn't only want me. He wants the castle, and my heritage.

A heritage he believes is his alone.

Ruarok...

Half-Fae, half-Incubus, I've always struggled to know where I belong in the castle, even as the king's bastard son.

But when my father brings home his new wife, and gifts me a stepsister, I'm determined to take what's owed to me.

Except my plot is rumbled, and instead of ruling the kingdom, I'm locked inside a magic cage for a decade...

Until the day comes where the king has fallen and his magic wears off, and the princess Taelyn finds me.

I've always had my sights set on the king's throne, but now Taelyn believes she's is the rightful heir.

I will do whatever it takes to ruin her, and ensure her people no longer want to crown her queen...

I'll corrupt the heir.

**Total Pages (Source):** 88

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

1

RUAROK

PART ONE

I release the tight knot of the woman's nipple from my mouth with a satisfying pop. The puckered skin is wet with my saliva, and I go back for more, grating my teeth against the sensitive peak.

The woman the breast belongs to arches her back, pressing into me for more, which I gladly give. I bite, just hard enough to cause the perfect balance of pleasure and pain. The sexual energy that lies across her skin like an early morning mist flickers orange with heat.

"Oh, Ruarok," she moans, her fingers lacing in my dark hair. "Oh, fuck, yes."

"Call me prince," I command. "Call me your prince."

"My prince," she gasps. "Fuck me, my prince."

"Gladly, but first I want your mouth around my cock."

I lift my head again and take a sip from the light dancing across her skin, feeling my strength grow.

I have no idea what her name is, and I couldn't give a shit either. I'm guessing she's

mostly human, though she must have some Fae blood in her to be allowed inside the castle walls. She's what people might think of as comely, short and curvy, with a set of tits that will most likely be seen as matronly when she gets older. But her big blue eyes and sensual lips just about scream sex. It was the first thing I thought when I found her bent over my hearth this morning, stoking the fire. The castle's thick stone walls don't allow the weak, spring sunshine to penetrate, and keeping the fires burning is important so we don't all freeze half to death.

I roll to my back, bringing her with me, so she's on top of me now, straddling my thighs. Silk sheets brush against my skin, and a chandelier filled with flickering candles—which the servants, including the naked girl in my bed, light daily—is high above my head.

“Suck it,” I tell her, grabbing the back of her head and pushing her face down to my cock. “Deep as you can.”

She willingly obliges, opening her mouth and sliding her lips over the head of my dick. Her tongue is hot and wet, and she uses it to wrap around the bell-shaped tip, pressing into the slit, before she sinks lower. I lift my hips, wanting to feel the back of her throat, and she groans around me.

“That's right, good girl. Let me hear those moans.”

She bobs on my dick, and I fold my hands beneath my head, enjoying the view.

The blonde's sexual energy is as golden as her hair and grows more vibrant with every notch to her orgasm that she ratchets up. It covers her skin in an aura. I've seen shades of all colors on different people—orange and red, and violet and indigo. Some have even been black.

I want her to experience as much pleasure as possible. Sometimes, when I'm

particularly famished, I can make these sessions last for hours. Naturally, I want to come, too, but that's not the entire reason I love to fuck.

My balls tighten, but I don't want to come yet. I grab the length of her hair, knotting it in my fist. I fuck her mouth with a couple more thrusts, then I pull her off me.

"My turn," I say with a grin and flip her over again.

I push her creamy thighs apart. Her sexual energy dances across them like a lightning storm, and I lean close to drink her in. With every sip, I become more powerful, and my cock grows bigger and harder. I know she'll never have fucked someone like me before.

Incubi aren't allowed within the walls of the city of Highdrift.

I am the exception.

I cover her pussy with my mouth and suck on her clit. Her back bows from the bed, and she grips the black silk sheets in her fists.

"Oh, God. Oh, fuck."

I pause for a moment. "That's right, pretty girl. Come hard for your prince."

The harder she orgasms, the better I'll be able to feed from her. It benefits us both to ensure I blow her mind.

When I'm done with her, she'll sleep—probably the best fucking sleep of her life—and she'll wake wondering if it had all been a dream. It'll take her a few days to feel normal again. She'll wonder if she's coming down with something, or if she's just particularly tired for some reason. She won't know that she feels that way

because while I fucked her, I drank from her sexual energy to fortify myself.

The thick stone walls of my chambers muffle the sound of her cries from anyone passing by.

My charm magic only works if the desire is already there. My prey might be completely unaware of their darkest desires on a conscious level until I direct my powers in their direction. It's like an amplifier, a tease, a sweet whisper of a suggestion in a person's ear. It might never have occurred to them before—or perhaps it's a desire they've refused to give in to and have pushed it down—but as soon as they become my focus, it comes rushing back up. It's like they're drunk on fucking, primal, unable to control themselves. They lose all their inhibitions, all fears over what they might look or sound like, or what anyone else might think of them. It's a total release, and something many of the tight asses in the castle are desperately in need of, if you ask me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I continue to lick her, pushing my tongue inside her tight walls. Is she a virgin? Even better if she is. Nothing tastes as good as virgin energy.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” I tell her. “It’s probably going to hurt, but I need you to try to relax.”

I move up her body and fist my cock. The energy I drank from her means I’m even larger than when she was sucking me.

She glances down at my erection, and her eyes widen with fear. “No, no, please. It’s too big.”

“You can take me. I know you can.”

I increase the strength of my magic, and she lets out a cry of pleasure. She won’t refuse me again.

I press the head at her entrance. She’s so wet and swollen and ready for me. It’s the most beautiful sight in the world.

I stretch her wide, and the smooth head of my cock vanishes inside her. Fuck. I love seeing a sweet, tight pussystretching around my girth. I drive deeper, and the light ripples and pulses across her skin. Her head is tossed back, her plump lips parted, her eyes shut. She feels like heaven.

A knock comes at the heavy wooden door. “Prince Ruarok?”



I recognize the voice of the head of the King's Guard, Cirrus Planetree. Seriously? The man has the worst timing.

Ignoring him, I pulse my hips, sliding in and out of her. I duck my head to take one of her nipples into my mouth, sucking on it hard. She gasps and meets me with every thrust.

The banging comes again, louder this time. "I know you're in there. Word has just come that your father has entered the city walls with his new bride. He'll expect you to be in the Great Hall to welcome them both home."

"Busy!" I shout from between gritted teeth.

I glance down at where my cock slides between the girl's pussy lips, vanishing inside her. My length is wet with her arousal. She shows no sign of having heard the man outside my room—though I suspect Cirrus won't have come alone—and throws her head back and moans again. Her hands find her heavy tits, and she squeezes her nipples and bucks her hips, wanting more.

I growl and lower my head, thrusting hard inside her. Her glow grows brighter with every thrust—she's like a firework about to explode—and my own climax builds.

The banging comes again. "Prince Ruarok! I really must insist."

My orgasm retreats, and I blow out a breath. "Motherfucker."

I climb off the girl and snatch my pants up from where I'd abandoned them on the floor. Now my charm magic is no longer directed at the young woman, she starts to come round. I've left her unsatisfied, though, so her hand slips between her thighs to rub her clit. It's clear she plans to finish herself off, and I'm frustrated this interruption means I'm no longer involved.

Bare-chested, my skin still slick with sweat, I go to my door and undo the heavy brass bolt.

I swing open the door. “What?”

I’ve opened the door far enough that Cirrus can clearly see the naked woman masturbating in my bed. His face pales and he swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“The king will be here any moment, sir. You really must be ready to greet him and his new bride.”

That’s the last thing I want to do, but my father, the king, has been gone for three months, so I really should show my face.

2

RUAROK

The court has gathered in the Great Hall. From the clock tower, a bell dongs with a deep resonating sound that travels for miles, signaling the return of our ruler.

I’ve showered and changed, aware that I’m going to be on show to the rest of the court, and I don’t want to stink of sex around my father and his new queen. Normally, I wouldn’t care, but this is a special occasion.

No matter how many times I’ve entered the Great Hall, the grandeur and beauty of the space always hits me. Overhead are high, vaulted ceilings, intricate paintings of winged beasts between the beams. Beneath my feet are polished parquet floors.

The Great Hall is already crammed with my father’s subjects. An energy fills the air,

as do excited whispers that occur behind hands about who the new queen will be. At the head of the room, on a platform, are two thrones. The smaller of the two is where I would normally be seated, except now my spot is to be taken by the new queen.

Jealousy bites at me like rats' teeth at the thought.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

As I enter, people notice me and duck their heads in small bows of greeting. No one smiles.

I'm not loved here. I already know that. The subjects are unsure of me, and they have good reason to be. My kind of magic is not to be trusted.

I stick out like a sore thumb.

I'm surrounded by these perfect, white-blond haired, pointy-eared Fae, but my appearance is the opposite. While I might have half Fae blood running through my veins, I got my looks from my mother's side. My dark hair and eyes mean I stand out as someone—something—different. There are a few others dotted between the Fae who don't have the classic Fae appearance, but they're only there because they have some Fae blood in them. Non-Fae aren't allowed in the castle at all. Even the servants, like the girl I've just left, will have some Fae blood, though they're more likely to be the offspring of some lesser mortal like a human.

My heritage is something my father has never let me forget. I'm his only offspring, but often I think he'd prefer if he hadn't sired anyone at all. He's ashamed of me—ashamed of how I look, of how I act, of how my magic works. Perhaps a lesser man would embody his shame and hide himself away, but I refuse to give him that satisfaction.

I take my new place, standing at the king's left-hand side, one pace back from the throne. The empty seat beside the king's throne mocks me.

A hush falls over the crowd.

A horn sounds, and a voice rings out.

“Introducing King Themaris, first king of his name and ruler of the lands of Askos, and Queen Lorith, Princess of the lands of Torremora.”

My father sweeps into the Great Hall. He still wears his riding cloak, which billows around him as he walks. One of his staff moves forward to unclip the clasp from around his throat and quickly whisks it away, all without my father having to break his stride.

I’d imagined he’d have come in with his new bride on his arm, but, as is usual with my father, he has her walking several steps in his wake. His large form hides her from me, but I’m eager to get a look at the new queen, the woman who will technically be my stepmother.

I smirk at the thought. I’ve never had anyone in my life in a mothering role before. After I was born, my father took me from my mother’s arms and banished her from the kingdom. The only reason I know she was Incubi is because her genes were clearly stronger than my father’s. I’m sure if I’d been born looking like him, and with more Fae magic than Incubi, he’d never have revealed to me—or anyone else—what makes up the other half of my parentage.

The king reaches the platform and steps up to his throne. The motion removes him from my line of sight and reveals the person a few steps behind him.

The sight of my father’s bride-to-be snatches the breath from my lungs.

She’s older than I am, but still nowhere near as old as the king.

She is beautiful. Waist length, white-blond hair, cat-shaped pale blue eyes, skin like marble. Her fingers are long and elegant, her wrists narrow. In the tight corset, her

breasts practically spill out, and her iridescent wings lightly pulse the air behind her.

There's no doubt that Queen Lorith is full-blooded Fae. It isn't only in her appearance, but in the way she holds herself, her shoulders back, her chin held high. The air around her vibrates with magic. It's no wonder my father decided to take her as his bride.

What the fuck is a beauty like her doing marrying an old man like him?

My father reaches his throne, and, without sitting, turns to face the room. He is mere feet from me—so close I could reach out and touch him—but he doesn't even make eye contact with me. I wonder what the hell I'm doing here, when I could still be balls deep inside a naked woman.

He reaches out and clasps his new bride by the arm and guides her to stand in front of what is now her throne. I try not to taste the bitterness of being replaced on my tongue and fail.

Whoops and cheers come from the crowds, filling the air in a deafening roar, but my father lifts his hand to silence them.

“Thank you, all, for giving us such a warm welcome home. Tonight, we will feast and drink, and dance and sing to celebrate this union, and your new queen.”

Cheers erupt again.

I clench my fists and grind my teeth as cold anger and jealousy wrap around my heart.

I plan to get my father on his own as soon as possible. I have questions.

No sooner have the king and queen arrived, they leave again. My father never even acknowledges me.

So much for wanting me here.

My father has living quarters that are completely separate from the new queen's. I don't understand it myself. If I had a woman like that at my disposal, I'd have her permanently in my bed. I'd want her bathing in my clawfoot tub, the scent of her in the air. I'd want her standing naked as she chooses her clothes in the morning, and naked again as she discards them last thing at night. I'd want to watch her brush her silver-white hair in the mirror and hold her eye in the glass. But my father probably doesn't want her presence interrupting his nightly visits from the whores he loves so much—whores like my mother had been. The women he holds with such disdain yet also can't get enough of.

I wait until the Great Hall has cleared out, and then make my way through the castle to my father's quarters. The only way to reach his tower is across the sky bridge. It's not really a bridge, as such—more a suspended corridor. It's designed so only a couple of people can reach the King's Tower at a time. If we were ever to be invaded, it would allow his men to defend him no matter how many people were in the invading party.

I hope Cirrus Planetree won't be stationed outside the door, but it's a possibility. He'll have been given instructions to keep me away.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I cross the sky bridge, aware of the wind buffeting it, and reach my father's door. There's no sign of the King's Guard, for which I'm grateful. Not that I can't handle them, but I need to keep all my energy for the confrontation with my father.

Without bothering to knock, I throw open the heavy wooden door and stride into the room.

My father stands at the tall, arched windows, gazing down onto the city and lands below.

The castle and tower are positioned on the highest part of Askos. Below us, the city of Highdrift sprawls in a rabbit warren of streets and alleys. I often slip away from the castle at night, disguised as one of our groomsmen, to frequent the whorehouses and bars. Not that I need to pay a whore, but sometimes...okay, more than sometimes...they know tricks that regular women don't. I've not yet had a whore gasp in shock when I've told her that I'm fucking her ass tonight. They tend to be well-practiced. That's not to say I don't like ass-virgins—they can be fun all of their own—but they take time and practice to be able to fully take my size, and sometimes I'm hungry and don't have the patience.

“What do you want, Ruarok?” he says without turning to face me.

“Good to see you missed your only son,” I reply, unable to keep the snideness out of my tone.

I hate that he brings out this side in me.



“The only time you want to see me is to either cause trouble, or because you’reintrouble.”

“Perhaps I simply want to wish you congratulations on your new bride since you completely ignored me in the Great Hall.”

He spins on his heel to look me in the eye. “Not everything is about you. At your age, I would have thought you’d learned that by now.”

Age is a strange thing among the Fae. I’m two hundred years old but only matured around forty years ago. A year in human years is ten years in Fae.

My father is four hundred years old, while the new queen must only be about three hundred, if that.

“Perhaps I just never had the right upbringing to learn it.”

I was raised by the castle staff, people who were only there because they were paid to be. As I started to mature and come into my magic, even those people no longer wanted to be around me. A teenage Incubi, with hormones flying and little control over the magic he’s coming into, isn’t a safe thing to be near.

“Shouldn’t you be with your new bride,” I say, “giving her a tour of her new home, maybe, making her welcome?”

He shrugs. “She has her own people for that. She doesn’t need me to do it.”

“She’s brought her own people with her?” I ask, curious. “Who?”

New people means fresh blood. They won’t know who or what I am, which always makes things more interesting. I imagine all the rich pickings that will be had among

these people from a far-off land. Will they have been warned about me? I hope not.

“Yes, she brought all her lady’s maids, and her daughter.”

The word stops me. “Her daughter? She has a child?”

This is news to me.

“Yes. The rot has taken hold in her homeland of Torremora. It took her husband, too. She’s been left without a home or a husband to protect them, so I stepped in.”

My jaw drops. “You’ve berated me for years for being a bastard, and now you’re taking on another man’s child?” I can’t hide the disbelief in my tone.

“It’s not the fact you’re a bastard that’s been the problem, Ruarok. It’s who your mother was.”

I snort in contempt. “My mother was a Succubus, and I bet you loved every second of fucking her.”

“I didn’t know that’s what she was when I met her. She tricked me, just like all your kind do.”

I shake my head, huffing air from my nostrils. “How can I trick anyone? All anyone has to do is look at me and they see what I am.”

“You’re a monster. A fucking energy vampire.”

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t insult me, Father. I’m nothing like those messy bastards. You think I’d want to get blood all over my face...” I consider this for a minute. “Well, I don’t mind one kind of blood, if it’s that time of the month.”

His upper lip curls in distaste. “You disgust me. I’m ashamed that you’re my son.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“How many times have I heard that before? You think telling me one more time is going to make the slightest difference? The truth is that you did something stupid by screwing my mother, and now you’ve got a lifetime of me to put up with.”

“It’s not like I had much of a choice with your mother, is it? Like I said, your kind are vampires.”

“And now your only son is half one.”

He shakes his head and turns back to the window.

“This conversation is over,” he says. “I’ve had a long journey, and I need to rest before the feast tonight. I won’t stop you from coming, but if you’re not there, you won’t be missed.”

I scowl. “I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

3

RUAROK

I return to my room, anger thrumming inside me.

I’d expected to be replaced, especially with the new queen taking my seat beside the king’s throne, but I hadn’t expected this.

A child.

It's no secret that my father has...issues...in conceiving. I was an outlier, something so unexpected that he hadn't been able to turn his back on me. With the amount my father whored around, he should have bastards all over the place. But he'd never conceived with his first queen, and stories say she died of heartbreak from not being able to mother a child, and none of his whores had ever fallen pregnant either.

Until me, that was.

Of course, it was questioned whether my mother had conceived me from another man, but since my father had kept her prisoner for years, to be his own personal concubine, and there was no possibility any of his staff would have been so foolish as to sleep with her behind the king's back, it was clear he was the cause of her swollen belly.

Then I was born, and he had no way of denying me. I might only be half Fae and look nothing like him, but I have the royal birthmark like a tattoo behind my right ear. All of our line had some variation of it, including my father.

But now he has a full-blooded Fae child, who may not be his biologically, but who he'll see as far more suitable to take over the kingdom when he's gone. He's always hated the idea of me being on the throne when he passes, diluting the royal Fae bloodline, but, until now, there was no one else.

My mind races. What can I do?

I stand at my bedroom window and gaze out across the kingdom. My father's flags containing our emblem, the dragonfly, with its lethal sting at the tail and its ability to fly faster than any other creature in the lands, flutter in the breeze. The numbers here have swelled over the last few years. A rot is setting in, something dark and magical that no one understands yet, but it's eating away at the very ground beneath our feet, sending entire villages plummeting into the darkness of whatever is lying far, far, far

beneath the world's crust.

What if I need to get rid of them? Could I do it? Murder a young child and her mother? I search my heart for even a flicker of potential remorse or regret but find nothing. It wouldn't be a pleasant job, but if they stand in the way of me inheriting the kingdom, then yes, I could.

Or maybe there's another way...

Instead of killing them, maybe I could make Lorith my queen instead. While I have no use for the daughter, I know the mother won't be able to resist me.

I'll bend her over the king's throne and fuck her until she can't retain a single thought in her pretty little head. If she were to choose me instead, that would really screw up my father's plans.

I'm sure I can sense her in the castle.

Something has changed. A different kind of energy vibrating within the thick stone walls. I'm used to being surrounded by Fae magic, but this feels more...Incubi.

I shake the thought from my head. There's no possibility my father would allow another Incubi into the castle. He'll have demanded to know the new queen's ancestry for generations back. He wouldn't risk making the same mistake again. Maybe this is a different kind of magic—one I haven't come across before.

It pulls to me, though, like she's a beacon in the castle, the only light I can see, and I'm drawn to it. Should I go to her? I'm tempted, but I also know I can't be too obvious. I can't risk my father wising up to my plans and using it as an excuse to banish me. I don't believe even he would do such a thing, but if he knew how I was thinking about his new bride, he might change his mind.

I'm quite sure Queen Lorith would rather have me fucking her than the old man who is my father.

Blood rushes to my cock at the idea. I didn't get the chance to finish myself off earlier. The thought alone of how much it would piss off my father for me to climax over the new queen is enough to make me even harder.

I throw myself down on my bed, lying on my back, one arm over my head. The other reaches down to open my pants. My cock springs out, and I wrap my fingers around my length.

I've got a few hours until the feast in the Great Hall, and I plan to make the most of them.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Closing my eyes, I bring forth the image of the new queen. She is delicate in every way. That long, white-blond hair, the clear skin, the rise of her breasts beneath her dress. She just screams the need to be defiled. I imagine taking her roughly, of tearing away the front of her dress to expose her naked tits, of her crying out and trying to cover them with her hands.

My cock grows even harder in my hand, and I slowly pump myself. My fantasy of ravaging the new queen takes shape. I want her to fight me, to force me to take her against her will. I make no attempt to use my magic on her, to try to seduce her. In my head, I tear away her undergarments and grab her hand and wrap it around my dick.

Now my hand has become her hand, and she masturbates me, despite her insistent cries telling me she doesn't want this. She tells me how angry the king will be, how furious he'll be when he finds out his son has defiled his new queen. The idea only makes me harder. I picture myself pushing my hand between her thighs, of finding her wet and hot and swollen, ready for me, despite her insistence that this isn't what she wants. I force two fingers into her greedy pussy and imagine they're my erection.

What if I was the one to get this new queen pregnant? What if I filled her with my cum, and my seed made its way to her womb, and then I would be the one to create the next heir to the throne?

In my imagination, I hold her down, my arm around her throat. I cover her body with mine, pressing myself between her thighs, and ram my cock inside her. Even while she cries about how the king will find out, I fuck her hard and fast. She continues to protest, but I swallow her words by covering her mouth with mine.



My orgasm builds deep with my balls, rising through the base of my cock. My ass clenches, my thighs trembling. All my focus goes to my climax. I come hard, semen jetting from me in a hot, forceful surge. I jerk my hips into my hand and spurt again and again.

Wrung out, I slump onto the bed. I don't bother to open my eyes again. A blissful wave of relaxation sweeps over me, and I let out a sigh as my heartrate and breathing slow to normal.

Sleep takes over.

4

TAELYN

I enter my new bedchamber at the castle.

Taking center stage is a four poster bed, which has been intricately carved from a solid piece of white ash. In the solid stone walls, a large fireplace burns. Not that I think it's needed. The temperatures here at Askos are far warmer than my homeland.

Though there are only a few items in the room that actually belong to me—most of my belongings had been swallowed by the rot, along with the castle, and the city, and lands surrounding it—my new bedchamber reminds me of my room at home, and my chest tightens with pain.

It feels strange to no longer have a home, as though I've been untethered from the world. I've known this day was coming since childhood, but I'd never imagined the way it would happen or what would take place after.

My wonderful father—killed by the rot that has devoured our home—has been

replaced by an older man. A stranger. He seems kindly enough, but it's still all so surreal. We've left our home behind and have arrived in a strange land where I know no one. I guess I should be grateful I'm not quite yet of a marrying age, or I would have been sent away, alone, to become some other strange man's wife. I'm grateful my mother has brought me with her.

Still, I ache with a longing for a home that no longer exists. The knowledge that no matter how homesick I am, there is no longer a place to go back to, leaves me with a strange kind of lethargy. A dull ache in the pit of my stomach and an emptiness in my heart.

As we'd approached the city and I'd gotten the first look at my new home, I'd acknowledged the castle of Highdrift had seemed pretty enough, standing on the top of the hillside. It's made up of one large tower and a smaller, separate tower is positioned beside it. A suspended corridor, many hundreds of feet up, join the two buildings. It was quite a sight. The city that surrounds the castle is charming and bustling, and the locals had gathered as we'd ridden through, filling the streets, clapping and cheering at our arrival.

I know it was never me they were clapping for. It was the king, and perhaps my mother, their new queen. I wonder how long it has been since they had a queen here at Highdrift.

I'm exhausted and filthy. We've been traveling for weeks, and the journey was hard. As we moved through the country, I felt the weather grow warmer, not only because of the changing of the seasons, but because of the change in the lands. My homelands were located farther south, where we were more likely to see ice and snow than grasslands and flowers. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the heat.

We'd been attacked on several occasions during the journey, and it saddened me that most of the people doing the attacking were simply our own people, displaced from

their homes. They were desperate and starving, and it made me feel terrible that we were escaping to a new land and leaving them behind. I once mentioned to my mother that we were abandoning our people, and she told me that we no longer had people to abandon. Our lands were no more, and those who survived the rot had been pushing onto lands of other kingdoms that we'd had to seek permission to travel through. Even so, when I spotted any of these unfortunates, I always tried to give them whatever I had, and I'd continued to do so until the king had noticed and forbidden me from giving away anything else. We needed it for our long journey, he said.

The servants have poured me a deep bath, scented with local flowers. There is to be a ball tonight, and I certainly can't show up smelling like horses and old sweat. I have new clothes in the closet, too, though I have no idea who bought them.

I'm eager to get into the bath while the water is still hot, so I rid myself of my traveling clothes, peeling them from my body. I climb into the bath, grateful to have the warm water encasing my limbs. I sink my wings in first as I lie back, and my long, white-blond hair floats around me. I want to relax, but it isn't easy when I'm in a completely strange place.

Tonight, at the ball, I will meet the king's son, Prince Ruarok. It's strange to think I have a brother now. He's older than me, but other than that, I haven't been able to get much information from anyone about him. It's not from lack of trying either. They're strangely closed-lipped. The king's face takes on this tight, pinched look any time Prince Ruarok's name is mentioned. I can't help being curious. I've never had a sibling before. I picture him defending my honor and teaching me things like sword fighting and drinking, and all the things my mother considered too masculine to allow me to learn before.

There's a milky cream added to the bath, something to soften my pale skin. I wash my limbs, and my body, underneath my breasts and between my thighs. I linger there

a moment, enjoying my touch. I'm exhausted from travel, and I allow my eyes to close. I know it's dangerous to sleep in the bath, but a little self-love won't hurt. I need to relax after such a stressful journey.

A flash of a dark-eyed man enters my mind. The images project into my brain as though someone put them there. I gasp and sit up, sloshing water over the sides. What was that? It had been like someone had been watching me.

I climb out of the bath, fluttering my wings so tiny droplets of water fly into the air, the vibrations drying them almost instantly. My hair will be a different matter, however. It's almost waist length and will take an age to dry completely. It needed to be washed, though, and for all the knots and tangles to be worked out of it. I wrap a large towel around my body and tuck it into place between my breasts.

I go to the closet to look through the garments a stranger has purchased on my behalf.

The dresses are beautiful. I go through them each on the railing, looking for the perfect one to wear tonight. They all have a corseted top, with long skirts that puff out at the hips. They'll make my waist appear tiny, and I'm sure the corset will only serve to highlight my breasts. The clothes are far more grown-up than my mother would normally allow me to wear, but the king is in charge now, and I know she won't say a word. This is a new beginning for me. People here will see me as a young woman, not the little girl bouncing around the castle like they did at home. I'm almost of a marrying age, and though I have no wish to marry, I do want people to see me as a woman.

A knock comes at my door.

"Enter," I call, holding the towel tightly around my body.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

My lady's maid, Skylar, enters the room. She shares my pale complexion, blue eyes, and white hair. I brought her, together with the head of my guard, Balthorne, with me.

"Princess." The girl drops to a curtsy. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

I've never been good at having other people fuss around me, but I'm happy to see her. I pat the edge of my bed for her to come and sit.

"Please, come sit with me, Skylar. I don't know anyone else at Highdrift, other than my mother and the king and Balthorne. It's good to have a friend."

She smiles and her features light up. She perches on the bed beside me.

"Tell me about my stepbrother, Prince Ruarok. Have you heard any news about him?"

Instantly, her anxiety seems to return. Her shoulders stiffen, and she stares hard at the floor. "Oh, I really couldn't say."

"But you've heard something? Have you met him?"

"No. I've been lucky enough that he hasn't crossed my path."

I frown. "Lucky? Why lucky? What is everyone so frightened of?"

"Prince Ruarok isn't fully Fae."

“Right,” I say slowly. “I admit it’s unusual for a member of a royal family not to have full Fae heritage, but it’s not unheard of.”

She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. “He’s a bastard. His mother was a whore.”

Her coarse language does shock me. Even more so does the information that my mother is now married to a man who has slept with women of the night. But then, I doubt there are many men around who haven’t, and, in my opinion, if those women have put to use something they have to earn themselves a living, then who am I to judge?

“So, all this secrecy is just because Prince Ruarok is a bastard?”

“Plus he has a reputation around the castle for being...easy with women.”

I frown. “He’s not yet married, so surely he’s allowed to be with whomever he chooses.”

“When you see him, you’ll understand more.” She jumps back to her feet. “Now, will you allow me to help you dress?”

I nod my agreement. “I’ve chosen which one I want to wear.” It’s a beautiful dress in silver which will highlight my hair and wings.

“Let’s work on your hair first.”

I take a seat at my dressing table, and she combs out all the knots, the movement relaxing.

“And now a little magic,” she says with a smile.

The air around us charges, and a rush of hot air blowsthrough the white-blond strands of my hair. Within seconds, it's perfectly dry. Silky and shiny, and falling around my shoulders.

"Thank you," I tell her, but my stomach knots that even my lady's maid has more powerful magic than I do.

"Now let's get you into your dress."

I allow her to wrestle me into the garment. I can see the impact the dress has had on my figure. There is no possibility of anyone mistaking me for a little girl wearing this.

Skylar lets out a low whistle. "The whole court are going to be talking about you when they see you wearing this."

My pale cheeks pinken in the mirror. "Oh, no, they won't. All eyes will be on my mother, I'm sure."

My mother has always been the beautiful one, and I've always been proud of her. What she's been through over the years has been enough to make anyone crumble, but she kept going, keeping her chin held high. Her magic is also far more powerful than mine, though that isn't difficult. Considering I'm full-blooded Fae, my magic still hasn't come into its own. My mother reassures me that it's because I'm still young, but even so, I find it frustrating.

Skylar shakes her head and smiles. "Oh, no, Princess. All eyes will be on you, I'm sure."

5

RUAROK

I openmy eyes to someone straddling me.

It takes me a moment to figure out what's happening. It's dark in the room, so night must have fallen. While I normally have no problem with waking to a woman on top of me, I'm fairly sure I fell asleep alone. No one should have access to my quarters without my permission.

I try to see who it is. The buxom blonde from earlier that day, perhaps? Has she returned to finish what we started?

But it doesn't look like the same girl. She's fully dressed, but beneath her skirts I glimpse a set of long, pale thighs. Her white-blond hair falls over her face, obscuring her features from me. That it's dark also doesn't help.

There's a flicker of recognition inside me, though, but I almost can't believe what my eyes are trying to tell me.

My heart picks up its pace.

Her elegant fingers wrap around my cock, squeezinghard, almost to the point of pain. I gasp, but I'm instantly hard.

What's happening here?



The woman crawls down my body, so her face is directly above my dick. Her hair hangs in a curtain around her face so I still can't make her out. I want to reach down and swipe that hair away, but I'm terrified that if I move, I'll break whatever spell this is.

Protruding from the deliberate folds left in her dress, two gossamer wings vibrate in the air. They almost have a life of their own, the amount of energy that is going through them.

Her mouth covers the head of my cock, hot and wet, and she sinks down deep. Fuck. That feels incredible. I let out a moan and thrust my hips up, wanting more. Still, I can't bring myself to touch her. My cock is deep in her throat, and then she gags. Her throat closes around me, and I growl in pleasure.

Then I realize something. I can't see any aura across her skin. I've never been in a sexual situation and not been able to drink from their energy. I don't understand what's happening here.

Is it the queen? The queen is pure Fae, isn't she? My father would never have married someone of unpure blood, not when he has me as a son.

It looks like her, but still...something is different. The question about the new arrival's bloodline jumps back into my head, but I'm not given enough time to analyze it.

The pleasure makes my mind swim. It's as though I can't see or think straight.

What is she doing to me?

Has she drugged me? I can't see where she'd have had the opportunity, but it's possible.

Another possibility occurs to me.

Is this Fae magic? I thought I was immune to their magic, but maybe I was wrong.

The Fae woman lifts her mouth from my cock then turns around, so she's facing away from me. I still haven't seen her face. She raises her long skirts so they hook around her hips and lower back. Her wings reach higher in the air, helping her as she lifts herself, positioning her pussy directly above my cock, and she slowly lowers herself.

My eyes roll with pleasure. By the gods. The tight walls of her pussy hug me, and she grinds down so she's taking me right to the hilt. She moves languidly, as though she's savoring every moment, and rides me backward.

She still hasn't said a word.

I have the perfect view of her long, smooth thighs and round ass. My gaze is glued to where my cock vanishes into her pussy. I place my thumb against her asshole, and she lets out a guttural moan and rides me harder. Her wings take much of her weight, so it's almost as though I'm fucking her in midair. Her ass slams up and down, and I'm sure I'm not going to last much longer.

I still don't understand what is happening here. I don't feel as though I'm completely with it, like my limbs are too heavy and my head is foggy. Is this what it feels like when I use my magic on someone, or is this something else?

My orgasm builds inside me, and I chase it. She fucks me harder and harder, and then her pussy pulses around me and she grinds down, her wings going still to allow her to sink low, her whole body shuddering and trembling.

I'm close as well, and she moves on me again, sliding up and down the length of my

dick, our motion building.

Her wings flutter, and she lifts herself off me, just as I'm about to come, and slides down my thighs, away from me.

I open my mouth to protest at the sudden lack of contact, but my climax has already taken hold. Now bare, my cock jerks, and jets of milky white semen burst from the slit, splattering my stomach.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I close my eyes again, utterly spent. The deep suck of sleep pulls me under, and I struggle to fight against it. I need to speak to her, don't I? To ask her where we take things from here? But I can't. I can't move, never mind anything else.

I give in to oblivion.

6

RUAROK

The swell of noise hits me as I approach the Great Hall.

People are laughing, talking, and dancing. Musicians are in the corner playing stringed instruments. The crash and clatter of dishes as servants fill the long table with roasted meats and baked sweets fill the air.

When I woke for a second time, there had been no sign of my mystery visitor. The only thing that hinted at my experience was the amount of dried semen splattered across my skin and bed. I'd taken the time to clean myself up again before dressing for the feast.

I'd also checked my bedroom door. It had been locked. There was no way for someone to have entered my room while I'd been sleeping. Even if she had, how had she gotten back out again, locking the door behind her? The queen is new to the castle—it isn't as though she'll have access to a key. In fact, no one else has access to my room—at least not that I know of.

Now I think back to it, the moment feels strange and unreal in my head. I'd been asleep, hadn't I?

Is it possible the whole thing had been nothing but a dream? Had my subconscious conjured it up because of the way I'd fallen asleep—fantasizing about fucking the queen, while jerking myself off?

It's the only thing that makes sense.

As I enter the Great Hall, a few Fae lift into the air and fly a short distance across the room before dropping to the ground.

I scowl at the sight, acutely aware of the wings missing from my back. My black hair might single me out as being different, but I could drain the color from the strands if I really wanted.

No, there is one thing in particular, or lack of one thing in particular, that marks me out as not being Fae, and that's my missing wings. Not that the wings my father and his new wife possess are much good for anything. Thousands of years of living on the ground, in cities and castles, instead of in the treetops where Fae originated, has made it so their bodies are too heavy and their wings too small for any real flight. They might still be able to lift a few feet from the ground, and perhaps cross the length of a room, but that is all.

The skies of Askos no longer glimmer with the ethereal silver of fairy wings.

Those days have long gone.

That doesn't mean the Fae aren't still the most powerful of beings, however. They still have magic, and, for the most part, they're respected. Being half Fae, well, that's clearly a different matter. Maybe if I'd been half human, or even half demon, instead

of Incubi, I'd be respected a little more, but because I need sex to survive, I'm seen as everyone's enemy.

Heads swivel in my direction. The usual whispers and comments are made behind the backs of hands.

I've deliberately arrived late as an extra insult to my father.

He's already seated in his throne, the new queen at his side.

I can't take my eyes off her. She shows no sign of having paid me a visit. She doesn't seem to be looking for me, or to be worried about anything in particular. If she had any idea how much my father and I hate each other, surely she would have realized how I would happily use this against him.

Unless, of course, the whole thing never happened.

The king eats heartily, tearing into a hock of ham with his teeth. He has food all over his face, hanging from his beard. I wrinkle my nose in disgust. Queen Lorith must want to vomit when he leans in for a kiss like that.

Where is the daughter? Of course, feasts like this one are no place for a child, but I did wonder if my father might have taken the moment to parade his new potential heir to the throne in front of his subjects. Or maybe he's hoping for a miracle and to conceive with his new wife, though such a thing is unlikely.

I think back to my plan to rid myself of this new problem.

Children are vulnerable. They die all the time. They make stupid choices, like hanging from balconies, or tripping down stairs, and they get sick too. Why should the queen's child be any different?

Keeping my chin up and shoulders back, I wind my way between all the guests and approach the thrones.

“Ruarok, you came,” my father says.

I offer a tight smile. “You sound disappointed.”

“You’re as welcome here as anyone.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I'm not sure that's the truth.

One of his King's Guard moves in to speak in his ear, distracting him. I take the opportunity to greet Queen Lorith.

"My Queen." I take her fingers in mine and drop to one knee before her.

I place a kiss to the back of her hand, lingering perhaps a moment too long. I keep my gaze lifted, fixed on hers, in a way that I know is disrespectful.

It's not toward her, however—this is all about saying fuck you to my father.

I don't want to use my charm magic on her. That would spoil the fun. I want her to want me over my father not because I've woven my spell around her, but because I'm a better man than he is.

"So, you're my stepson," she says.

I lower my voice and throw her a wicked smile. "Yes, though I'd prefer to be your husband."

She yanks her hand away.

I hold her eye. I want to read any hint of understanding or recognition in her gaze, but there is nothing.

As each moment passes, I'm becoming more convinced that the whole thing was just



a dream. Disappointment settles within me. It had seemed so real. I'd convinced myself that Lorith was destined to be mine, but it seems I was mistaken.

The queen's line of sight drifts over my shoulder, to someone behind me.

"I don't believe you've met my daughter, Taelyn," she says.

I rise to my feet, but I'm already feigning interest. Who brings a child to a ball? What if I'm now considered on the same level as some random Fae girl, and I'm expected to entertain her and sit at the children's table?

Forcing myself to be polite—something that hurts right down to the roots of my teeth—I turn to greet the girl.

I jerk back in shock. This is no child, or at least she's verging on the dawn of becoming a woman. I guess she's at least a hundred and seventy years old. She's almost identical to her mother, though clearly a hundred years younger.

"Prince Ruarok," the girl says, extending her hand to me in much the same way her mother has just done. "I've heard so much about you."

Still in shock, I take her hand. Her fingers are long and slender, just like the ones that had wound around my cock and squeezed so hard it hurt. I kiss the back of her hand, the skin smooth and soft, and try to hide my reaction.

"Princess Taelyn. I'm afraid no one has told me much about you at all."

So, this is the person who will oust me from my throne?

I'd believed I'd been dreaming about the queen, but what if...?

No, that's impossible. I couldn't have been dreaming about the princess. I didn't even know she looked like...this...until a few moments ago. It must have been the queen my imagination conjured. But I remember how I never actually got to see her face.

Could she have used some kind of magic on me?

Had she come into my room and taken me while I'd been sleeping?

Is she the one I'm destined to be with?

My cock jumps in my pants at the thought.

No, I can't allow myself to think like that. If her magic is stronger than mine, she may well use it to rid herself of me. Is she thinking the same way I am—that I'm the one standing in the way of inheriting the throne? If her homeland has been destroyed by the rot, then she has nowhere else to go. Does she understand that if I inherit the kingdom, I'll have no use for her?

Princess Taelyn might be stunningly beautiful, and my stepsister, but she's also my enemy.

She looks to her mother. "I was just searching for someone to dance with. This music is so beautiful."

The queen gives me a tight smile. "I'm sure Prince Ruarok will oblige. He is now your brother, after all."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Her words hit me. Fuck. Princess Taelyn is my little sister, and I've been thinking about fucking her the entire time I've been standing here.

Still trying to hide my thoughts—and grateful no one here has the gift of mind-reading—I offer my arm to the princess.

“Gladly,” I say.

She gives a radiant smile and takes my arm. Together, we step out onto the ballroom floor.

Princess Taelyn is wearing a silver ballgown that's covered in crystals and glitters as she moves. The bodice is tightly fitted, and the skirts billow out right down to the ground. I pull her into me, my hand at the narrow nip of her waist. She gazes up at me, her pale blue eyes so like her mother's. Her lips are perfect, parted slightly, so I can see the pink of her tongue and a glimpse of small, white teeth.

We dance, holding each other's eye. I want to ask her if she was the one riding my cock earlier, but I don't. I'm still unsure what happened. It was most likely a dream, but something tells me it was more.

We move across the floor, fluid and graceful. I'm so conscious of her hand on my back, the heat pressing through the fabric of my shirt and searing my skin. People make way for us as we spin and twirl. I sense them murmuring to one another, perhaps commenting on what a striking couple we make.

But no, we are brother and sister.

We can never be a couple. I see that. Her mother is now queen, and Princess Taelyn will consider herself as a rightful heir to the throne.

Just as I do.

Neither of us will settle for sharing.

The song comes to an end, and we stop moving and face one another. I duck my head in a bow, and she gives me a small curtsy.

“Thank you for the dance, Prince Ruarok.”

“Of course. You dance beautifully.”

She smiles and drops her gaze.

I sense eyes on me and turn to see who is watching.

It’s my father. His expression is as cold as stone. Doesn’t he want me dancing with his new stepdaughter? Or does he know what I’m thinking?

It’s only later that I realize the whole time I’d be dancing with Princess Taelyn, thinking about sex, that I never caught a glimmer of her sexual aura. Why was that? Normally, if I’m thinking about sex, I can project some of that onto the person I’m with, especially when I’m also touching that person, but with her there was nothing.

Is there something different about my new stepsister?

When I reach my chambers, I hardly know what to do with myself.

I'm flustered, my body alight in a way it's never been before, like it has suddenly come to life.

I danced with Prince Ruarok. My stepbrother.

I throw myself onto my back on my bed and cover my face with my hands. I'm glad to be alone for a few moments so I can process what's just happened.

Never before in my life have I felt so beautiful. Though I'd been aware of all eyes in the Great Hall being on us, every one of them had fallen away apart from him. That he had chosen to dance with me had made me feel as though he'd elevated me to another level.

I see now why everyone was so closed-lipped about what makes up the other fifty percent of his parentage. He is half Incubus. Is that why I feel the way I do around him? Like my heart has forgotten how to beat steadily, and my lungs no longer know how to expel my breath.

He is quite beautiful.

I've only ever been around blond, fair-skinned males before. The shock of his black hair, glimmering like raven's wings, made my hands itch to touch it. And his deep brown eyes were like wells I'd believed I could have fallen into.

My mother and the king had watched us dance, but I don't believe they'd thought anything untoward was happening—at least my mother hadn't. Perhaps the king knows his son far better and was more conscious of the prince's actions.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Skylar said he had a reputation around the castle. That he was loose with women. I'm not special, I remind myself. This is just how he is.

But even so, he's made an impact on me.

Do I feel this way because he is part Incubus? It must be. I'd prefer to believe it's his Incubus magic at work than any natural reaction on my part. After all, this man is my stepbrother. We are related, even if it isn't by blood. I surely can't be having any...immoral...thoughts about him. But by the gods, when we'd been dancing, I'd swear my nipples had grown hard and tight beneath the bodice of my dress, and that place between my thighs had become hot and tight. The entire court had been watching—something I'm grateful for now, because if they hadn't been, how would that dance have ended? He'd mesmerized me as he'd swept me across the floor, and all I'd wanted to do was press my body closer to his. I'd pictured his lips against my skin and his hands in my hair. The rest of the room had all but fallen away.

I shake my head at myself. No, no, no. He's my new brother. I'm horrified at myself, and I think how disappointed my mother would be if she knew the thoughts going through my head.

I can't think of the way I pictured how it would feel to have him between my legs.

If he's Incubus and has been with many women, he'd know exactly what to do to pleasure a woman. I try to recall what I know about Incubi. Don't they feed from sexual energy? It benefits them to give their partner as much pleasure as possible, because it helps them grow stronger? Some say that being with one is like taking a drug. It lifts you to a whole new level, physically and spiritually.

A knock comes at my door, and my lady's maid slips inside the room.

She tuts at me lying on the bed, still fully dressed. "You can't sleep like that, Princess."

I force myself to sit up. "I know, I know. I was just resting a moment."

"Come and sit here, and I'll help."

I do as she says, as though she is the one in command instead of me, and take a seat at my dressing table.

"You danced with Prince Ruarok," Skylar says as she loosens the ribbons holding my corset together.

"Yes. He's quite...something." I'm aware that I sound as breathless and flustered as I feel.

I see her face over my shoulder in the mirror. Her expression is pinched, as I see so often with people when they speak of the prince.

"You must be careful around him. He's dangerous."

I press my lips together. "He doesn't seem dangerous."

"It's well known that he does not have favor with the king."

"How can that be?" I question. "The king is his father."

"It does not matter. Every time the king looks at Ruarok, he sees the whore instead of himself."

How must Ruarok feel to know his own father hates him? I wonder if he ever met his mother. What a lonely existence he must have lived. I can't imagine my own parents hating me. I'd been blessed with a loving mother and father, until he was taken by the rot. I still miss him every day, but I'm grateful for the years I did have him in my life. Yes, Ruarok might be part Incubus, but has the real reason he's been...busy...with so many women around the castle simply because he's been searching for someone to love him? The possibility breaks my heart.

"That's so sad."

"Don't try to comfort him," Skylar says. "He will interpret it as something else."

My face heats, and I clear my throat to hide my reaction. "He's my stepbrother. I care only for his well-being."

It's her turn to appear uncomfortable. "Of course, Princess. I wasn't trying to suggest anything..."

I throw her a smile. "It's fine, honestly. Let's talk about something else, shall we?"

I don't really want to talk about anything else. My mind is completely occupied with thoughts of my new stepbrother. I can still feel the imprint of his hand on my waist and the touch of his palm against mine. I want her to leave so I can be alone with my thoughts, to analyze what this new feeling is inside me.

Maybe Skylar is right. Perhaps going down this path is dangerous. After all, what good can come of me feeling this way? The two of us have to exist in this castle together, and how will that work if it feels like fireworks have gone off inside me every time he is near?

I'm so aware of his presence inside the castle. It's like a beacon calling to me,



guiding me home. Is it his magic I'm sensing, or could it be a little of my own? I want to learn more about what having him near me means.

For the first time in my life, I feel truly alive.

Skylar must sense my new excitement and ignores my suggestion to talk about something else. "Stay away from Prince Ruarok, Princess, please. He will ruin you."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Why does that possibility give me a little thrill?

Do I want him to ruin me?

8

RUAROK

The crash of my bedroom door smashing open is like a thunderclap happening right above my head. I'd been sleeping, my head filled with thoughts of the princess now instead of the queen—what a fickle beast I am.

I'm wide awake now, though.

Suddenly, my quarters are filled with guards.

They all seem to be yelling at once.

“He's in here!”

“Get him!”

“Act fast.”

I push myself to sitting and then to my knees. The guards surround my bed, edging closer, and more guards block the door. I wish I had thought to bring some kind of weapon to bed, but it hadn't occurred to me.

I'd left the feast in the Great Hall without incident and believed everything was fine.

I was clearly wrong.

I refuse to go easily. It's clear to me that the reason behind this invasion is my father, and behind that is most likely the new queen and her princess.

Reaching deep inside, I pull my magic to the surface and then thrust it outward.

My power isn't only over the female kind. I can just as easily overcome the men, too.

The guard closest to me lets out a groan, and the bulge in his tight pants is apparent. He reaches for me but hesitates.

Give in, I mentally will him. Feel the hot wetness of a mouth around your cock.

His hand goes to the front of his pants, and instead of grabbing me and yanking me off the bed, he unzips himself, freeing his erection. The other guards stare at him in shock, though they should know what they are dealing with. What I am is no secret. My father really should have warned them all about that before sending them in. I almost want to laugh, if the situation weren't so serious.

"Put it away, man," one of his comrades yells.

But the guard is too far gone, lost in his head now, only focusing on the pleasure I've sent coursing through his body. His hand moves up and down on his cock, his jaw rigid with concentration. His aura lights up—a forest green—and deepens. He beats off hard, and I know he won't stop until he comes.

I turn my attention to a second guard, sending out that same forceful sexual energy. I'll have them bending each other over the bed soon enough, fucking each other in the

ass, even if they've never so much as looked at another man in such a way. When they come round, they'll be confused and ashamed, and angry and sickened about what they've done, but they'll also remember how much they fucking loved it.

The second guard moves his attention from me to the first guard—the one whose cock is in his hand. With a moan, he drops to his knees in front of his comrade and swallows down his dick. Guard number one fucks his face hard, and guard two chokes and gags, tears streaming down his cheeks. But guard two has pulled out his own cock now and is masturbating at the same time as sucking his friend.

I can tell from the color and intensity of their auras that they're loving it, and I glance around, assessing the auras of the others to figure out who's the most susceptible. Which one is turned on by seeing the two men together, even if they'd deny it until they were blue in the face?

The other guards understand what is happening. Several of them back off, taking steps in retreat. They glance anxiously at one another, not wanting to be the person who next ends up sucking cock.

Guard number one pulls guard two to his feet, turns him around so his hands are flat on my bed, yanks down his pants, and then rams himself in deep.

I wince, and suck air in over my teeth. Ouch. Going in with no lube, on what I assume is an inexperienced asshole. That's got to hurt. The poor guy won't be able to sit down for days.

I focus my attention on the next closest guard, the one with a golden yellow aura, and spill my magic toward him. His expression tightens with pleasure, and his movement toward me falters. I want to get him in a line with the other two, maybe take guard one up the ass, but I don't have time. Another guard finds his courage and approaches me, and I witness understanding passing between them all.

They realize there's too many of them for me to control at once. Even with this distraction, they remember their jobs, and that's to apprehend me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I have no choice but to fight physically.

One guard grabs my arm, and I manage to swing my elbow and catch him in the jaw, sending him flying backward. Another launches himself at me, and I throw a punch, my knuckles connecting with his nose with a satisfying crunch.

Rich, red blood sprays from the injury, a couple of droplets hitting my skin. The distraction is enough for two more guards to slam straight into me, knocking me hard to the stone floor. All the air bursts from my lungs, and it's as though an iron band has wrapped around my chest, preventing my ribs from expanding to draw another breath.

The guards seem unaware of this as they haul me back to my feet. They yank my arms behind my back and clip heavy metal cuffs around my wrists. All the fight has gone out of me, but I'm still indignant about the way they're manhandling me. Don't they know who I am?

"I'm your prince," I spit when I'm finally able to draw breath. "Unhand me this instant."

They don't reply. I understand they have the same kind of distaste for me as my father has. On the other side of my bed, both guards come with yells of pleasure and dismay.

I'm dragged down the corridors, torches burning to light the way. Staff catch sight of us, scullery maids, and handmaidens, and flee as though a battle is on its way.

Perhaps it is.

What the hell is my father planning to do with me? Would he have me killed?

I've always believed he won't go so far, but now I wonder. I am his only son. His only child. He might not like me very much, but would he really wipe out his own bloodline? Except maybe he doesn't see me as his bloodline, or at least he sees me as having polluted it.

Would he rather see me dead than passing on my genes?

The guards haul me into the Great Hall. I'm unsurprised to find my father sitting on his throne, his expression impassive about his only son being thrown to the floor at his feet. His new wife sits beside him. Can I use my magic on her? If I do, is that more or less likely to get me killed?

Slowly, I get to my feet. I'm trembling with rage at being treated this way.

"What is the meaning of this, Father?" I demand.

His face is as rigid as ice. "Your plot has been exposed."

"Plot? I have no plot."

His wings vibrate with his fury, shimmering like starlight on the ocean. The hum of the vibration fills the air.

I experience a pang of remorse, of regret. What would I have been if it had been that side of me that had been expressed in my genetic makeup? Would my father have hated me so much if I'd been more like him?

“One to have the queen and her child killed?”

I grimace. “Oh, that one.”

I don’t correct him that he’s only half right but how does he even know that much?

The why and how comes to me. I’d believed no one had the talent to mindread, but I’d been wrong about that, at least in part.

“You had someone read my thoughts?”

He scratches his fingers through the silvery strands of his beard. “You’re like an open book, Ruarok. A disgusting open book.”

“Thinking something isn’t the same as acting on it. If I’d have wanted to have the girl killed, then I would have. I’d had other plans for Queen Lorith.” I smirk.

“She is your stepmother and your queen,” he snaps. “You will treat her with respect.”

I can’t help myself. I snort. “My stepmother? She’s not much older than I am.”

“She’s still your queen.”

My queen. I like the sound of that. Except I want to be the one sitting on the throne. Not scrambling around on the floor like a nobody. This was never supposed to be my destiny.

“A part of me wants to make an example of you,” Father continues. “I should have you taken to the city square and strung up and left to hang until your flesh falls from your bones. Traitors to the kingdom would be treated no differently.”



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

My jaw drops. “A traitor? Is that what you think I am? Because of a mere thought I had? I love this kingdom, love it more than anything else in the world—even you, Father. The idea that I could betray it is unthinkable.”

“A kingdom is nothing without its king, and I am the king, and you chose to betray me.”

“I did nothing,” I hiss from between gritted teeth.

“No, but in time, you will.”

I shake my head in dismay. “So, you’re going to have your own son—your only offspring—executed for something he may possibly do in the future. I assume you won’t take my word that I’ll behave myself?”

He scoffs lightly at this. “When have you ever behaved yourself, Ruarok?”

The king has a point.

He carries on. “As much as I feel I will regret my choices, I can’t bring myself to have you hanged,” he says.

My heart catches, but not in a good way. I know what the alternative is. “If you’re going to banish me from Highdrift, then I’d prefer you hanged me. I have no wish to exist outside of our lands.”

Because existing is all I would be doing. The wild and wicked moorlands beyond our

kingdom are desolate and barren. There's no wood to burn for fire or heat, no way to cook our food. The lack of trees also means no shelter from the biting winds that strike across the moorland or the icy, lashing rain. And the lack of shelter or warmth or hot food isn't even the worst thing about those lands. There are creatures far more fearsome than I am that prowl the moorland. Huge beasts with sleek, black fur and yellow eyes, and rows of teeth that can strip the flesh from a man—or a Fae—within seconds. When the dark falls out there, they move in silence, blending in with the black, so you're dead and devoured before you even hear them coming.

In that moment, I hate both Queen Lorith and Princess Taelyn. If they never existed, I would not be facing this fate.

But to my surprise, the king shakes his head. “No, Ruarok. I will not banish you, either. If I were to banish you, there would always be the possibility of your return, and I cannot live in peace with that threat hanging over all our lives. We would never rest. I need to know exactly where you are.”

His words fill me with confusion. “Where are you going to put me? In the dungeons?”

“No, the dungeons wouldn't contain you. All you would need to do is charm one of the guards and they would unlock the door just to be with you.”

Damn, my father knows me and my magic too well.

“Where, then?” I ask.

“You'll still be in the castle.”

I'm alarmed. “Where?”

He taps his staff to the floor, and the guards file back in. There are so many of them. I know their numbers are to prevent me from trying to escape. But even if I were to escape, where would I go? I can't flee the kingdom and still expect to live any kind of life, and if I were to stay, it would only be a matter of time before I'm recognized. Hopelessness blooms within me.

The guards take hold of me again. There's no point in fighting back. I know when I've lost. The metal of my cuffs clink as I'm dragged from the room. I wonder if that was the last time I'll ever see my father.

I'm surprised at the jolt of pain that strikes through my heart. Had a tiny part of me held on to the hope that one day things might have been different between us?

That hope is crushed now.

The guards drag me through the castle to where the coil of stone steps leads down into the dungeons. I'm confused. My father said I wasn't going to be put in the dungeons, but that definitely seems to be where we're heading.

The temperature drops by several degrees, and the walls grow cold and damp. Somewhere nearby, I hear the hollow trickle of water.

The cries and moans of the dungeon's current inhabitants reach my ears. It's misery and desperation I hear. Am I to become one of them?

We reach the bottom of the spiral staircase, but instead of turning right, toward the cells holding the current prisoners, I'm taken left. I have no idea what is down this way.

The corridor is lit by torches attached to the walls. We seem to be heading farther down. Is this even possible? I didn't think there was anything beneath the dungeons.

“Where are we going?” I demand. “Where are you taking me?”

I hadn’t expected an answer, and I don’t get one.

Finally, at the end of the corridor, we reach a heavy wooden door. Metal bars run across the wood as extra security. One guard steps forward and uses a large iron key to unlock the door.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

It swings open, revealing the room beyond, which is also lit by torchlight.

It's the item in the middle of the room that captures my attention.

A huge metal cage stands in front of me. Its bars are silver. The air around it vibrates with magic. It's so powerful, it snatches the air from my lungs.

"No!" I roar and try to pull back on the guards.

Cirrus Planetree, the head of the King's Guard, steps forward. I hadn't noticed him until now. I guess he didn't want to get caught up in whatever mayhem I might cause with my magic.

"This will be your forever home, Ruarok," he tells me. "In this cage, you will be in a kind of stasis. You won't age, you won't need to eat or drink, your bodily functions will be halted. You will, however, be perfectly aware of the passing of time. You will experience the drag of every single moment. An endless nothing. No distraction from your suffering."

The blood freezes in my veins. "You can't do this to me."

"Of course we can."

One of the guards moves forward and opens the cage door with a pair of gloved hands. He seems afraid, and I realize that's because he is. He's frightened he will be the one to accidentally be pulled inside the cage. He's the one who will spend eternity suffering.

Panic gives me one final burst of energy. I dig deep for my charm magic, but it's not there. Not that it would be much use to me anyway. There are too many guards. I do try to fight, though, throwing myself backward, using my feet to kick and shoulders to shove. My hands are still cuffed behind my back, or I'd punch as well.

"Stop this nonsense, Ruarok," Cirrus exclaims. "Accept your fate. There is nothing you can do now."

I run out of steam. I want to drop to my knees and sob, but pride prevents me from doing so. I go limp in their grip.

Two of the guards take advantage of my weakness and rush me forward, throwing me into the cage. I fall to my knees, my hands still bound.

"Wait, please. At least take off the cuffs."

With my hands cuffed behind my back, I won't even have the distraction of masturbation to carry me through the years. What is an Incubi who can get no sexual satisfaction? I'll become a madman. A shell of myself.

Cirrus ignores my plea. "You brought this upon yourself, Ruarok."

The cage door slams shut behind me and instantly seals.

The guards back out of the room and pull the door closed behind them. I hear the click as the lock is turned.

Fury rises inside me at the thought of the queen and of Princess Taelyn. A hatred like nothing I've ever experienced before burns bright inside me.

And I have all of eternity to nurture it.

TAELYN

## PART TWO

A cracklike the earth is splitting in two sends me rocketing from my bed.

The stone walls of my chambers shudder around me. Mortar crumbles and falls like rain. Everything seems to be moving, and the noise sounds as though the world is ending.

I spin on my bare feet, my silky nightgown flaring around my legs. My wings vibrate in the air behind me and lift me from the floor for the briefest of moments.

“Skylar!” I shout, my gaze darting around the room.

I’m trying to find the source of the chaos I’ve woken to, but it’s not something that’s occurring inside. It’s coming from outside, shaking the castle right down to its foundations.

The candelabra swings wildly above me, the metals chains shaking like an angry ghost in the dungeons. Only one of the four candles that had been lit when I’d gone to sleep is still alight, and the flame flickers and dances as though caught in a storm.

The door bursts inward, and Skylar, my lady’s maid and best friend, rushes into the room.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Princess Taelyn,” she cries. “What’s happening?”

She’s closely followed by the head of my guard, Balthorne. His near-white hair is down to his broad shoulders. He sees me standing there in my nightwear, and his pale blue eyes widen. He goes to turn his back, as though my modesty is the thing that’s important right now, then changes his mind.

Both stand with their arms outstretched to keep their balance. The floor seems to tilt and buck, and I swear I see the stone slabs moving.

On my left, books slide from the towering mahogany shelves and plummet to the floor. The covers open as they fall, cream pages fluttering.

Terror clutches my heart.

“Get into the bathtub, Princess Taelyn,” Balthorne shouts at me. “Lie down flat.”

I spin to face him. “How is that going to help?”

“If the ceiling comes down, you’ll be safer there.” He looks to Skylar. “You, too.”

Luckily, my bathtub is big enough for us both. Maybe some princesses would refuse to be in such proximity to their staff, but Skylar is more like a sister to me. I’d gladly give my life for hers.

On unsteady feet, we hurry into my adjoining bathroom. Skylar climbs into the tub first, lifting her long skirts over the high rolltop edges and the solid cast iron sides,



and then puts her arms out to help me. It isn't easy with everything shaking around us, but I manage to climb in and lie down with her. We're face to face, holding each other tight.

"What about you?" I ask Balthorne, twisting my head to look at him and having to shout to be heard over all the noise.

He ducks his head in a bow. "My job is to protect you."

"From people or rabid dogs," I cry. "Not this!"

The terrifying racket continues. It's not only the ceiling I'm terrified of coming down. We're several stories up, and if the building below us collapses, there will be little chance of survival. An old cast iron bathtub certainly won't save us.

It feels as though hours have passed since I woke, though it must only be a matter of seconds, maybe barely even a minute.

I hadn't thought it possible for things to get louder, but they do. Skylar lets out a scream. It sounds as though the whole castle is coming down around our ears. Skylar and I clutch at one another. Everything shakes and trembles, more mortar and pieces of rock fall around us. My hair and skin and eyelashes are coated in dust. I inhale it into my lungs and cough.

Then, suddenly, everything goes quiet and still.

There are a few shifts of rubble, the distant sound of things collapsing. But it's nothing like what we were in the middle of only moments before. It's like the whole world is holding its breath, me included.

I find my voice. "I-Is it over?"

“I think so,” the head of my guard says.

Balthorne leans over the tub and puts out his hand to help me up. His wings are longer and thicker than mine, and they lift into the air and help to brace him as he helps us out of the tub. Balthorne is as traditionally Fae as they come, and one of my top members of court.

I take his hand, and he carefully helps me out. Then we both help Skylar up.

“Is everyone okay?” Balthorne asks, his tone deep and rumbly.

“I’m all right,” Skylar says.

I nod in agreement.

What damage has been done to Highdrift Castle? From the amount of noise, I assume we won’t have gone unscathed. What about the surrounding city and the homes there? They’d have been built with far less support than the castle. I hate to think of them razed to the ground, the poor people inside either dead or homeless. I vow to ensure we do everything we can to help those who are left in a desolate situation.

Assuming our own stores have gone unharmed. I suddenly find myself worrying about the horses in the stables, and the chickens, and all the other animals we have. I hope none of them were harmed.

“We should go to the king,” I say to both Skylar and Balthorne. “Find out what we can do to help.”

But Balthorne doesn’t move. He’s standing at the arched window, a silhouette in the moonlight.

“Balthorne?” I say. “We should go.”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Still, he doesn't move. He speaks without facing me.

"The King's Tower has come down, Princess."

I widen my eyes and shake my head in disbelief. "What? No."

He finally steps out of the way, revealing the view beyond. "You can see for yourself. I'm so sorry."

I run to the window, once more short of breath. My pulse races, and I'm dizzy and sick with shock.

I stare out, my heart in my throat.

Where the skybridge once linked the King's Tower to the main part of the castle, created to keep armies out if the city were ever to be invaded, it now hangs in pieces down the castle wall.

The place where the King's Tower once stood is now an empty space. Dust hasn't yet settled, and the cloud is illuminated in the moonlight.

"The rot," I manage to say.

The ground that had been beneath the tower has been swallowed, too. All that remains is a gaping hole.

My knees buckle, and I drop to the floor. I cover my mouth, but it doesn't stop the

wail of utter grief that rises through my chest and bursts from my lips. The sound is inhuman and comes right from the soul.

There is no possibility of any survivors. The tower hasn't just fallen—it's been swallowed by the very earth it stood upon.

I clutch my hand to my chest as though I'm trying to hold my heart in place, to prevent it from breaking. The King's Tower is where my mother and stepfather, the king, reside. If it's gone...

My brain can't take the severity of what that might mean.

My mother and stepfather are dead.

"No, no, please no."

I clutch my face in my hands and shake my head. I'm barely aware of Skylar crouching on one side of me, and Balthorne the other, both trying to offer me comfort. But how can anyone make me feel any better? The King's Tower is gone, my mother and stepfather crushed within it. I think of how terrified they must have been, how their final moments would have been spent in utter terror. I understand how frightened they'd have been because I felt that way myself only moments earlier, and that was with the floor remaining somewhat solid beneath my feet. I picture the slabs falling away instead, dropping through the sky, the walls and ceiling, and us along with it. Of falling and falling, and then finally agony. Had my mother died instantly, or had she suffered? The thought only makes me sob harder.

"You're in shock," Balthorne says. "I'll fetch you some sweet tea."

"I think she's going to need something stronger than sweet tea," Skylar snaps. "I think we all are."

Something else occurs to me. If the king and queen are both dead, and I am their only heir, then the kingdom is mine. Wailing on the floor is no place for the next queen of Highdrift.

I manage to nod. “Yes, something stronger. Please. I need it.”

Balthorne leaves my side long enough to retrieve a bottle of liquor from the cabinet. Distantly, I think to myself that it’s a sign of the carpenter’s excellent workmanship for the bottle not to have broken in all the chaos.

He pours me a shot glass of the liquor and hands it to me. I drink it down in one, the syrupy aniseed flavor coating my tongue, the alcohol burning my throat and warming me from the inside.

I motion to him. “Another.”

I catch him shooting Skylar a look, followed by her briefest of nods. They’re wise not to argue with me right now.

He hands me a second glass, and I take my time with this one. I’m still shaking all over, the drink vibrating in my hand. Tears continue to run down my face, but the alcohol seeps through my veins, offering me a layer of numbness that is much needed.

Pulling myself together is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, but the people of Askos need me. They’ll be looking toward the castle for guidance. How far will the news of the monarchs’ deaths travel? Will rulers of other lands consider us weakened and an easy conquest? Or, if they hear the rot has made it as far as the city, will they decide it’s not worth their bother?

I put my hand out to Balthorne, and once more, my guard helps me to my feet. I go to

the window to take in the destruction with fresh eyes.

I stare across the countryside of Askos, which lies beyond the city and castle of Highdrift. The castle isn't the only place that's suffered. Several fires have broken out, black smoke rising into the air. People will have lost their homes. They'll have nothing. When news of the king's death spreads, there will be days and weeks of mourning.

And everyone will want to know who is ruling them now.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I think of Prince Ruarok Loftborn, the king's son. I only met the man once, briefly, when my mother and I first arrived at the castle. We'd shared a dance, but then a plot to have both me and my mother murdered had been revealed, and the prince had been banished from the castle and the surrounding lands and cast out into the wilderness.

He's most likely dead now, and even if he isn't, I'd have no idea how to find him. If he is still alive somewhere, will word of his father's death reach him? It doesn't feel right for a son not to know of his parent dying, though I'm fully aware of the difficult relationship the two of them had. My stepfather and mother rarely spoke of the prince, and, when they did, it was from between pinched lips and clenched jaws.

I remember dancing with Ruarok in the Great Hall on the first day I'd arrived at the castle. He'd certainly left an impression on me. The atmosphere between us had been charged. I'd been so conscious of the placement of his hand on my waist, the fingers of his other hand entwined with mine. He'd stared into my eyes the entire time we'd spun across the dance floor. I remember forgetting to breathe.

I'd never seen anyone quite like him before. His dark hair and eyes were so completely opposite to the natural paleness of the Fae. I'd struggled to believe he could even be half Fae, but then there was no way the king would ever have allowed someone who wasn't his natural born son to live in the castle. Besides, he had the king's birthmark behind his ear, so there was no question of his heritage.

I'd dreamed of him after he'd been sent away—dirty, heated dreams that I really shouldn't have been having about my stepbrother. I'd blamed my age and hormones, conjuring something that never could have been.



Besides, Ruarok had wanted me dead. That was why he'd been banished. There was certainly no love lost. Maybe I'd entertained the idea of having a big brother, but he'd clearly never thought of me as being a younger sister. Plus, the dreams had nothing sibling-ish about them. Quite the opposite.

I'd been so young back then. My head had been in a whirl. I'd lost my father and my home and been whisked off to a new land and castle and introduced to a new stepfather.

It had all happened so fast.

Sometimes, I wondered if the king ever regretted banishing his only son. I couldn't imagine having a child and casting him into a life of such torture and misery. But my mother often used it as a way of reassuring me as to how much the king loved us both—that he would choose us over his own flesh and blood.

I doubt I will ever become a mother. My child is the kingdom now, but I fear for its survival. If the rot is in the lands of Askos, as it clearly is, then how much longer will the city and the castle stand?

I close my eyes and knock back the remainder of my drink, and then spin on my heel.

“Princess,” Skylar says, “where are you going?”

I glance back over my shoulder. “To take command of the kingdom.”

10

TAELYN

Balthorne chases after me with my cloak.

In my haste, I've left my chambers in only my nightgown. I'd completely forgotten what I was wearing.

"Thank you," I tell him, my hand touching his as he places it around my shoulders. "That wouldn't have been the best way to make my first entry into the Great Hall as?—"

I cut myself off. I can't quite bring myself to say it. As what? As the new queen? As the new ruler of Highdrift and the lands of Askos? It feels wrong to even think it, as though I'm betraying my mother's and the king's memories.

A number of footsteps come running toward us, echoing down the long hallway.

It's Cirrus Planetree, the head of the King's Guard, and several of his men.

"Princess," he gasps, "thank the gods you're safe."

"What news of my mother," I say, "and the king?"

I find myself grasping at the final strands of hope that perhaps they weren't in bed at the time of the collapse, that perhaps they'd gone for a walk in the middle of the night, or maybe they'd had a fight and my mother had gone to sleep elsewhere.

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Princess."

I close my eyes briefly and nod, doing my best to hold myself together. Tears burn my eyes, and my throat feels like I've swallowed a sliver of glass, but I don't lose it again. I need these people to respect me, and that won't happen if they see me as an emotional mess.

"I want to see," I tell him.

He frowns. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I need to.”

Maybe I’m torturing myself by wanting a close-up view of the place that has become their burial site, but I feel the need to confirm their deaths for myself.

“Very well.”

Cirrus leads me there, though I know my way. Balthorne brings up the rear. Cirrus is the head of the King’s Guard, but does that mean he’ll become the head of my guard now? I’m unsure of where that would leave Balthorne. I’ve never been a huge fan of Cirrus, but I trust Balthorne with my life.

The cold air touches my cheeks and nose long before I come face to face with the hole in the side of the castle. My heart crawls up my throat and lodges there, making it hard for me to breathe. Instead of the skybridge, which once crossed to the king’s quarters, there is now only the night sky. Wind howls around the part of the castle that remains. It catches my long, white hair, whipping it around my face. Mortar crumbles from the fractured stone, reminding me how fragile this part of the castle has become. It’s stood for a thousand years, but in the space of one night, a vital part has been destroyed.

The atmosphere of shock and grief that surrounds us also unites us. It’s a deep sense of mourning, not only for the loss of our king and queen, but also for who we were as people. The relative comfort and security of our lives is no more. It can all be ripped away from us at any moment.

The future is also uncertain. I can’t even think too far ahead right now.

I turn to Cirrus.

“We must make an official announcement from the castle that the king and queen are dead, and the kingdom will enter an official seven days of mourning. I need the word

spread that the kingdom has a new ruler in the form of Princess Taelyn Loftborn. The people need to know they have someone at the helm. Someone guiding them.”

Cirrus ducks his head. “Yes, Princess.”

“I will go to the king’s offices now and work from there. Please instruct the head of the treasury to inform me as to the state of the castle’s coffers. The city is going to need money if it’s going to rebuild.”

“Of course, Princess.”

I look to my lady’s maid. “Skylar, could you return to my chambers and bring me something more fitting to wear?”

She gives me a brief smile, turns, and hurries away.

“Balthorne,” I say to the head of my guard, “you may escort me.”

We walk in solemn silence through the castle, down to my late-stepfather’s private offices. The heavy wooden door is shut, and, with a shaking hand, I reach out to open it.

It’s strange stepping into this room. I can count on one hand how many times I’ve been here in the ten years I’ve been living in the castle. It was the king’s private offices, but the king is no longer with us. I am the only remaining member of royalty now, and therefore, this is now my private office.

I’m the Queen of Askos now, though it’s unofficial. We have far more important things to worry about than a coronation. Besides, it’s only right that the kingdom observes the seven days of mourning before crowning a new monarch.

Will ruling as a woman make Askos more vulnerable than it already is? If I had a husband by my side, my ability would not be questioned, but alone? That's a different matter.

We have been weakened by the king's and my mother's deaths, but also by the rot that's now worked its way into the very ground we stand upon. Why would any other kingdoms want to conquer us now? What would they want with lands that are ready to fall away beneath our feet at any moment? If we can't trust the very ground we stand upon, what can we trust?

I've been here before.

I lost my homeland, Torremora, to the rot. I grew up while watching pieces of the city fall into the nothingness. It hadn't happened all at once, but slowly, bit by bit, over years and then decades.

It hurts my heart that these people are going to have to go through what my homeland suffered. Where will we all go? How many places will be left? Before long, resources will become slim, and then the fighting will start. I know how it goes. We're still at the beginning here, and people will feel terrible for their neighbors who've lost everything, but in the years to come, those same neighbors will become enemies. Anyone who has something will see those with nothing as their enemies. They'll guard what they have and kill anyone who tries to take it, no matter how desperate they are. I've seen it with my own eyes. Normally good people forced to kill families with babies because they're trying to protect what is theirs.

Soon there will be nowhere left to run.

The walls of the office are lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. A ladder on a runner is available to reach those shelves near the top. At the far end of the room, an open fire still smolders in the grate. In the middle, positioned on an expensive rug, sits the

king's heavy wooden desk.

Balthorne is waiting for me outside, preventing anyone else from entering. This space is mine now.

I go to the bookshelves and run my fingers across the spines of the books. So many books on every subject possible—on magic, and history, and arts. As I take slow, deliberate steps, I touch the leather bindings and inhale their scent.

One book in particular draws my attention. Its spine is as thick as my forearm, and it appears to have real gold embossed into the leather.

I experience a strange pull. It causes my heart to skip, and my breath to tighten in my chest. It's almost as though my fingers have been magnetized and something is drawing me toward it.

I select the book from the shelf. The cover opens, and the pages flip as though on their own. What is this? Magic?

Being a full-blooded Fae, magic is something that should come naturally to me, but I've always had a difficult relationship with it. While other pure Fae might have powerful magic, mine has always been somewhat lacking. I've told myself that my magic is simply dormant, and will come to me when I am older, but currently, it is weak.

The pages finally come to rest, open at the precise page where a gap has been cut into the pages beneath. Nestled in the hole is a large iron key.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

With a frown, I reach in and lift the key. Pinching it between my thumb and forefinger, I hold it in the air and turn it one way and then the other. What is it for? Why has the king gone to such trouble to hide it here?

I swear it vibrates in my grip. The iron isn't cold, as I'd expected, but is warm, as though heated from within.

Come...

A whisper, but I don't hear it via my ears. It's coming from all around me. Or even inside me.

This way...

I find myself powerless to resist.

11

TAELYN

Aware that I've left Balthorne guarding the front, I slip out of the rear door of the office—the one the staff use to enter if they need to stoke the fire or bring meals to the king. I hurry down the rear passageway, candlelight guiding me. I'm following something, but I don't know quite what or to where. I know only it's important.

Hurry...the voice whispers from somewhere inside my head. It's time.



Following some kind of instinct inside of me, I keep going. I leave the staff corridor and cross the main hall to take me to the steps that lead down, into the dungeon.

The head of the King's Guard, Cirrus, steps out in front of me, breaking my reverie.

"Princess Taelyn, where are you going?"

I frown and stare down at the large key in my palm. "I-I'm not entirely sure."

He sees the item in my hand, and his eyes widen in shock. He covers his reaction quickly with a smooth smile, but not quickly enough for me to fail to register it. He recognizes this key.

"I will take that for you."

To my surprise, he reaches out to swipe it from me. I move just in time, closing my fingers around it, and then placing my hand behind my back.

"A princess has no business with ugly things like that," he says.

"Ugly things like what? It's just a key."

Something is clearly troubling him. "It's old and rusted."

"What is it for?" I ask.

"I have no idea."

His gaze shifts up to the left, and I know he's lying.

"Cirrus, you are head of the King's Guard, and since there is no longer a king, you

are now sworn to me.”

“I will swear to protect you, Princess Taelyn, and that’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

“Protect me from a key.” I give a small laugh that contains no humor. “I think I have far bigger things to worry about.”

He chews at his lower lip. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

I remain baffled. “I still don’t understand. Does this key have something to do with the rot?”

It’s the only thing I can think of that could possibly cause me harm. We’ve lived in peace here for the past ten years. The rot took my home, and my real father, back in Torremora. It gradually ate away at our lands, taking our crops and animals, until our subjects began to starve. How can you fight something you can’t see? No one knows the cause of it. Rumor is that it’s caused by black magic, a curse put on our lands, but no one knows why or by whom.

“No, Princess, it doesn’t. It’s something that could be far more dangerous.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

The key seems to feel warmer again in my hand. I have no intention of passing it to Cirrus. The king went to great lengths to hide the key, and now Cirrus seems intent on not allowing me to find out what door it opens.

“I don’t need you to worry about me,” I tell him. “I’m a grown woman and ruler of Highdrift and the lands of Askos.”

He ducks his head slightly. “I’m sorry if you believe me to be too overprotective, Princess, but we have just lost both our king and queen. It would be wrong of me not to do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“I understand that, Cirrus, but there was nothing you could have done to protect either of them. My greatest threat is something none of us have any power over.”

It must make him feel helpless, as though his job is worth nothing. I don’t mean to be cruel, but I really do want him to leave me with the key. I can’t explain the grip it has on me. All I want is to follow where it guides me.

Perhaps, on the other side of whatever door it opens, is the answer to all our problems. Maybe it will save us from the rot? The unlikelihood of that niggles in the back of my mind. If that was the case, then why had the king hidden it? A person hides something they don’t want anyone to find.

I feel the pull of whatever is behind the door, even if I don’t fully understand it. I am Fae, though, and I recognize magic, even if my own isn’t strong. It isn’t always something that can be comprehended. Sometimes you just have to let the magic take control.

“Step aside, Cirrus,” I say. “I command you.”

He has no choice, and though I can tell it goes against everything he believes in, he moves to one side to let me pass.

Pass, I do.

My wings tremble behind me, a flicker of excitement racing through me. I shouldn't want any more excitement—quite the opposite. I need to think of my kingdom now, how much they need me. But the pull is stronger than I am. I find my feet moving of their own accord.

Down, toward the dungeon.

This isn't a place I've spent any time. Why would I? A dungeon is no place for a Fae princess. Of course, that doesn't mean I've never been down here. I've taken the occasional peek when I'd heard of someone—or something—interesting being locked away down here.

I reach the bottom of the stairs and, instead of turning left, toward the main part of the dungeon, I go right.

I've never been this way before. Why am I suddenly so sure I had to come down here?

It's dark and dank, and torches that have run low flicker in the gloom. Somewhere nearby, water trickles. My pulse races, my heart feeling too large in my chest. In my palm, the key grows warmer still.

I'm going the right way, even though every instinct tells me to turn and bolt. Somehow, I know this is important, and I can't be a coward. How can I rule over a kingdom if I allow myself to get a little spooked? This is a part of the castle—my

castle now—and I need to know every inch of it. If I don't explore, I'll be forever questioning what's down here.

Maybe I should have brought someone with me. Yes, that would have been more sensible. I know why I haven't, though. If I'd tried to tell someone where I was going, even my lady's maid, Skylar, they would have tried to stop me.

This also feels like something I need to do alone. I can't begin to explain why or how I know this; I just do.

A heavy wooden door stands at the end of the corridor. Twin torches are attached to the wall on either side, and lit. Who comes down here to keep the flames burning? Would they know what this key is for?

The wooden door has been fortified with iron bands strapped across it. Whatever is behind that door must be someone people were fearful of escaping. A large iron lock, a size that I'm sure will fit the key, is on the left-hand side.

My hand trembles. I shouldn't do this. I should turn and run as fast as I can back up into fresh air and sunlight, and the safe company of my lady's maid and guards.

But my feet won't move.

My hand reaches forward, seemingly of its own free will, and slots the key into the lock. I try to pull back, but nothing happens.

It's as though the proximity of the key to the lock has given it a new kind of power. A strength it didn't have before. I can't stop it. I want to toss it to the ground, but my fingers only grip it tighter. Tears prickle the backs of my eyes with fear. This is black magic, and I have no control over it. I'm going to open this door, whether I want to or not.

The key turns in the lock, and I pull it back out, keeping hold of it.

The door swings open, revealing the room beyond.

12

TAELYN

I let out a gasp and clutch my hand to my mouth. Now the door is open, it seems the key has released its hold on me. But I'm not going to turn and run.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

In the middle of the room, though it is more like a stone cave carved out of the bedrock, stands a huge silver cage. It reminds me of a far larger version of the kind one might keep a brightly colored parrot in, or perhaps several budgerigars.

But it's not a bird that sits in the middle of the cage, but a man.

He is naked.

He sits on the floor of the cage, curled into himself, so all that is visible is the top of his dark head, his shoulders, and his shins and feet.

Slowly, he raises his head. Dark eyes—eyes I've looked into before—lock with mine.

“Hello, Princess.”

I blink, almost unable to believe what I'm seeing. “P-Prince Ruarok?”

“I wondered when someone would find me. If someone would find me. I've had times I've believed this would be the end of me.”

Moving cautiously, as though he hasn't used his limbs in some time, he unfurls and gets to his feet. The cage is large enough for him to stand straight. He makes no move to cover himself, and I find my gaze landing on his semi-erect cock and the thatch of black curls around it. I wonder if he has no modesty at all, but then I realize he can't cover himself, even if he'd wanted. His hands are cuffed behind his back.

“I thought you'd been banished,” I blurt.

My cheeks are hot at the sight of my naked stepbrother. Really, it should be the least of my concerns, but, despite my age, I've never been with a man. Seeing one completely naked at such proximity has affected me.

He takes a couple of paces closer and stops to press his forehead against the bars. "I guess this was a kind of banishment."

"How long have you been down here?"

"Ten years, I believe, though it's been difficult to mark the passage of time."

I gape. "Ten years? That's not possible."

That's the same length he's been banished. Surely, he can't have been down here all this time? From the moment he was escorted from the Great Hall. I don't want to believe it.

I picture us all living our lives above him, eating good food, and dancing, and listening to music, when all the while he was down here, wasting away. And my stepfather knew about this? He gave me no indication that he had any idea this was where his son resided now. What about my mother—surely, she didn't know as well? No, I'm sure she couldn't have. My mother was a good, kindhearted woman. I find it impossible to imagine her being all right with Ruarok locked away down here while we continued as though nothing was wrong.

"Who has been looking after you?" I ask. "Who has been feeding you?"

"No one. You're the first face I've seen in all this time."

"Impossible. You'd be dead."



He lifts his chin to gesture around the cage. “Magic. You are Fae, are you not? I don’t have to explain that to you.”

I try to imagine how it must have been for him to spend ten years trapped inside a cage with no one to speak to and nothing to do. His hands cuffed behind his back. It must have been utter torture.

I take in the sharp planes of his face, the angular cheekbones. The full lips and dark eyes. The thick, dark brows, and messy, almost-black hair. It hits me that my stepbrother is beautiful, enough to steal my breath. His skin is pale from the lack of sunshine, but it doesn’t detract from his beauty. If anything, it only makes him more striking.

I try to coax my memory of the dance with him into the forefront of my mind. Had I been aware of his looks back then? I had only been young, but yes, I had. Wasn’t that the reason I’d thought of him so often over the years?

There’s something else. Ruarok doesn’t know about his father’s death.

Is that why I’ve been able to find him? Assuming his father was the one responsible for imprisoning the prince, is his magic waning now that he’s dead? Does Ruarok know this? Can he sense it?

He nods down at the key in my hand. “Are you going to release me?”

I glance down at it. I’d forgotten I was even holding it. I twist to look back over my shoulder at the door I’ve just come through.

“But isn’t this the key to the door? How will it open the cage as well?”

He smiles at me. “Princess, you are Fae, but yet you seem clueless as to the ways of

magic.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

His words stab me. Does he know of my failures? No, that's impossible.

Of course, the key is magic. I suspect it will open any door I need it to.

Still, I hesitate. The king locked Ruarok away for all these years for a reason. Ruarok wanted both me and my mother dead. Now, he has at least one of those wishes. My mother is no longer with us. I blink back tears at the thought. What if he decides to finish the job that landed him behind these bars in the first place?

"I should go and talk to my people—" I say.

He cuts me off. "Who? Cirrus Planetree? Assuming he's still alive. Is that who rules the kingdom now?"

"No, of course not, but I'm allowed to take counsel. A king or queen who listens to no one else is a dangerous person." I flash with anger.

"Of course, Princess Taelyn. I didn't mean anything by it. Please, forgive me."

I soften slightly. I already know what Cirrus will say. He'll tell me to walk away, to forget I ever saw Ruarok. He'll say that Ruarok is getting what he deserves, and to free him now would be to go against the dead king's wishes. Is that what I want to hear? I don't think it is. I want someone by my side right now. Ruarok would be my equal. He would understand the pressure on my shoulders, perhaps even help to alleviate it.

But I know those thoughts are dangerous. He was locked down here because my

stepfather had believed him capable of murdering me and my mother. Surely, the king wouldn't have made a decision like that without believing it to be one hundred percent true.

This was his son. A bastard, yes, but still his flesh and blood.

Ruarok faces me again, pressed against the silver bars of the cage. "Will you free me, Princess? Or will you leave me here to suffer?"

I take a step back. "I-I'm not sure."

"Don't you think ten years is enough punishment for something I never even did?"

"You were imprisoned because you planned to have me and my mother killed," I say.

He shakes his head. "No. I had no such plan. Did I entertain the thought? Yes, in passing, but then I saw you, and I saw your mother. I'd rather have had you for myself than for you to be killed."

"Had me?" It takes me a moment to understand exactly what he means by that. When it dawns on me, my cheeks warm with embarrassment.

"What do you know of me, Princess?" he asks.

I recover myself. "That you are a bad person. That you wanted the throne, no matter who you had to kill to get it."

"Do you believe I am that person?"

I blink. "I don't know what to believe. I'm still not sure I can believe you've spent ten years in a cage beneath the castle with nothing to eat or drink, and without seeing

another living soul.”

“But I have, and it was my own father who put me here.”

The king had never been fond of Ruarok. Everyone knew Ruarok wasn't full Fae. Rumor was that Ruarok's mother had been a Succubus, and not only that, but a whore. That was why Ruarok had never been accepted by his father. That seemed wholly unfair to me, though. After all, the king had been the one to sleep with Ruarok's mother. It wasn't as though she'd created him alone.

Wasn't it possible that the king had created this situation in order to rid himself of his son? With a new wife, in the form of my mother, and even a new daughter, in the form of me, his line was secure.

Perhaps he had no need for his bastard son anymore.

A claim that Ruarok was planning the murder of the new queen and her daughter was a convenient way of ridding himself of the inconvenience of his half Incubus son.

I don't want to believe it. I've come to love the king as a father over the years. But it's enough to plant a seed of doubt in my mind. It's enough doubt for me to not want to leave this man trapped inside a magic cage for the rest of eternity.

I can't imagine having lived this way for so long and still having my sanity intact. Surely, he'd have been better off dead.

“If you leave me down here,” Ruarok continues, “do you really believe you'll be able to just carry on with your life? You're a good person. I can see that. Knowing I'm down here, suffering, will torture you. You'll dream of me at night, and I'll haunt your thoughts in the day.”

I lift my head, and my eyes lock with his dark gaze. The truth is, he's right. Hasn't he already been haunting my dreams? Hasn't he already been on my mind? This man, with whom I spent only one dance, has been in my thoughts since the first moment I met him.

"Very well." I nod. "I will release you."

13

RUAROK

Her hand trembles as she guides the key toward the lock.

My heart is in my throat, and I barely dare to breathe. What if she changes her mind at the very last moment? I couldn't stand to come so close to freedom, only to have it snatched away from me again.

A part of me wonders if any of this is even real. It wouldn't be the first time my mind has played tricks on me, making me believe something is real when it isn't. The hallucinations I've suffered over the years have been both a place of solace and one of torment. They've been so clear and vibrant that on many occasions I've believed myself to be somewhere else and free. I've even hallucinated people coming to visit me, of residing inside the cage with me, only to come around and realize it was my own imagination's cruelty.

Am I insane?

I've certainly had moments I've believed I've lost touch with reality while inside those bars. I hadn't cared, either. I'd been happy to embrace whatever fantasy world my mind created to protect me during my years of incarceration.

Should I tell the princess she'd joined me in my fantasies many times over the years?

Before I was locked away, I'd dreamed a woman—who I'd first believed was her

mother—visited me while I was sleeping, climbed on top of me, and fucked me. It was only after I'd met Taelyn at the ball that I'd realized it was her. It might not have been real, but it had felt real to me.

I've relived that moment over and over while locked in here. I hadn't known I'd be able to climax without so much as a single touch—not even my own—but it turned out I was able to. I assume it is similar to nocturnal emissions, the way my cock grew harder, and my hips pumped, all without my control. My mind is powerful enough to make my fantasies real enough to come, even without being touched.

I hate how weak I am right now, and I hate that she's seeing me like this. Does she pity me? Pity this pathetic creature I've become?

Half Incubus, half Fae—I've been starving, unable to derive my strength from the sexual energy of another person. I think that was partly the reason my father put me here, especially with my hands cuffed behind my back. He knew exactly the sort of suffering he would put me through.

The key glides into the lock, and, as smoothly as if it had been recently oiled, it turns with a click.

I draw my breath into my lungs. The cage gate swings open, leaving only empty space between the princess and me.

I have to play it carefully. I am weak, and I've been locked away for many years. I don't know the state of the kingdom, or the king, though I assume he's either dead or dying for someone to have found me. His magic must have worn off. But just because the king is gone doesn't mean there aren't people who will do everything in their power to push me back inside my prison and this time destroy the key.

Until I've regained my strength and assessed the situation, I have to ensure the



princess believes I am no threat to her.

Her beautiful blue eyes are wide, and I can see the shock on her face at what she's just done. She's doubting herself, wondering if she's made a terrible mistake.

Maybe she has.

I take a couple of steps forward, emerging from the terrible cage of magic and darkness that has been my home for the past ten years, and then I drop to my knees in front of her.

"Princess. You have saved me. I am yours for all eternity. My body, heart, and soul." Though I keep my head lowered, I lift my gaze, trying to assess how my proclamation has affected her.

Her lips are parted, and she stares down at me, unsure what to do next.

I prompt her. "If you could use the key to release my cuffs, I would be forever grateful."

She blinks, seeming to bring herself back around. "Yes, yes, of course."

She hurries around behind me and crouches to undo the cuffs. They clink around my wrists and then fall to the ground.

With a groan of pleasure, I bring my hands to the front of my body. I roll my shoulders and flex my wrists and forearms. It's the first time I've been able to do so properly for ten years, and I can't believe how good it feels.

I realize I'm still naked, and the pleasure of being able to move properly has caused blood to rush to my cock. It stands at half-mast now, jutting out from where I kneel.

The urge to fist myself for the first time in a decade is almost overwhelming, but somehow, I control myself.

Princess Taelyn steps around from where she's released my hands to come to the front of me again. Her gaze locks on my semi-erect dick. She stares for a moment, then her jaw drops, and she spins around so she puts her back to me.

"Oh, the gods," she gasps. "That's highly inappropriate, Prince Ruarok."

I like seeing her all flustered like this, and I hide my smile.

"My apologies, Princess. It's been a very long time, and I'm afraid there are some things I have no control over. That I have no clothes is one of them."

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Without turning back to me, she unbuttons her cloak and tosses it at me. I'm surprised that all she's wearing beneath her cloak is a silky nightgown.

Why is she wearing only her nightclothes?

I catch the cloak and continue to hide my amusement at her discomfort. If she thinks seeing my cock is something to get flustered about, just wait until she learns what else I have in store for her.

"Are you covered now?" she asks.

"Yes, I am. My apologies, once again, Princess. I truly am mortified that you should see me in such a way."

She spins back to face me, and it's my turn to become flustered. Her nightgown is almost transparent, and I can make out the curves of her body and her long limbs. She's elegant, with high tits, and white-blond hair that falls to her waist. I'm sure if I look closely enough, I can make out the darker circles of her nipples through the material.

It does nothing to help my erection.

She seems to remember that she has very little on and wraps her wings protectively around herself to hide her body. Her wings are as beautiful as she is, and the sight of them fills me with an old sense of jealousy and grief that I missed out on having any myself. Sometimes genetics does not play a fair hand, and I ended up with my mother's side being more dominant than my father's. I've often wondered if I looked

more like him, perhaps he wouldn't have hated me so.

"You must be hungry," she says. "Thirsty, too. Let's go up into the castle and find you some provisions."

She has no idea what kind of hunger I have. While I need regular food to keep my body alive—at least I do when not being confined to a magical cage for a decade—it's the sexual energy I feed from that has made me an enemy to this kingdom in my father's eyes.

I know something must have happened. I've been cocooned down here, completely unaware of the rest of the world, but something must have changed for Princess Taelyn to have found me.

14

TAELYN

Prince Ruarok remainson his knees, waiting for me to tell him to rise, perhaps? I discover I prefer having him there, at least for the moment.

I can't get the image of Ruarok's erection out of my mind. It's the first and only one I've ever seen. Of course, I always knew they were supposed to get bigger and harder, butthatbig? I don't think it was even fully erect yet. How is something like that supposed to fit inside a woman?

A tingling, tightening sensation warms between my thighs, and I squirm at the thought. I know things are supposed to stretch down there—how else would we birth babies?—but even so...

The image of me lying on my back, my thighs spread, while that huge cock pushes

inside of me bursts into my head. By the gods, where are these thoughts coming from?

This man is my stepbrother, and having such thoughts about him is both immoral and wrong. And that's before I even get into the whole 'and he planned to have you and your mother killed' part, though I'm still unsure if that is the truth about what happened.

"Are my rooms still mine?" he asks.

"As far as I'm aware. No one has moved into them."

He lowers his head farther. "It would be best for me to make my way there, then. Perhaps some of my clothing will remain."

Is that laughter or amusement in his tone? I understand he's happy to be free, but considering everything that has happened, I don't believe he should be quite so jovial.

It suddenly hits me that he doesn't know. How could he? He's been shut away down here all this time. He'd have no idea that his father is dead.

I clear my throat. "There is something I need to tell you. It's not good news."

It occurs to me that it might be good news to him.

He fixes those dark, dark eyes on mine. "Tell me."

"Your father, the king, is dead, as is my mother."

His brow furrows. "I won't pretend I'll grieve for him, but I'm sorry about your mother. How did it happen?"

“The rot is in Highdrift, perhaps even in the whole of Askos. It toppled the King’s Tower while the king and queen were sleeping. It only happened tonight—a matter of hours ago, in fact.”

Saying it out loud feels unreal. So much has happened in that short space of time. It feels as though an entire lifetime has passed me by since I went to bed last night.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Who is ruling the kingdom now?”

I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin. “I am.”

“I see. So, you are not Princess Taelyn. You are Queen Taelyn now?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. There’s been no time for a coronation, and it would be wrong to conduct it before the official seven days of mourning is over.”

I brace myself for a glitter of hope in his eyes, but instead he lowers his head again.

“You are my queen, coronation or not,” he says.

His declaration surprises me.

“Thank you, brother.” I put out my hand to help him up. “Rise now.”

He reaches up and takes my hand. The contact is like a lightning bolt to my heart, fizzing through my veins. I swear it stops for a moment. Despite what he’s been through, his grip is strong, his fingers dry and warm. I find myself not wanting to let go, and though he stands, we remain this way for a heartbeat too long, our fingers entwined, our palms pressed together.

I remember myself and snatch my hand away. He is on his feet now but is still naked under that cloak. To touch him in such a way, especially with no one else around, is inappropriate, especially for a woman of my standing.

He is your brother, a little voice says in my head. Why would it be inappropriate to touch his hand?

But I know exactly why. This energy between us is like nothing else I've experienced before.

No, that's wrong. I have experienced it—once, in the Great Hall, on the day I arrived at the castle, when I was dancing with him. There had been a charge between us, even then. Had he felt it, too? I can't help but wonder.

"Let's leave this place." I spin on my heels, eager to be out of here. "I'm sure you've seen quite enough of it."

"Enough to last a lifetime." He falls into step beside me.

"I'll have someone stoke the fire in your room for you, and bring you fresh bedding and towels, and food as well, of course."

"You're too kind, Princess."

How am I going to break the news to the rest of court that Prince Ruarok is back with us? I feel like I should be announcing his return, but truthfully, he hasn't been anywhere. He's been in the castle all these years.

Together, we walk through the door and out into the long, damp corridor I'd found my way through only a matter of minutes ago.

Once more I marvel at how a matter of minutes can change everything.



## RUAROK

It is strange to return to my chambers after so many years.

The rooms are the same as when I left them. It's as though no one has stepped inside these walls in ten years. The staff must have been in here, though, as otherwise dust and spiders would have taken over. It doesn't smell overly musty, and it seems fairly clean.

I check the closet for my clothes. Just like the rest of the room, it looks as though they haven't been touched.

Is it possible my father had anticipated my return? That he was keeping this place ready for me for when he decided to release me? Or had he never planned to free me, and simply couldn't stand to think about what to do with all my belongings?

I hate that even after everything he's done, a part of me still longs for his approval, but sadly, I suspect the latter. If he was cruel enough to leave his only son locked away for so long, it is unlikely he'd ever have freed me. He'd have known that I'd have wished to seek my revenge.

Except now he is dead, and revenge is no longer an option. The only person left is Princess Taelyn.

I stand at the window and stare out at where the King's Tower once stood. Being told the tower has fallen is very different from actually seeing it. It's hard to put into words how it feels to see the building missing. Like I'm looking at a person who no longer has their arms or legs. I'd believe myself to not be someone who is easily shocked, but the collapse of the tower is like someone has torn away some vital part of me.

“You got what you deserved,” I say to a man who can no longer hear me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I wish there had been a way for him to learn I'd been freed before he was killed. I wish he could have gone to his death while staring me in the eye.

I feel bad for Queen Lorith, Taelyn's mother, however. She didn't deserve to lose her life like this. The queen was a beautiful woman—almost as beautiful as her daughter—and I don't blame her for what happened to me. Maybe Lorith and Taelyn were brought here to take my place, but they wouldn't have known the blackness of my father's heart.

The castle isn't the only part of Highdrift that's been damaged. Looking out across the city, one quarter appears to also be badly damaged. Black smoke coils into the sky from numerous fires, and, even from this distance, I can tell that many homes have been flattened.

A knock comes at my door.

"Enter," I call.

A moment later, a member of staff cracks the door, and then pushes it open fully with her hip. She carries a tray, a silver cloche covering the contents.

The woman ducks in a small curtsy. "Princess Taelyn requested I bring you something to eat and drink."

"Thank you. You can set it over there." I nod at a low, mahogany table.

The maid hurries over and sets down the tray where I've indicated.

Does she know who I am? How many of the original staff remain, other than damned Cirrus Planetree?

Is it a good or a bad thing that people don't know me? I balance the options. A fresh start might be just what I need. My reputation wasn't exactly glowing before.

I reach into myself, feeling for the magic that always gave me such a bad name. It's weak, weaker than I've ever known before, but that's hardly surprising considering what I've been through. It's still there, though, a tiny, glowing ember deep inside my chest. It wouldn't take much for me to relight it.

I could pull this slip of a girl into my bed and have her naked within a minute. She'd feed the magic inside me, helping to make me as strong as I ever was, but then the rumors would start again. Okay, maybe they weren't rumors...more like facts. Do I need to make a good impression this time around? How much will my reputation have preceded me after all these years?

Besides, there's only one person my cock is stiffening for, and that's the princess. She seems so prim and proper, and hearing that I'd fucked one of the staff only minutes after I'd been released wouldn't go down well with her. I need her to trust me. I plan to make my way onto the throne, but first I'll need to figure out how to get her out of the way.

I thank the girl, and she scurries out of the room.

I go to the tray and remove the silver cloche to reveal a variety of food. There's coffee and orange juice. A pastry with a fruit jelly filling. Boiled eggs, and slabs of thick cut toast and butter.

I realize I am famished. Whatever magic subdued my appetite and need for food while in the cage has worn off. Now I'm ravenous. Though I take my internal

strength from the sexual energy of others, my body still needs food and water, just like any other man.

I make short work of the meal, devouring every crumb and licking the plate clean. I gulp down the sweet orange juice and chase it with the bitter coffee. I can't remember food ever tasting this good before. I could eat the whole lot all over again.

With a sigh of pleasure, I throw myself onto my back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

I'm still wearing Taelyn's cloak; in fact, it's the only thing I'm wearing. I turn my head and duck to my shoulder, inhaling the scent of her imbedded in the material. My cock jumps in response.

She's really something else.

How old is she now? I'm guessing around one hundred and eighty now, give or take a couple of decades. How is it possible that she has lived this long and still is not comfortable around the form of a naked man? Has she ever even been with a man? That she remains in Highdrift, and is still a princess, has me assuming she has never taken a husband. But surely that doesn't also mean she's never had sex?

My cock jolts again at the thought.

She's so beautiful, so perfect. Unsullied. As pure as the day I first met her.

Is it fate that I've come into her life now? Am I to be the one to defile that perfect pale body, to knot my fist in that long, white hair, to claim her mouth?

I let out a groan and reach down to fist my cock. Fuck, it feels good to be able to touch myself again after all these years. I stroke my length, admiring my dick. It's

long and thick, ridged with veins, the head a darker, smooth dome. A bead of precum glistens from the slit, and I swipe my thumb over it, gathering the moisture, and use it to help lubricate the head.

If only Taelyn were here now.

I picture her standing in the doorway, or perhaps hiding behind the drapes, watching me touch myself. How she wouldn't be able to look away, though all her upbringing would be telling her how wrong looking at me would be. Would her mouth water, wanting a taste?

The dream I'd had about her before I'd met her remains clear in my mind, even after all these years. It seems impossible that I would be able to dream about her fucking me when I didn't even know she existed, but that's the thing about magic—it brings the impossible to life. Technically, I should be dead by now, after spending ten years with nothing to eat or drink, or never breathing fresh air, or seeing sunlight, but here I am.

I squeeze the base of my cock, and pleasure floods through me. What I'd give to have Taelyn straddling my thighs now. I picture her leaning over me, her long hair tickling my skin, as she opens her mouth to take my cock between her lips. In my imagination, she keeps her blue eyes on mine, a new wickedness in their depths.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

A groan escapes me, and I move my hand up and down my length, squeezing when I get to the base, like I'm milking myself. I grow even harder, my balls tightening. In my head, it's Taelyn's hand that's working me, and she covers the head of my cock with her mouth and starts sucking me off like one of the whores I used to visit. With one hundred percent effort. She's moaning and licking and sucking, all the while watching me.

My hips jerk into my hand, and I spill my seed in a gush of intense pleasure. My ass cheeks clench, my thighs trembling. The white fluid splatters my stomach and then comes again and again. All those years of not being able to touch myself means I didn't last long, and I have one hell of a backup. I'm soaked in my own cum.

Fuck.

I snort laughter and climb off the bed to head to the shower.

One day, I swear to myself that I'll get to experience the real thing.

16

TAELYN

Instead of calling a meeting and announcing Prince Ruarok's return to all the members of court in one go, I decide to start small. Everyone is already reeling from the news about the collapse of the tower. Perhaps, in the wake of the rulers' deaths, the return of the king's son won't be such a big deal.

Despite my self-assurances, my stomach fizzes with nerves. I stop by my rooms to change. I'd instructed Skylar to bring a change of clothes to the king's offices, but I was led astray by the key before she had the chance to find me. She's probably wondering where I got to.

I believe Cirrus most likely already knows. He saw me with the key. After speaking with Ruarok, it wouldn't surprise me if Cirrus played his part in ensuring Ruarok remained locked inside that cage. I can't believe he's known all this time. Because I don't have my stepfather to be angry with, I find myself directing my fury and disbelief in his direction.

I find him in the library. He stands at the bookcases, his back to me.

"Cirrus, I need to talk to you."

He turns to face me.

I realize I still have the key, and I hold it out for him to see. "I believe you know exactly what this key opens."

"What have you done, Princess?" Cirrus's face is pale, his eyes wide.

"Righting a grievous wrong."

He shakes his head. "You've made a terrible mistake."

Anger and disbelief spills from me. "How could you just live your life, knowing the prince was rotting beneath ground? You watched Ruarok grow up, did you not? To grow from a boy into a man, and yet you allowed him to be served the cruelest of punishments."



It occurs to me that Cirrus and I aren't the only ones to know this. Ruarok also knows. Is that why Cirrus looks so panicky now? It's not because he believes Ruarok is any danger to me or the kingdom, but actually fears that Ruarok might get his revenge?

Cirrus's lips pinch. "He deserved what he got. I can't believe you've released him."

"If it makes you feel any better, I will ensure Ruarok doesn't harm you."

He barks laughter. "You really believe the prince will listen to a single word you say?"

I straighten my shoulders. "Your words offend me, Cirrus. I am the future queen. You do not speak to me that way."

"Apologies, Princess. I'm just fearful of what Ruarok will do next. He is not a good person. He will come after the throne."

"No. He understands that I am the person in line to take the throne. He has spent the past ten years inside a cage. He knows nothing of the kingdom as it is. He is too weak to rule."

"He is the only blood relative to the king."

"The dead king. Blood means little when the person is no longer alive. I am the next in line for the throne. I am the one who has been here at the castle for the last ten years, learning how everything runs. I am the one who has refused all offers of marriage because it is my destiny to be Queen of Askos, and ruler of Highdrift."

"Ruarok would argue that he has been here, also."

“I’ll deal with Ruarok when I need to. I have more important things to worry about right now.”

He lets out a sigh. “I know you believe that, Princess, but Ruarok is as much a threat to you and all of Askos as the rot is. You were young when we had to...deal with Ruarok. You don’t know what he’s like. The things I’ve seen him do—” He cuts himself off and shakes his head. “I can’t even speak of them in front of someone such as yourself.”

“What? A woman?”

“A princess. A future queen. Truly, he is a monster.”

“Or is that just what his father wanted you to believe? I’ll admit, he is not like us, but just because someone is different doesn’t mean they should be locked away for the whole of eternity.”

“He was plotting to have you and your mother killed.”

“Where is the proof of these allegations?”

Cirrus’s gaze shifted away. “Your father had someone with special talents. They were able to read Ruarok’s mind.”

I’m unable to hide my disbelief. “He had someone read his mind? That’s convenient. Who was this person?”

“I don’t know. No one would want to be outed as someone who has that kind of magic. No one would ever want to be around them again.”

“Or someone with that magic simply doesn’t exist, and it was just the king’s way of ridding himself of his problem son now that he had a new family?”

“You can’t accuse the king of lying, Princess!”

“I can’t accuse him of anything. He’s dead. So, we take the word of a dead king, who

we already know had issues with his half Incubus son, and imprison a man for the rest of eternity, or we give him a chance.”

He shakes his head. “I want you to know that I don’t agree with this choice on any level.”

“That’s fine, Cirrus. I don’t need you to agree with my choices. I just need you to support them. Right now, we have more important things to worry about than my stepbrother. We’ve lost both our king and queen, and parts of the city have been devastated by the rot. Many of our people are without a home right now, and we have to do something to help.”

He ducks low as a mark of respect. “Yes, Princess.”

“I want you to call the heads of each position of Highdrift together in the Great Hall, so we can not only break the news of Ruarok’s return but also come up with a plan about how we’re going to handle the rot and the destruction it has caused.”

“Very well.”

I leave the library and head down to the kitchens. It’s morning now, and, despite having sent a tray of food up to Ruarok, I haven’t eaten anything myself.

I’ve been coming to these kitchens for years, nipping down to steal chunks of freshly baked bread and cakes when I’ve been peckish, but now there is a different atmosphere. Kitchen staff, who would normally have jested with me for taking the food, greet me with bended knee and lowered eyes. Their respect comes not only for the loss of the king and queen, but also because I am now to be queen. I find myself saddened by the thought. Everything has changed now.

An innocence has been lost.

The kitchen staff put together a meal for me, similar to the one I imagine Ruarok would have eaten, and I find a quiet place to sit and eat. Though I'm sure the food is excellent, I struggle to taste any of it. My thoughts are so crowded with all that has happened that I barely notice my surroundings or the passing of time. They flit from my grief for my mother, to the responsibility of becoming the new ruler of Askos, to the release of Ruarok, to how long it'll be before the rot takes everything.

I finally realize I've been here long enough, and Cirrus will have gathered everyone in the Great Hall by now. I'm aware that I'm hiding down here, but I can't stay hidden forever.

I take my empty tray to the kitchen and make my way to the Great Hall. Even before I enter, I can tell people are already there. The hum of chatter filters through to my ears. My stomach spins and swirls, and my heart beats too hard and fast. I clench my fists to my sides, and force myself to walk in, chin up and shoulders back. My wings vibrate in the air behind me.

As soon as I'm spotted, the chatter dies away, and those I've asked to be there part, clearing my route through to the thrones at the head of the hall.

Deliberately, I take the king's throne—mine, now—and sit.

I take in all of those who've come here—Cirrus, Balthorne, Skylar, as well as the head of the treasury, the chaplain, the steward, the marshal, and so many others. All eyes are on me.

“Thank you for coming. I'm sure I don't need to repeat the tragedy that has befallen us, and I believe Cirrus Planetree has already informed you all of Prince Ruarok's return after his father's death.”

In the small crowd, Cirrus gives a nod to indicate he has, but I watch as others shoot

those next to them uncomfortable looks. Are they wondering why Ruarok isn't here? Perhaps I should have told him of the meeting? I instantly dismiss the thought. I couldn't have Ruarok distracting me, or anyone else, from the reason I've called them all together.

"I wish to go into the city," I announce, "to give to those who need our help."

Their faces all match—horror and disbelief.

Balthorne is the one who has the guts to speak. "Princess Taelyn, I strongly advise you against going into the city. People are desperate, and there's no telling what they might do."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“That they’re desperate gives me even more reason to go and walk among them. They need to know they’re not alone in this, and the castle won’t just abandon them. Please remember, Balthorne, that I’ve been here before. I’ve seen the devastation and destruction the rot brings firsthand. I won’t allow these people to believe their lives are over because of it.”

“What do you plan to do?” Cirrus asks.

“A gold sovereign for every household that has lost everything. Half a sovereign for those that have been damaged.” I look to the head of the treasury, a man called Walter Odel. “We have enough money in the coffers?”

“Yes, Princess, we do,” he replies.

“Good. I wish to leave on the hour. Please ensure the rest of the guard is ready.”

Cirrus ducks his head in a nod. “Understood.”

I am grateful he doesn’t argue with me. He needs to understand I’m not only the princess anymore. I’m the ruler of this kingdom and need to be treated with the same respect and authority he would have shown my mother or the king.

Despite my words and brave façade, the thought of walking through the city, among such devastation, causes my stomach to roil and my palms to prickle with sweat. How will the people be? Will they be angry? Probably. They will be grieving for their king. How are they going to accept me, a young woman, as their new ruler?

I refuse to let my fears hold me back. I can't call myself a queen and then hide away in the castle. That would make me no kind of queen at all.

I leave the throne, and my people part ways for me once more. Only one person follows me—the head of my guard, Balthorne.

“Princess Taelyn,” Balthorne says, catching up to me, “I hope I’m not speaking out of turn, but I’m concerned that Prince Ruarok has returned to the castle, so soon after his father’s death.”

I keep walking. Time is short, and he hurries along beside me.

“That’s because it was his father’s magic that’s been holding him prisoner all this time. He’s not returned, because he never left. He was here all along.”

“But I hear he was imprisoned because he wanted you dead. If there is genuine threat to your life, as head of your guard, I need to know about it.”

“He denies he had ever planned to have us killed. He claims his father just used it as a way to get rid of him. There was never any proof, and there is no proof now.”

“So, you believe him?” Balthorne’s handsome face appears troubled.

I stop short and turn to face him. “Until he gives me a reason not to, yes, I have to take him at his word. He is my stepbrother, the king’s son, the prince of Askos and Highdrift. I can’t pretend he does not exist.”

“You could have left him in the cage.”

I allow a small smile to tweak my lips. “How many years have you known me, Balthorne? More than I can count. Do you really believe I’m someone who could



leave a man trapped in torment for the whole of eternity, no matter what he's done? That is a punishment too cruel for words."

"You have a kind heart, Princess."

I start to walk again. "Too kind, I'm sure some are saying." I sigh. "Maybe that is my biggest weakness."

He shakes his head. "Don't change who you are for anyone or anything. Stay true to yourself."

"Thank you, Balthorne."

He hesitates, as though he wants to say something else, but then lets it go.

17

TAELYN

Back in my chambers, I dress in a different long cloak, since Ruarok has taken my main one, and boots. Befitting the situation, I'm fully in black, the color a stark contrast to my almost-white hair and pale skin.

When the time arrives, I make my way to the castle entrance. Balthorne is putting together a group of guards to escort me into the city, and I expect to find him there.

Instead of Balthorne waiting for me, I discover Ruarok standing at the castle entrance.

"I heard of your plans, and I'm coming with you," he says.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Absolutely not. I don’t know how the people of Askos will react upon discovering you not only still alive, but actually being here, in the castle. Don’t you think they have enough to worry about?”

“Why would me being alive be something for them to worry about? Haven’t you even considered that they might find this happy news? Yes, their king is dead, but the prince still lives.”

I shoulder him out of the way. “The princess lives, also, and I am the one they’ll be expecting to see.”

“At least let me come as one of your guardsmen, Princess,” he says. “I can wear a cloak to cover my head. No one needs to know who I am. Isn’t it better that you have more people at hand? More men to protect you?”

The truth is, I can’t force him to stay here. He’s a free man now, isn’t he? He can go wherever the hell he likes. Not that he seems to have any intention of leaving Highdrift. The place is his home, just as it is mine. I can hardly send him away either.

I have no idea how this is going to work in the long run. The castle can’t be run by us both, can it? Brother and sister? I search my mind to think of other kingdoms that are run by siblings. Okay, maybe we’re not blood related, but technically, when my mother married his father, we became brother and sister.

There is one kingdom where a brother and sister have married and rule together, but the thought makes me cringe inside. Blood relatives marrying is never a good idea for the children. Ruarok and I are not blood relatives, however. There isn’t a single

shared blood cell between us.

I shake the thought from my head. No, I do not want to marry Ruarok. The man is half Incubus. I imagine how unhappy that wedlock would be, with him fucking every castle staff member around. It's always accepted that kings have their mistresses, but this would be on a whole other level.

My heart twists at the prospect. Ruarok having sex with everyone behind my back. Everyone would know about it, too. I'd be pitied and shamed, and that was the last thing I wanted.

"Fine," I say. "Come, but wear a cloak and keep your face hidden. I can't have this excursion turned into a parade on your behalf."

"Thank you, Princess."

Balthorne joins us. "The guards are ready, Princess." He completely ignores Ruarok. "I have the pouch of coins also, as you requested."

Ruarok arches an eyebrow. "Coins? For whom?"

"The people, of course," I snap. "They're in need of our help."

"So you're giving them the castle's gold?"

Balthorne frowns in concern at our interaction, but he doesn't interrupt. It's not his place to offer his thoughts unless they've been requested. Ruarok might have been locked away for ten years, but he's still the prince.

"They have far more need of it than we do. Do you begrudge them a few coins?"

Ruarok clears his throat. “That’s not the reason I’m concerned. People carrying large amounts of money on their person will only open them up to thievery.”

“What do you suggest? That we do nothing? They need to be able to pay for a new home, or at the very least, rent rooms so their families have a roof over their heads. Having people in the streets will only lead to chaos. People who are left to struggle aren’t good for the city as a whole. They’ll have no choice but to steal, and that will lead to violence. People who understand they will be looked after are peaceful people.”

He ducks his head in a half-bow. “I understand, Princess.”

The truth is that money will only go so far. Gold means nothing if there is no food left for people to buy. But we haven’t reached that stage, not here, not yet. Back in Torremora, the rot took the fields and countryside, so there was no grain to harvest. That was when things started getting really ugly.

I’ll find a way to stop it before we reach that point. I have no idea how, but there must be a way. If there isn’t, the future doesn’t bear thinking about.

We set off. I want the people to understand that I’ve been where they are, at least in part. I’ve gone through the rot destroying my home. I can empathize with how frightened they are.

I have two guards leading the way, Balthorne and Ruarok bracketing me, and several more guards bringing up the rear. They carry the banner of our kingdom, the dragonfly, with its wings so like our own, and it flutters in the breeze. There’s a chill in the air today.

As we head down the winding road that leads into the city, Ruarok falls into step beside me.

He lowers his voice and darts his gaze toward Balthorne. “Who is that man?”

“He’s head of my personal guard.”

“He wants to fuck you.”

“No, he doesn’t!” I’m offended by the suggestion. “I’ve known him for years. We are more like siblings.”

Ruarok snorts. “Even if he thinks of you like a sibling, that doesn’t mean he isn’t also thinking of fucking you. After all, my father married your mother, so doesn’t that also make us siblings?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I widen my eyes. “So? You’re not thinking about fucking me.”

He gives a low chuckle. “Of course I am, Princess Taelyn. I am half Incubus, and I’ve been locked in a cage with my wrists cuffed for ten years. I haven’t even been able to touch myself. Do you know how impossible it is to get yourself off when all you have is the hard floor of a cage to rub up against?”

My jaw drops, and my face burns like it’s on fire. I’ve never even heard someone speak in such a way, and certainly never with me as the point of reference. “Prince Ruarok, you won’t speak of me like that.”

“Apologies. The act of sex is in my nature. I’ve been away from people a long time, and I forgot my manners.”

I pick up my pace, leaving my stepbrother behind and catching up with Balthorne.

The streets are dirty, and my long cloak drags in the filth. Balthorne stoops to lift the hem from the ground, and I offer him a smile of thanks. I catch Ruarok glaring at us, and I glare right back.

The long, winding road leads down from the castle. I hadn’t wanted to take either horse or carriage, aware of how it would present me—a step above my subjects. I wanted them to understand that I’m willing to get to their level, to empathize with what they’re going through. I don’t want to be distanced from them.

We reach the outskirts of the city, and shouts of ‘it’s Princess Taelyn!’ and ‘the princess is coming’ fill the air. Within moments, people rush to greet us. Many drop

to one knee and place their fingers at a steeple to their forehead in a sign of respect.

There are no full Fae in the city, or at least none that I'm aware of. Anyone of full Fae blood is at the castle, holding important roles within our court. These people are a mixture of all sorts—I see some who have the height and facial features of dwarfs. Others who have hooves instead of feet. There are even people sporting tusks and horns. Then there are others who appear to be almost fully human, at least to the naked eye.

The crowds get larger the farther we move through the city, heading to the quarter where the destruction from the rot is at its worst. I try not to think about the fallen tower, and the ultimate burial site of my mother and the king. As far as I can tell, no one has recognized Ruarok yet. What is his intention? Does he plan to get the people on his side? I can't see how that is possible when everyone knows what he is, and how his father hated him enough to banish him all those years ago. The king was loved and respected, and that won't be forgotten easily.

The destruction the rot has caused is breathtaking in the worst possible way. This quarter has been flattened. There is nothing but wood and rubble lying on the ground, bodies trapped beneath the chaos. In the center, a great hole continues to slowly expand, and the crash and rumble of the remains of those flattened homes sliding into the nothingness fill the air.

It truly is devastating to see.

Some survivors climb over the rubble, trying to find what remains of their possessions. Others call for those who are lost beneath the flattened homes. It breaks my heart.

Where will this stop? This might only be one small part of the city, but if it spreads, it could take the whole of Askos, just like it did Torremora. My mother and I had been

lucky to escape, and we wouldn't have if it weren't for the late king. He'd offered my mother a hand in marriage, and us a home, all at the same time. I can't even imagine what might have become of us if he hadn't.

My heart grieves for them both.

Now I feel it is my duty to help others in the same way he helped us.

A mother with a babe in arms, their clothes filthy, sits huddled on the side of the street.

I press a coin into her hand. "Here, take this."

She peers down at it. "Oh, bless you, Princess. Bless you for your kindness."

I repeat the process with all those who are in need. It doesn't feel like much, considering how much they—and we—have all lost, but it's something. I hope they'll at least be able to put food in their bellies and a roof over their heads.

18

RUAROK

I remain hiddenbeneath the cloak, tucked away in the dark folds. The material is rough and scratchy around my face, and it smells faintly of mothballs after going unworn for so long.

Is this my future now, to stay hidden away, the castle's dirty little secret? That isn't what I've survived the last ten years to do.

It isn't going to be as easy as ridding myself of the princess, however. There're the



people to think about, too. They've had the last ten years to grow to love her—and how could they not? From the short time I've spent with her, it's clear she's royalty material. Everything about her screams she should be on the throne. It's not only that she's full-blooded Fae, unlike me; it's the way she holds herself. She expects people to do as she says.

She commands respect, and people give her that respect because they love and admire her—not because they are fearful of what she might make them do.

I admire that about her, but I also know it's something I'm going to have to break.

My reputation is the exact opposite of hers. While she's seen as good and pure and honest, I'm tainted and evil—a trickster. The people of Askos believe me to have been banished, and I daren't even think what kind of rumors will have trickled through the lands at the reason for my banishment.

The truth is bad enough.

In the ten years I've been gone, the city doesn't appear to have changed—not including the massive fucking hole where part of the city used to stand.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

From this position, I'm able to turn and look back at the castle. The space where the King's Tower used to stand feels unreal. If someone had told me it had been hidden with masking magic, I'd probably have been more likely to believe them than if they'd told me it had collapsed. That tower had stood for more than a thousand years. That it could be gone in a matter of minutes is terrifying. If it was so easy for the tower to disintegrate to nothing, then why not the rest of the castle, taking us with it?

Sometimes I wonder what all this is for. Why do we fight so hard for a future when all we really have is the here and now? So many people deprive themselves of today's pleasures, believing it will benefit some imagined future that may not ever arrive.

"Ruarok? Prince Ruarok?"

The feminine voice catches my attention. A young, beautiful woman emerges from the crowds of people lining the street. Her features have the pointed nose and ears and big eyes that suggest she has pixie blood in her somewhere. Not only that, I recognize her, too. She's older now, but she's one of the whores I used to visit before I was locked away.

"Is it you?" she says. "Is it really you?"

She's clearly recognized me, and it's not as though I can deny it. I shoot a glance over at Taelyn to see if she has noticed. She has and is glaring at me to stay quiet.

I pull the cloak farther over my head and keep walking. But my name has been picked up by others around her, and I hear the question rumbling through the crowd

like distant thunder.

“I told you to stay hidden,” Taelyn snaps.

“I’m trying to, but they’re going to find out eventually,” I reply.

“Not now. There’s too much else going on. I can’t have this kind of unrest among the people.”

I almost laugh at that. “Part of their city has just fallen into the ground. I hardly think learning their prince has returned is going to be what upsets them. Maybe they could use a little good news.”

She spins on her heel. “You believe them hearing of your return will be good news?”

That annoying head of her guard steps in. “Is everything okay, Princess Taelyn?”

“Yes, thank you, Balthorne. I can handle this.”

She places her hand on his muscular forearm, and it’s my turn to glare. She shouldn’t be touching him. He’s mere staff.

“Just say the word if you need anything,” he replies, and moves away to push back a member of the crowd who is getting too close.

This Balthorne is the epitome of how a Fae male should look—tall, muscular, white-blond hair, and paleblue eyes. He even has wings, and I’m surprised he’s not considered gentry rather than one of the princess’s guards.

I say as much to Taelyn.

“Heisgentry,” she replies. “He just gave up his position to protect me.”

I’m shocked anyone would do such a thing. To take a role of servitude over owning lands. But then I remember the lands they hailed from are no more. Perhaps it was better to take a role in the princess’s guard than end up with nothing. He might be acting as though he’s altruistic, but no one is, completely. There’s always something in it for the other person.

I bet Balthorne has been thinking about getting into Taelyn’s panties this entire time.

Rage at the thought of him even fantasizing about touching her boils through me. I know Taelyn would never allow it to happen—she’s a princess and is better than that—but I still hate the thought.

I grind my teeth at the unfairness of genetics. If I’d been born with the appearance of my father’s Fae side, my life would have been so much easier. I hate how my dark hair and eyes make me stand out among these perfect Fae, and then, of course, there’s my lack of wings. Though the Fae are unable to do much more than lift a few feet off the ground these days, as their bodies have grown too large, and their wings have weakened over the generations, it’s still something else that sets me apart. That makes me inferior. I hate that they’d look down on me.

Would these people ever accept someone who looks like me on the throne?

The guards hustle us through the streets, holding back the crowds. I’ve been seen, however, and word of my return will spread quickly through the city. They’re going to ask if the reason for my return is to take the throne now the king is dead.

I don’t understand why Taelyn hasn’t realized this yet, but she will soon enough.

TAELYN

It has been an incredibly long day, and though the sun is barely setting, I'm already longing for my bed.

I sit at my dressing table mirror, staring at my reflection while Skylar brushes my hair. She's barely stopped talking long enough to breathe, and I'm trying to follow along, but my thoughts are elsewhere. I don't think it's truly sunk in yet that my mother and the king are gone. I keep expecting to be able to tell her something, and then it takes my brain a moment to catch up, and I remember I'll never get to tell her anything again.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“He’s good-looking, though, isn’t he?” Skylar babbles. “I mean, I know you’re not supposed to think that, what with him being your stepbrother and all, but it’s impossible not to see how attractive he is.”

I suddenly realized she’s talking about Ruarok, and I snap my gaze to hers in the mirror.

“Stay away from him, Skylar. I mean it.”

The two of us have gossiped and giggled over plenty of men in our time, so it’s not unusual for her to be talking tome about him. We’ve discussed, in great detail, each of the admirers who’ve been to the castle to ask for my hand in marriage, and she’s told me about the various males who’ve come in and out of her life, often making me blush with her details about what they get up to in bed—details I’ve yet to experience for myself. Skylar is in no way as innocent as me, and, for the first time, I find myself worrying about that.

She blinks in surprise. “You mean because he’s half Incubus?”

Like me, Skylar had only just arrived at the castle when Ruarok was ‘banished.’ She’d never gotten the chance to properly meet him before he was locked away. I brought Skylar here with me from Torremora when my mother married the king.

“Yes, because he’s half Incubus.” I can’t hide the tension in my tone. “Ten years ago, you warned me of the prince’s reputation, and it would seem even ten years locked in a cage hasn’t changed him.” I remember how he spoke to me about sex when we’d made our way into the city—as though it was completely normal to speak to a

princess in such a way. “You know what that means, don’t you? I imagine he’s...hungry. He might not be able to control himself.”

“Control himself not to do what?”

Is she teasing me? “You know what he does to people?”

She lowers her voice to a whisper. “He gets power from having sex with them.”

“Yes, and he can make people want to have sex with him, too, even when they might not want to.”

She purses her lips, her smooth forehead furrowing. “I heard that Incubi aren’t capable of doing that, that the desire has always got to be inside the person first. The Incubus just helps them break through any...inhibitions...they might have.”

The memory of Ruarok naked in front of me, his huge cock already half erect, jumps into my head. My face flushes with heat. I’d thought about what it must be like to feel him pushing inside me, hadn’t I? Had they been my own thoughts, or had Ruarok placed them into my head? Had he been removing my inhibitions then?

I can’t trust my own thoughts and reactions around him. Is that what Cirrus meant when he said Ruarok was dangerous?

“I don’t want you going near him, Skylar. I’m commanding you now, as your princess and your future queen.”

I can practically sense her rolling her eyes at me.

“Okay, okay,” she says. “I get the message.”

What is it about the thought of Ruarok having sex with Skylar that's getting me so riled up? Is it that I'm trying to protect my friend? Do I not want to see her getting hurt? I want to convince myself those are the reasons, but if I was truly honest with myself, I'd acknowledge that coil of bright green jealousy inside me.

It's so ridiculous. I have far bigger things to worry about right now than my stepbrother's sex life. I shouldn't even be thinking about it. The people I love most in the world are dead, and I'm going to have to rule the kingdom—a kingdom that is falling into the earth because of the rot.

I turn my thoughts to the darkness infesting the city. I find I prefer dealing with that to thoughts of my stepbrother. I'm on safer ground, ironically.

We are a people of magic. There must be a way to stop the rot, or at the very least, slow it down.

But nothing could be done in Torremora, so why should things be any different here?

Where would we all go, if the rot should destroy the whole of Askos? It's a long journey to the next kingdom, and why should they take us? A deal was made between my mother and the king to accept our people, those migrants in need of a home, but what do I have to offer a neighboring kingdom for a safe home?

Only myself.

I swallow hard at the thought. It might come to that. Would I sacrifice myself—my body, at least—to a neighboring prince or king in return for a safe place for my people to go? Isn't that essentially what my mother did? I might have to. I might not have a choice.

If my people left and tried to travel to the next kingdom without there first being an



agreement put in place, the inhabitants of that kingdom would be well within their right to kill anyone who trespassed on their lands. They'd be seen as raiders, stealing produce and resources from the locals, even if it were only done to survive.

If I were to make such a deal, it wouldn't necessarily mean security, at least not for long. There's no way of knowing where the rot will go next. I could promise my hand in marriage and move as many of my subjects as possible, only to find the rot had spread there as well.

I let out a sigh and close my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Princess," Sklyar says, placing her hand on my shoulder to offer me some comfort. "I didn't mean to upset you. I was trying to take your mind off things. I understand things are very difficult for you."

I cover her hand on my shoulder with my own. "I shouldn't have snapped. I'm sorry, too. You're right, what's happened is terrible, but I have to remain strong. I fear we have worse to come."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Tears shimmer in my eyes, blurring the room around me. I blink them away, not wanting her to see me cry. It's not as though she hasn't seen me at my most vulnerable times before, but things have changed now. I'm not only a princess; I'm going to be queen.

She continues to brush my hair in long, soothing strokes, and I close my eyes. I tell myself that I'm allowed to be troubled—it would be strange if I weren't. Just because I'm to be queen doesn't mean I'm not allowed to experience emotions like everyone else. It's just how I react to them that must be different.

When I'm ready for bed, Skylar leaves me.

I'm completely exhausted, and, though I have a lot on my mind, I'm sure I'll fall straight to sleep.

I crawl beneath the covers, and though the mattress is soft and the blankets warm, I toss and turn. The loss of my mother—something I've been trying hard not to think about all day—swells up inside and overwhelms me. Now I've got nothing to distract me, grief clutches at my heart. I can't fully comprehend that I'm never going to see her again.

A whimper of pain escapes me, followed by a great, gulping sob.

I cry with my face pressed against the pillow and my fingers clutching the sheets. I cry until utter exhaustion has taken hold, and finally, the depths of sleep call me.

I dream of the castle shaking around me. I'm barefoot in my room, barely keeping my

balance. The stone floor collapses and drops away. The ceiling comes down around my ears, and then I'm falling, falling, falling?—

I jerk myself awake. Someone is screaming, and it takes me a moment to realize it's me.

I clamp my mouth shut, silencing myself.

Balthorne and Skylar must have been exhausted, too, not to have heard me from their rooms down the hall, but then the bedroom door flies open.

“Princess? Are you all right?”

But it's not Balthorne, or Skylar. It's Ruarok.

My heartbeat gradually slows, and I take a deep, shaky breath. “Yes, I'm sorry. It was just a bad dream.”

He doesn't wait to be invited, but instead kicks the door shut behind him and strides across the room. His black shirt is open, revealing the muscles of his pecs and abs beneath. On his bottom half he's wearing loose pants. He sits on the side of my bed and then reaches out to take my hand. The boldness of his actions shocks me. I've never had a man sit on my bed before, not even Balthorne. That he's semi-undressed also makes me nervous.

“You're safe,” he tells me.

I should pull away from him, but I can't. All my focus is on where our skin meets, fingers to fingers, palm to palm. He seems to sense me staring, but instead of pulling away, he leans in. He reaches out with his other hand and smooths my hair away from my face, and I'm conscious that it's slightly damp from my sweat. His hand

linger there, stroking my hair just as Skylar had been doing with the brush before bed.

The energy between us is charged. I'm not sure I can breathe, and I've completely forgotten about my nightmare. All that exists is this moment between us.

A warning bell sounds in my head—this is your stepbrother, and he's an Incubus!—but I completely ignore it.

Slowly, cautiously, as though he's giving me the time to stop him, he leans in and brushes his lips to mine. They're soft, and warm, and he smells so good, of fresh soap and a hint of smoke from the fire.

Every part of my brain screams that this is wrong, that I shouldn't let him do this for so many reasons, but my body is alight and greedy for him. Is that because of what he is? Is he working his magic on me right now?

His kiss grows firmer, and I part my lips, some instinct in me wanting to find his tongue with mine. Our tongues tangle, and I think I might just die from desire. Who even am I?

Excitement fizzles through me. I shift my position slightly, to bring myself onto my knees, and wrap my arms around his neck. We're still kissing, our tongues dancing now, the passion growing between us. I press myself against the hard muscles of his chest, aware there's only a sliver of material separating us. Heat pools between my thighs. My nipples harden and crinkle beneath my nightgown. He seems to sense this as his hand leaves my hair to cup one of my breasts over my clothes. His thumb brushes my nipple, and I gasp into his mouth.

Have I been longing for this moment, ever since we danced all those years ago? I'd felt this energy between us even then.

He kisses me harder and pinches my stiff nipple between his finger and thumb. It's hard enough to hurt, but the sensation seems to have a direct line to my pussy. I squeeze my thighs together, increasing the pleasure.

Is it real, though? Or is this how everyone feels when they're with an Incubus? It's as though I'm drugged, and he's become my addiction. After all the pain and fear and grief of the past twenty-four hours, all I want is to forget everything and allow this to happen.

Ruarok breaks the kiss. "I want to touch you, Princess. I want to push my fingers inside you and hear you come."

No one has ever spoken to me in such a way before, and I whimper at the thought. Can he tell how much I long for his touch, though I can't bring myself to give voice to the words? I've never told a man what I want before.

I think of his cock, how big and long it is. Has it grown again now, just by kissing me? I can't seem to help myself. I reach down and cover him with my hand, just as he's covering my breasts. Dear gods, he is hard, and by the feel of him, fully hard, too.

He sucks air in over his teeth.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Did I hurt you?” I ask, suddenly worried.

“No, Princess, quite the opposite. Do it again.”

The loose material does little to impede my way, and I’m able to wrap my hand fully around his girth over the top of his pants, with the material still between us. I trace my fingers up the outline of his length and then back down again. A tiny patch of the material has grown damp, and, from the tales Skylar has told me in the past, I know that’s because he wants me.

His hand moves from my breast, and he cups my chin. “For ten years, I’ve dreamed of this moment. It’s what’s kept me going the entire time in that forsaken cage.” He kisses me again, his tongue mapping out the inside of my mouth. “You have no idea how much I want you.”

His hand leaves my breast and trails down my stomach, to reach beneath the long skirt of my nightgown. His fingers run up the inside of my thigh, and I hold my breath. My wings flutter behind me in anticipation.

It suddenly hits me that I’m half-dressed, with my hand wrapped around my stepbrother’s cock, with him about to touch me in a way no man has touched me before.

I yank away from him, deliberately putting space between us.

“No, we can’t. You’re my stepbrother. This is...wrong.”

He frowns in confusion. “How can it be wrong when it feels so good?”

“By law, we are brother and sister. What will people say?”

“Fuck other people. Plenty of other cultures encourage the coupling of siblings to keep the bloodlines pure.”

“We are not of the same bloodline.”

He smiles, like a feline who’s got the cream. “Exactly. So it shouldn’t matter.”

Perhaps he’s right, but it’s not his reputation that would be in tatters. Men are always judged differently than women. If people knew we were together, in that way, he would probably get slaps on the back and other men buying him drinks. I, on the other hand, will walk into a room to find people whispering, and most likely my ability to rule called into question. The only person who would squeal with joy and demand to know every detail is my lady’s maid. As much as I’d love to have that conversation with Skylar, as I trust her completely, it’s not worth risking the kingdom for.

I snatch up my blankets and hold them against my chest, as though they can offer me some kind of protection.

Hurt and disappointment is evident on his handsome features. Those cheekbones are sharp enough to cut glass, those eyes so dark I feel I could fall into them forever.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I didn’t mean to lead you on, but I do mean it when I say this can’t happen.”

“Are you telling me it doesn’t feel good?”

My cheeks burn. "That's beside the point."

He leans in again, cat-like, or perhaps it's more snake-like, as though he's going to slide himself across the bed toward me. His tone is soft, hypnotic. "You've had a difficult time. Let me take your mind off things, if only for a short while. No one else needs to know. It will be between only the two of us."

"But I will know!" I protest.

"What does that matter? Are you saving yourself for marriage?"

I shake my head. "No, I will never marry. The kingdom is my husband."

It crosses my mind that I'd considered the possibility of having to marry someone from another kingdom to secure the safety of our people, but then I push it from my head.

"If you will never marry, then why not take some pleasures where you can? Where is the pride in being a virgin queen?"

He's right, there is no pride in being a virgin queen, but I also don't want to give someone else any control over my body, and especially not him.

"You are my stepbrother, and you are half Incubus. I know what you do, how you get your power. Is that your plan? To drain mine to use for yourself?"

He draws back, his forehead furrowed. "Princess, it hurts that you'd think of me that way."

"Am I wrong?"



“I only wanted to make you feel better. I saw you were suffering, and I wanted to make that right. I’m sorry if I did the wrong thing. You have to understand it simply comes naturally to me to use physical affection as a way of connecting with someone.”

## Page 38

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

My body craves him. Maybe he's right, and no one else would know. I entertain the thought of lying back and allowing him to do whatever he wants to me. I have no doubt he's good at what he does.

I strengthen my resolve.

“Prince Ruarok, it is the middle of the night, and you shouldn't be in my chambers. I'm asking you to leave now. Please don't make me ask you again.”

With a sigh, his shoulders drop, and he rises from the bed. My gaze locks on the huge erection tenting his pants. He makes no attempt to hide it, and it occurs to me that my stepbrother has zero shame when it comes to sex. In that way, he is the complete opposite of me.

We would be a terrible match.

20

RUAROK

It is morning again, and I am appreciating waking up and not being in that damned cage.

After ten years of only having the cold, hard floor of the cage to lie upon, sleeping in a real bed is the kind of luxury too many take for granted. As was standing beneath a hot shower for as long as I wanted.

Princess Taelyn is on my mind. She is a fucking prick tease, but I know I can wear her down.

She might believe it's my magic that's making her want me, but it isn't. I haven't had the need to use it on her, and, even if I had, it's still too weak. Being with her, if only for those few minutes during the night, has helped to sustain me, but not with the sort of strength I was used to before I was imprisoned.

I tell myself that my magic being weakened is also the reason I don't see any kind of sexual aura around her when we're together. But then I remember I never saw it at the dance, either. Is there something different about Princess Taelyn? I'd always believed she was full Fae, but maybe there is something else in her bloodline, from generations before, that makes her immune to my magic.

Taelyn wasn't the only person to have to deal with nightmares last night. The reason I'd been awake to hear her scream was because I'd had some of my own. I'd dreamed my father had come back to life, and he'd sent his guards for me once more. I'd been too weak to fight them, and they'd dragged me, kicking and screaming, back to the cage. Except the cage wasn't located in the dungeons this time. Instead, it was in the city, and the guards had hauled me, naked, through the streets, while all the inhabitants of the city lined the sides, jeering and throwing things at me. This time, the cage had been suspended above one of the huge holes created by the rot, and I would be visible for everyone to witness my torture.

Going to Taelyn, like I did, hadn't only been about making her feel better—it had been for my own comfort, too. Touching her, kissing her, had reminded me that I was no longer in that fucking cage.

I am free now.

It isn't until sometime after breakfast that I see her again. It surprises me that all my

thoughts have been solely around her. Of course, she is important, in that she's the person who is in the way of my rightful place on the throne, but it hasn't been my plot of rid myself of her that's been on my mind. Instead, it's been how soft her mouth is, how firm and high her breasts, how, I wish, I could have pushed my fingers inside her.

"Princess," I greet her.

She looks tired, dark smudges beneath her eyes. Of course, I already know her sleep was disturbed.

"Good morning, Prince Ruarok."

Her cheeks flush pink at the sight of me. Dear gods, she's so incredibly sweet, it almost feels wrong of me to want to destroy her. But this is my kingdom. It's my birthright, and she is the one standing in my way.

"I wondered how I could be of service today."

I don't give a fuck about being of service. I just want to be around her, to make her squirm. People are bound to start talking soon; rumors will fly. I will destroy her reputation just by being associated with her. It's a cruel world where women are judged so much harsher than men, but that works in my favor.

"We need to arrange a memorial service for the king and queen. I know we can't have a burial since?—"

She cuts herself off, but I know what she'd been about to say. We can't have a burial because both their bodies have been swallowed into the ground.

She must see something in my face as she pauses and narrows her eyes. "Is that going

to be difficult for you? I mean, because of your father..."

She means because I hated the man.

I swallow my feelings and force a soothing smile.

"I can put my feelings about my father aside for something so important. I won't let you down, Princess."

"Thank you, Ruarok." She lets out a sigh. "I admit it feels good to have someone I can trust with these things. We are family, after all. It didn't feel right to just hand it over to one of the staff, and I have so much to think about with the city in such a mess. I need to figure out how to stop this rot from spreading."

I stare at her. "You think it can be stopped?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“There must be a way. We can’t just accept that this is our future. That we’re going to end up with nothing. Otherwise, what’s the point in it all? What are we fighting for?”

Tears tremble in her blue eyes, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to step into her personal space and pull her into my arms. I want to hold her against me and stroke her hair, like I did last night, and comfort her.

I shake the thought from my head. My plan is to ruin her, not to give her comfort. I shouldn’t care about how she’s feeling.

“I’ve asked the greatest scholars of our kingdom to research what we know about the rot,” she continues. “There has to be something we can do.”

I huff air from my nose. “What do scholars know? All they do is read about what other people have already learned. They’re not going to tell us anything new.”

Her mouth pinches, her nostrils flaring. “What do you suggest?”

“The rot is dark magic, so the only answer will also be magic.”

“You think we need a sorcerer?”

I nod. “A powerful one, at that.”

She places her index finger against her lips as she thinks. “The only sorcerer I know of is the Mage who lives beyond the borders of Askos, in the wildlands.”

“Those lands are dangerous, Princess.”

She shoots me a look. “I’m fully aware of that. But you’re right. We need someone with great magic, not just a bunch of men with books. They say the Mage knows everything, and if that’s true, then they must know a way to stop the rot, if there is one.”

I wonder what can of worms I’ve opened.

“You’re not thinking of going yourself?” I check. “The kingdom needs you. If you die, what then?”

It occurs to me that this is a great plan. I may have stumbled into it accidentally, but it could work out perfectly.

She glances at someplace over my shoulder, her gaze misting. “If I don’t do this, there won’t be a kingdom left to rule.”

So she is planning to go herself. My stomach knots. I wish I could take back my suggestion of finding a sorcerer.

“Let me go in your place,” I blurt.

I don’t know where the offer comes from. Why am I putting my life on the line, when I’m trying to get my kingdom back? I should let her go beyond the borders of Askos, into the wildlands. If she’s killed—which she most likely will be—I’ll automatically become king. There is no one else to challenge my right to the throne.

She gives a small laugh. “I appreciate the offer, Prince Ruarok, but your reputation precedes you. Why would the Mage listen to you, or want to help you?”

“But you think they’ll listen to you?”

She lifts her chin and puts back her shoulders. “As the ruler of Askos, of course they’ll listen to me.”

The Mage is neither male nor female. They’ve lived in the wildlands for a thousand years, outliving even the Fae.

I grind my teeth. “If you go, I will go with you.”

“I’ll take my guards. I will be fine.”

Sudden jealousy flashes through me. “And that man, Balthorne, will he go with you, too?”

“Of course. He’s head of my guard.”

“No, Cirrus Planetree is head of your guard.”

She shakes her head, her waist length white-blonde hair shimmering. “He was the head of the king’s guard, and the king is no more. Balthorne has always been the man who protects me. He’s been there for me ever since I was young.”

I hate to think of another man being so important in her life. That this Balthorne looks the way he does also does nothing to help my jealousy. If I were pale blond, with wings, would she have still pushed me away last night? Or would she be proud to have me on her arm, to stand beside her in court, to be her equal?



I stoke the fire burning inside me. I need to let her go.

There is one problem. If she does go, while I stay here, and she returns to the kingdom having found a way to stop the rot, she'll be able to do no wrong in the eyes of her subjects.

In the meanwhile, I'll have hidden here, at the castle, looking like a coward.

21

TAELYN

Every time I look at Ruarok, the memory of last night leaps to the forefront of my mind.

I'm telling myself that I don't want him around. It's easier to give him a project to do than have him with me. But even so, I find myself looking for him at every opportunity, wanting to be near him.

It's his magic, I tell myself for the hundredth time. I wonder what he did when he left my bedchambers last night. Did he go straight back to his room and take care of himself? Or did he slip into the city and find a whore to fuck? Or perhaps he didn't even need to go that far and found a willing—or not so willing—chambermaid to empty himself into instead.

The thought alone is enough to heat my blood. What if I hadn't thrown him out last night? Where would our relationship be now?

I can't even think about what is going to happen long term. He certainly can't stay here. I don't think I'm strong enough to keep resisting him, and he doesn't seem like the kind of man who simply gives up on what he wants. But it's not as though I can send him away from the castle either. This is his home, no matter what I think. I could no more make him leave than he could make me leave.

Is my plan to head out into the wildlands in search of the Mage because it'll mean I'll no longer be in Ruarok's presence? It'll give me some breathing room, and then hopefully, by the time I return with an answer to how to stop the rot, we'll both have moved on from whatever madness has taken over us.

I leave Ruarok and go in search of Balthorne. I need to tell him of my plans, and ensure he gets a group together for us to ride out into the wildlands. He'll try to convince me it's a bad idea, but it's the only one I've got, even if it was courtesy of my stepbrother.

I find him in the courtyard. He's wearing his cloak, and hands the reins of his horse over to a stable hand. He looks as though he's been out in the city. What for? I haven't asked him to go out there.

He sees me coming and offers a tight smile. "Princess Taelyn."

"You've been out in the city?" I ask.

He nods but doesn't offer any explanation. His line of sight flicks away from me.

I can tell something has happened. My stomach sinks. What now? Will this never end?

"What's happened, Balthorne? Tell me."

Still, he doesn't look at me. "I thought Cirrus might have already spoken to you."

I'm getting frustrated now. "About what?"

"There's been some...disruption in the city."

He clearly doesn't want to tell me what's happened. "I swear to the gods, Balthorne, tell me now. What kind of disruption?"

He ducks his head, still not looking me in the eye. "The people you gave coins to have been robbed."

Instantly, two particular people jump into my mind. "What about the mother and baby?"

"Both dead," he says. "Heads bashed in, and bodies left on the streets."

Tears fill my eyes. "No."

Hadn't Ruarok tried to warn me about something like this happening? I hadn't wanted to listen.

"Who would do such a terrible thing?"

Balthorne bites his lower lip. "Anyone who got word that these people were carrying gold sovereigns. Unfortunately, they were easy targets."

Guilt slides like black roots through my veins. This is my fault. I'd believed I was helping, but I'd only made things worse. That mother and her baby would still be alive today if I hadn't given her the gold.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“I want the thieves and murders found immediately, and for them to be hung in the city square for everyone to see. Their bodies will remain there as a reminder to anyone else who believes that stealing from the vulnerable is a good course of action.”

I’m furious with whoever did this, but also at myself for being so shortsighted. Had I only given them the money to make myself feel better, to try to ease my own guilt at still being able to live in luxury while they had nothing?

Balthorne ducks his head. “Yes, Princess.”

I let out a sigh and cover my face with my hands. “I didn’t listen. I’d believed people would want to help one another.”

He offers me a sympathetic smile. “Your heart is too kind.”

I shake my head at that, my anger evident in the growl of my tone. “No. It’s not kindness. It’s naivety and ignorance.”

I vow to make better choices in the future, to listen to those around me. I’m a coddled girl who’s grown up in a castle. What do I know?

Helplessness overwhelms me. A desperation to hand this responsibility back to the king and my mother takes hold, a longing like I’ve never experienced before. I’d have sworn that if will was enough to make something happen, then I could have brought them back to life.

I don't want to doubt my ability to rule, but how can I not when one of my decisions had such devastating consequences?

I need to do something more than throwing money at the situation. That clearly hasn't helped—if anything, it's only made things worse.

That makes up my mind. I can't let anyone else suffer like this, even if it means risking my own life.

“Balthorne, I need you to put together horses and a team of guards to take beyond the border of Askos to find the Mage who lives there.”

His eyebrows lift. “You wish for us to go beyond the border, into the wildlands?”

“I will need your protection.”

His expression falters. “You plan to join us?”

“Of course. I need the Mage to listen to me, and they can't do that if I'm not there.”

“It's dangerous, Princess. Possibly even deadly.”

I sigh with irritation. “Why does everyone keep telling me that, as though I'm unaware of when something is dangerous? Do you think me stupid, Balthorne?”

“No, of course not. My apologies. I'm simply concerned about you. I'd never want to see any harm come to you.”

“Thank you, Balthorne, but if I don't try this, Askos will also become a place of danger—if it isn't already. The night before last, the King's Tower fell. Who's to say the same thing won't happen to the rest of the castle if we do nothing?”

“You could send a message to the Mage,” he suggests. “Allow me to carry it.”

“It’s not enough. The Mage is a thousand years old, and they won’t speak to just anyone. If they don’t understand how serious this is, then they may just send you away again.”

“If that happens, then you could go.”

“By then it may be too late. My mind is made up, Balthorne. I need to do something to save the kingdom. I wish to leave at first light.”

22

RUAROK

Taelyn is putting together a team of people to leave the city and go in search of the Mage, and I am not among them. That she thinks she’s allowed to tell me what to do pisses me off more than anything. She thinks she rules me, but she’s got it all wrong. I am the eldest sibling, and the only true blood heir to the throne. She’s just the daughter of some whore who married my father.

She is nobody.

I’m warring with myself about what the best course of action should be. I don’t appreciate looking like a nobody in front of the rest of the castle, but at the same time, I want her to believe I’m on her side.

I find her alone in the library, standing at one of the bookshelves.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Princess Taelyn, I wish to come with you tomorrow.”

She turns to face me. “Why? What good will it do to have both of us in the wildlands? One of us needs to be here.” She sighs as though my very presence exasperates her. “Please don’t keep making me repeat myself.”

I hate how drawn I am to her. My palms tingle with the desire to touch her. My body aches to be next to hers. Even when she’s annoyed with me, I still want her.

“You don’t seem to have given any thought as to how it would make me look for my younger sister to ride out into the wildlands while I stay behind. The rest of the city will consider me a coward. I’m fully aware that my reputation isn’t the best, but I feel as though since I’ve been released from the cage, this is my fresh start.”

She arches her brow. “Is it because you are older that you believe you should be the one going, or because I am female? Would we be having this conversation if I was a younger stepbrother?”

“Probably not,” I admit.

There would be a lot that would be different if she were a younger stepbrother. I wouldn’t be trying to creep into her bed at night, or be constantly thinking about her, I’m sure. I keep this to myself, though.

“Well, then,” she says, as though that has brought the matter to a close.

She walks over to what had been the king’s favorite chair and runs her fingers across

the back.

“I miss them,” she says. “I wish they were still here.”

I know exactly who she’s talking about, but she seems to have forgotten who she’s talking to.

“The king was a good man,” she continues. “A fair ruler.”

Sometimes I feel as though she is living in a whole different world than I am. “He had me locked away in a cage beneath the castle for what he hoped would be the whole of eternity. Me—his own son. How can you call him kind and good?”

“I don’t truly know his reasons for that,” she mutters, glancing away.

I can’t stand it.

I cross the room in a few strides, bringing myself in front of her. I grab her chin and yank her face up, so her eyes lock with mine—pale blue to almost black.

“I do. He was fearful I would take his place. He couldn’t stand the possibility that I might find favor with either you or your mother, and that ultimately you would prefer me to him. So instead of risking it, he had me locked away.”

“Find favor?” She gives a small laugh. “Do you mean sex?”

“Of course I mean sex. If you had to choose to fuck me or my father, which would you go for?”

She yanks her face out of my grip.



“He was like a father to me as well,” she spits. “You are disgusting for even mentioning such a thing.”

I huff air from my nostrils. Jealousy rises inside me, green and vibrant. “He was like a father to you, huh? Good to see he was a decent parent to someone, then, because he certainly wasn’t to me.”

“Maybe if you’d been a better person, he would have been.”

“I see. So, being locked away, with my hands in chains, for all of eternity, by my own father, was my own fault because I wasn’t a better person? Maybe if he hadn’t had my mother killed, so I’d had a caring figure to raise me, then I would have been.”

She flinches at that. “He had your mother killed? I don’t believe it.”

I scoff at her. “Really? You’ll believe he had me locked beneath the castle to slowly go mad, but you won’t believe he’d have a whore murdered?”

She hesitates, and I can see she’s considering this.

“Okay,” she says slowly, “but you’re still responsible for who you are, even without a mother. You still could try to be a better person.”

“A better person? Why am I not considered to be a decent person already? Because I need sex to survive? What’s so wrong with sex, Princess?”

Fuck, she’s so beautiful. I see the effect I have on her. The way my words cause blood to rush to her face, her cheeks pinkening so prettily. Her lips part, and she draws a breath. I’ve flustered her, and I find I’m enjoying the result.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Oh, that’s right. You wouldn’t know.”

She blinks rapidly. “What do you know?”

I lean in and inhale deeply. “You’re a virgin. I can smell it on you.”

She jerks away. “No, you can’t!”

I chuckle. “I absolutely can. I have a sense about these things. I like to play with virgins more than anyone. Getting the taste of a sweet virgin pussy is my absolute favorite.”

She glares at me. “And you wonder why you ended up locked in a cage when you say things like that. Have you forgotten who you are talking to? I am Princess Taelyn Loftborn, and I am the ruler of Askos and of Highdrift. I command you cease speaking to me this way immediately.”

I draw myself up to my full height. She’s tall, but I stand at least a foot taller. “And I am Prince RuarokLoftborn, firstborn to be the ruler of Askos and of Highdrift. Didyouforget who you are talking to?”

Her jaw drops open, and a few splutters emerge from her lips.

“We are equals, Princess,” I say, “as much as you might hate that. You are my sister, are you not?”

She folds her arms across her chest. “And as your sister, there is no way you should

be speaking to me like that.”

I love how reserved she is. How haughty. It only makes me want her more.

No, I shake the thought from my head. I can’t want her. She’s the one thing standing in the way of me ruling the kingdom. I want my castle back again. I want to sit on the throne where my asshole of a father once sat. This girl doesn’t deserve that seat. She’s an interloper. A fucking cuckoo. She has no bloodline here.

But I haven’t been able to get the memory of the dream I had about her all those years ago out of my head.

“Did you ever dream about me, Princess?”

She freezes. “What?”

“You heard me. Before I even met you, I dreamed about you. You came into my room and straddled me and rode me so hard I thought I was going to explode. Tell me you shared the same dream.”

Her cheeks grow red. “I certainly did not.”

“You’re lying. I can tell. Did you climax in the dream? I know I did. I wonder if we climaxed together, in our sleep, at the same time.”

She takes a step back, and her wings fold around her body, as though to protect her. “Stop, Ruarok.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“You don’t deny it, though. Did you recognize me when we danced, or did the dream come later? I can’t tell you how much the memory kept me going during the years in the cage. As you rode me, I ran my hands down your smooth back, cupping your ass, watching my cock slide in and out of you.”

“That wasn’t me,” she hisses. “You’re getting me mixed up with one of your whores.”

“No, I’m not. I recognize your wings and your hair. You are so beautiful. There is no one else like you.”

She lifts her chin, jutting it defiantly. “My mother was like me.”

I won’t tell her that I’d initially believed the person in my dream to be her mother. She won’t like that. “No one else living like you,” I add.

My cock is fully erect at the talk of fucking her. I want her now. It’s been far too long. I’ve been starving. Why haven’t I found some whore to feed from already? But I don’t want some whore.

I want her.

“Princess, just let me have a taste of you. You don’t need to do anything. I won’t expect you to touch me. Just lie back and spread those long legs and let my tongue do the work.”

Understanding of what that means dawns on her pretty face. “You want to...down there? With your mouth?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I can't tell if she's horrified or fascinated—perhaps a mixture of both. Fuck, she's adorable when she acts so innocent.

“Just a kiss,” I tell her. “Maybe a lick and a suck. Imagine your pussy is like a ripe fruit, and I wish to gorge myself on it.”

I need to build my strength. Those years locked away have weakened me, and weakened my magic, too. In years gone by, I would have had her stripping naked by now, begging me to fuck her. But either my magic is too weak, or she is immune to it. It's frustrating, but it's not the be-all and end-all. I can still make her want me.

Already, her wings have unfurled from her body and tremble in the air behind her. I can't tell if she's nervous or excited. Perhaps a mixture of both.

I run my hand down the side of her neck, pushing away her long hair, and then lower my lips to her incredibly soft skin. Fuck, she smells amazing.

I can't allow myself to fall for her. I have to get rid of her if I'm ever going to have this kingdom to myself. It's clear that people love her, and they'll never accept me as their ruler if she is around.

I place kisses to her throat, and she bows into me, a soft breath escaping her lips. I don't know if it's my magic that's bringing about the desired effect or simply my presence. Bizarrely, I find myself hoping for the latter—though I've never cared if women only wanted me because of my magic before.

The swells of her breasts peep from the top of her corseted dress, and I risk ducking

lower to place kisses on their soft mounds. I hold her waist with one hand, the other supporting her back. Her wings flutter in the air behind her, helping to hold her up, even as she swoons. The tips of her toes lift from the ground, so she's suspended in the air while I work to free her tits from the corset. I can't wait to get my mouth around her nipples, to suckle on her until she's moaning my name.

A loud knock comes at the library door.

Taelyn gasps in shock and her toes make contact with the floor. She shoves me away, pulling her dress back up to cover herself. She spins away just as the door opens and Cirrus enters.

"Princess, I need to talk to you about your plans to ride through the wildlands to find the Mage." His gaze flicks to me, and then back to her.

She's regained her composure and turns to him, her expression schooled into a serious one.

"Of course." She addresses me next. "We're done here, Prince Ruarok. I will see you on my return."

It's clear I've been dismissed.

23

TAELYN

PART THREE

I'm awake before the sun rises.

The monumental task that lies ahead of me has made it nearly impossible to sleep. I think I might have dozed for an hour or so, but then my racing heart woke me again. I could feel it thumping through my whole body, as though the mattress beneath me pulsed with the beat.

I pray to the gods I'm not making a huge mistake, but what other choice do I have? Being afraid is not a reason not to do something. If I do nothing, it'll mean the end of the kingdom. I refuse to be a coward.

From outside comes the clop of horses' hooves in the courtyard, followed by the call of one man to another to ensure everything is ready for the journey.

A light knock taps at my door.

"Enter," I call.

Skylar pops her head inside. "Do you need help dressing, Princess?"

"No, I'm fine today, but thank you."

I won't be dressing in my usual corseted top and longskirts today. They wouldn't be practical at all. Instead, I'll wear my riding gear—jodhpurs and boots, and several layers of long-sleeved tops.

Skylar doesn't leave but busies herself gathering items for my journey. I use the bathroom then dress in my chosen outfit.

In front of the full-length mirror, I look transformed.

If it weren't for my hair, I could pass for a man. My curves are disguised under layers of clothes. They are necessary. It's bitterly cold in the wildlands, no matter what the

season, and it's exposed out there, too. There are very few trees and nowhere to shelter. We'll be taking camping gear with us, but a few sheets of canvas won't be much protection against the kind of danger we'll face.

“Are you sure you don't want me to join you?” Skylar asks. “I feel terrible staying here while you do something so dangerous.”



## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“I’m sure. I don’t want to put you at risk.”

She blinks back tears. “But you’re putting yourself at risk. I couldn’t stand it if we lost you.”

“I’ll have Balthorne to protect me.”

My words don’t help, and she covers her mouth and lets out a sob. Could it be that she’s more worried about something happening to Balthorne than she is me?

I put my arms out to her, and she steps into them, and we embrace. I squeeze her and kiss the side of her head.

“I need you here to keep everyone in line,” I tell her as I release her. “Make sure Ruarok doesn’t get up to any mischief.”

“I think Ruarok does what Ruarok wants,” she replies.

I give a small laugh. “That’s what worries me.”

“You will be careful, though, won’t you? I’ll be worried about you the entire time.”

I don’t say what I’m thinking, which is that we’re not safe anywhere anymore. Only a couple of nights ago, the king and queen lost their lives while sleeping in their own bed.

I sit at the dressing table, and Skylar brushes my hair then puts it into a long braid

which hangs down the middle of my back.

Though my stomach is in knots, I force a hot breakfast of porridge down me. I need both the warmth and the sustenance. I assume Balthorne will have arranged that we take a small stove or what we need to make a fire, but there is the possibility this will be my last warm meal in some time.

From my research, it's said the Mage lives in a secluded cave in a hillside, north from the boundary of Askos, approximately a day and a half ride away. Assuming our journey isn't interrupted, and the Mage willingly gives me the answers I need, we should be back within three days.

The sun has finally lifted above the horizon, lightening the sky and spreading its rays across the city.

It is time to leave.

I go down to the courtyard, where my men are already waiting. It smells of horses, straw, and steaming horse shit. For some reason, I find this comforting. My horse—a gray mare called Arsher—has already been saddled, and I go to her and stroke her nose, murmuring a few words of reassurance. I'm aware I'm asking her to go on this journey with me, and tell her not to be afraid.

Despite myself, I look around for Ruarok. I'm sure he's still sulking about my refusal to allow him to join us, but I'd still hoped he would have come to see us off and offer us his best wishes.

I question why I should want him here, when all we ever seem to do is fight...or feel like we're about to fuck. I should be glad he's listened to my instructions for once and isn't still trying to press me to join us.

He needs to stay in the city. If something were to happen to me, he'd need to be here to help the kingdom navigate its way into whatever came next. He wouldn't be my first pick for that role—so far, the only thing Ruarok seems to care about is himself—but he'll be the only one left.

“Are you ready, Princess Taelyn?” Balthorne asks.

I nod. “As I'll ever be.”

I'm grateful he doesn't try to convince me to change my mind. He respects my decision as final. Cirrus wasn't happy about not coming on the journey either, but I need him here to keep Ruarok in hand, if such a thing is possible.

If our party doesn't return, at least I know the kingdom will have people at its helm.

I mount my horse and settle in the saddle. Several of the guards will be leading the way, Balthorne riding beside me, while several more will bring up the rear.

The castle gates are opened, men shouting to one another. The clatter of hooves on the cobblestones fills the air.

The first part of our journey will take us through the city, beyond the city walls, and across the remaining kingdom and countryside of Askos. We will then reach the borders of Askos, where we will pass over into the wildlands.

Even as we leave the security of the castle, I find myself looking over my shoulder, wondering if I'll spot Ruarok watching us leave, but he's nowhere to be seen.

I let out a sigh and focus on the journey ahead.

It's mid-afternoon by the time we reach the borders of Askos. We haven't seen either

a person or house for some time now. All that surrounds us are fields and woodland. But, ahead, the landscape changes. The trees vanish, and the grass becomes rocky ground and peat bogs.

The border is magic, designed to keep the creatures that live in the wildlands out of Askos. We don't need a tall wall or gates. My stomach churns with nerves. I can still give the word, and we can all turn back, but I can't do that.

We press on.

Less than an hour after passing into the wildlands, the temperature has dropped noticeably. The wind howls around anything it can find. Where the hills rise to a point, strange, pale stone structures are silhouetted against the gray sky. Are these monuments made by nature, or some other force? What do they mean? What have they been used for?

People used to live out here, before the temperatures dropped and it became too difficult for even the hardiest to survive. Perhaps the stone structures—like huge squares of rock cut out and then stacked on top of one another—were used as places of worship?

The solid body of my horse shifts reassuringly beneath me, hooves clip-clopping across the uneven ground. It's barren out here. The only trees are solitary, their limbs bare, their trunks bent against the harsh, cold winds that tear across the moorland. We can't even trust the ground beneath our feet. Too often, it looks as though it's just another moss-covered piece of land, only for the horse to take another step, and its front legs vanish into several feet of bog.

There are so many things out here that could kill us. If not the land itself, then the wild animals that fight for survival upon it, or the gangs of outcasts who have been convicted of some heinous crime or another and banished from the kingdom. If they were to see the kingdom's flag flying, they'd surely try to cut us down. It occurs to me that I'd believed Prince Ruarok to have been living this way all these years. Why hadn't I ever questioned it?

A pang of guilt stabs through me. I didn't speak up for him, not once. I just allowed the king to make his decision to banish his only son and stood by and said nothing. My mother didn't fight for him either. How could we have done that? Just been okay with believing the prince had been sent out here for the rest of his days? We'd taken the king at his word that Ruarok had planned to kill us, and never questioned it, even though there was no proof other than the king's word.

I tell myself that I was young—and who questions the king's decision, anyway?—but that doesn't make me feel any better.

Does Ruarok hate me for not fighting for him? Perhaps he has every right to. I won't even try to put myself in his place because I can't, even for a second, begin to understand the kind of suffering he's experienced over the past ten years.

I think of how passionately he kissed me, of how his touch sent bolts of electricity shooting through me. My emotions war within me. He seems to desire me, but how does he not want to wrap his hand around my throat instead?

I'm ashamed of myself.

After a couple of hours, we stop to eat a simple meal of bread, cheese, and cured pork, and allow the horses to rest. We can't stop for long, though. Time isn't on our side.

Though the wildlands are desolate, we don't come across anything that is threatening. The biggest danger is in the very land itself—in hobbling a horse or sucking one of us into a bog. That danger only grows as the light starts to bleed from the sky.

"We need to stop here for the night," Balthorne says. "It's soon going to be too dark to see the way, and we need enough light to put up the tents."

We pull the horses to a halt. There is nothing around that can offer us any shelter, and it feels horribly exposed up here.

Balthorne turns to the other guards. “Princess Taelyn’s tent will be in the center of ours. Position ourselves around her so nothing can get past without us hearing it.”

I shiver at the thought of lying alone in the tent, straining my ears for any creatures that might come sniffing around in search of an easy meal during the night.

Balthorne continues. “We’ll start a fire to cook food and heat water, but we’ll need to put it out before it gets fully dark, or the flames will make us easily visible to any marauders.”

Though I want the comfort of the warmth and light of the fire, I realize he’s right. We don’t want to attract any unwanted attention.

Night seems to fall on us like a curtain, with sudden finality. One minute, I can make out the faces of the men around me. The next, I can only see from the light of the fire. We huddle around it, and eat and drink, and try to warm ourselves the best we can.

Each of us is aware we’ll need to put it out soon. The longer we allow the fire to burn, the more likely we’ll be spotted. But none of us wants to sit here in the dark and the cold, unaware of who or what might be moving in the darkness around us.

The rhythmical clop of horses’ hooves comes from a distance away, drawing my attention. The others have heard it, too, and we fall silent, craning our necks in that direction. Balthorne and the other guards get to their feet.

It’s not coming from the direction where we’ve tied up our own animals. It seems to be getting closer. My stomach lurches.

“Someone is coming,” I hiss, standing as well.

Balthorne immediately places himself in front of me.

“Who goes there?” he calls.

My heart thuds against the inside of my ribs. I hold my breath. Every muscle in my body is tense with anticipation about who or what is going to emerge from the dark.

Now all I can hear is heavy breathing, and, in the dark, I make out white plumes on the freezing air.

“Princess,” a familiar voice comes out of the dark. “It’s only me, Prince Ruarok. Please don’t be afraid.”

My shoulders sag, and I huff out a frustrated breath, and push past Balthorne. Ruarok has followed us here. How long has he been behind us? The entire way, I guess. No wonder he wasn’t there to say goodbye. He must have left the castle earlier and positioned himself somewhere along the route so he could follow when we’d passed.

“What are you doing here, Ruarok? I told you not to come.”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

He climbs off his horse and leads it around to be tied up with the others. “And I told you that I was coming, no matter what. You need as many people around you as possible to keep you safe.”

“I have plenty of guards to keep me safe. If I’d wanted more people, I would have brought them along. You have deliberately gone against my wishes.”

He shrugs, and I want to smack him.

“Well, I’m here now. You might as well make the most of me.”

I point in the direction he’s just come. “No, you can turn back.”

His eyebrows raise. “What? In the dark? Alone? You can’t expect me to do that. It would be a death sentence.”

I growl my annoyance, but I know he’s right. As much as Prince Ruarok frustrates me, I don’t want to see him dead.

24

**RUAROK**

I don’t let it show, but I’m relieved to have found them. I lost the riding party a couple of times and was concerned I’d end up out here alone overnight. I didn’t much like my chances if that happened.

Balthorne steps in. “The princess instructed you to turn back.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” I bristle.

Fucking Balthorne, with his perfect fucking hair, and his broad shoulders and goddamned wings. Screw him.

“I’m merely passing on the princess’s instructions.”

“I can hear her perfectly well. I am Prince Ruarok, son of King Themaris, first king of his name and ruler of the lands of Askos, and I don’t need anyone else to tell me what to do.”

“The princess?—”

I lift a hand to cut him off. He’s lucky it isn’t my fist. “Until the princess is crowned, she and I are equals. Do you understand?”

He shoots her a look, but I take quick step forward, closing the gap so there is only a sliver of air between us. He might be bigger and taller, but there is a danger about me that doesn’t exist within him. I have the capacity to cheat and be cruel, but he doesn’t have that quality.

“Don’t look at her,” I growl. “You reply to me. Understand?”

He gives the slightest of nods. “Yes, Prince Ruarok.”

I half-expect Taelyn to step in, but she doesn’t. She understands that on this, at least, I am right.

She lets out a sigh. “It’s getting late, and I’m tired. I am going to retire to my tent to

get some sleep. I suggest everyone else does the same.”

“I’ll stand guard over you, Princess,” Balthorne says to her. “You can sleep in peace.”

“There’s no need,” I reply. “I will watch over her.”

He puts his shoulders back. “I am head of the guard. It’s my job.”

She steps in. “You can both watch over me. Balthorne, take the first four hours, and Ruarok, take the four hours until morning. That way you will both have the chance to rest.”

I begrudgingly agree. I left the castle long before dawn and have been riding ever since. I’m dog-tired, and I would have struggled to stay awake to protect the princess.

I’m also keen to get close to the fire, to warm my hands, and eat something hot. The cold of these wildlands has worked its way down to my bones, and it feels as though I’ll never warm up.

I find a place around the fire and jerk my head in greeting at those guards still seated. I wonder what they think of me—the prince whose own father locked him away all these years. It angers me that they might consider me less than a man.

Is that why Balthorne is so protective of Taelyn? Does he believe the stories that were told about me, and so he thinks I might try my hand at killing her again? Not that I even tried to kill her in the first place. Perhaps the thought had crossed my mind, but that had been before I’d known who she was.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Now I look around, I think Taelyn doesn't need my help getting herself killed. She seems almost intent on doing so herself.

I spread my fingers and hold my palms out to the fire.

A moment later, water splashes onto the flames, and the wet wood hisses and spits, sending thick, white smoke up into the air.

"What the fuck?" I protest.

"We can't keep the fire going," Balthorne says. "It'll attract unwanted attention. I suggest you try to get some sleep while you can."

I scowl in his direction. The man really does wind me up the wrong way.

Glancing over at Taelyn's tent, I see she has already retired for the night. It's a disappointment. I'd been hoping to at least sit and talk with her a while.

I shake the thought from my head and remind myself why I've come.

If the princess doesn't return to the city, but I am able to go back with the answer to saving the kingdom, there will be no doubt as to who will end up on the throne.

25

TAELYN

It's freezing.

My entire body shivers and my teeth chatter. I'd fallen asleep the moment I'd climbed into my tent, drained from the day's journey and all the stress that had come before it, but have woken from the cold. I don't know how long I've slept, but my body is already stiff from all the riding, so I guess it must have been at least several hours.

I huddle into a ball and try to pull the blankets tighter around my body, but nothing seems to help. It's still dark outside, and I've got no idea how long it is until morning. I don't want to give up on sleep, but this feels impossible.

The front of the tent suddenly flaps open. I gasp and half sit, expecting some terrifying creature from the moorland to launch inside. But instead, it's my stepbrother.

"By the gods, Ruarok," I whisper. "You scared me half to death."

"You're cold," he replies.

"How do you know that?"

"I can hear your teeth chattering from out there."

"Oh, I see."

"Move up," he tells me. "I'll keep you warm."

Maybe I should say no, but I'm so cold, and the promise of warmth is enough to ensure my lips stay firmly shut. He enters the tent fully and pulls the flaps shut behind him. Then he crosses over and lies down behind me. He fits the front of his

body into the back of mine and pulls the blankets up over us both. It occurs to me that now there's no one outside of the tent keeping watch, but I'm already feeling warmer from having him so close. He wraps his arms around me, pulling my back against his chest, my wings crushed between us, and his top knee wedges between mine. He buries his face into my neck, and it's as though we've become one body.

"Thank you," I whisper.

The shivering subsides as does the clatter of my teeth, but still I can't sleep. It's not because I'm cold now, but because I'm lying, alone, in such proximity to my stepbrother.

And I'm pretty sure the hardness pressing into the small of my back isn't a dagger.

"Ruarok," I hiss.

"Yes?"

"Your...erection...is digging into me."

He makes no attempt to move. "Apologies, Princess, but I can't help it when I'm this close to you."

I attempt to wriggle away, to create a tiny amount of space between us, but instead of it having the desired effect, Ruarok lets out a throaty groan.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Fuck, Taelyn, you can’t do that.”

It’s the first time he’s just used my name, and it sends a strange feeling of familiarity through me. The warmth I’m now experiencing has nothing to do with blankets or even body heat. I like that he felt comfortable enough to call me by my name alone.

Curious, I wriggle again, only this time I deliberately push my ass against his cock.

“Do what?” I tease, playing the innocent.

“You know exactly what.” His voice has become a low growl. “You’re playing with fire, Princess.”

That low, coiling, tingling pressure deep at my core has returned. “I did say I was cold. Maybe I could use a little heat.”

How does he always manage to bring out this side of me? It’s as though I become someone else when I’m around him. No one else in the kingdom would dare say some of the things he’s said to me, but he doesn’t seem to care what the repercussion might be. Perhaps it’s because he’s realized he’s already lived through the worst time possible, and so now there’s nothing anyone can do to him that would be any worse.

He moves my braid away from my neck and places his lips to my skin. The touch sends shivers through me, except they’re shivers of pleasure now. I grind back against him as he kisses and licks and sucks my neck. A moan of pleasure escapes me. I hope no one in the tents surrounding us hears.

Where am I planning for this to go? Would I let him fuck me, here in this tent, while my guards surround me? They're bound to hear us. People will talk.

He slips his hand down the back of my pants and cups my ass then pushes between my legs.

"Wet," he whispers against my ear. "I always knew you'd be so wet for me."

No man has ever touched me this way. He slides a finger inside me, and I gasp. "Oh, by the gods."

The pleasure that condenses deep at my core is like nothing I've ever experienced. He holds me close as he fingers me, and my hips rock back and forth. His other hand travels down the front of my body, stopping to cup my breast over my clothing, his thumb brushing my nipple, and then heading down. He slips inside the front of my pants, so he has both hands down there now. The hand at the front finds my clit, and I turn my face to muffle my moan against his bicep.

How does he know how to do this to me? To touch me in exactly the right places to make me feel like I'm climbing to the stars? Then it occurs to me that this is what Ruarok does—what he is. It's both experience and instinct that makes him good at this.

"So tight," he mutters. "My cock will split you in two."

His words shock me, and I jerk away. "No, stop."

"Why? Doesn't it feel good?"

He rubs me again, and I push my hips into him, but then remind myself that this can't happen. He is my stepbrother.



“I told you to stop.”

His finger slips out of me, and he withdraws his hands, rolls to his back, and lets out a sigh of frustration.

“Why do you keep doing this, Princess? You’re going to leave us both wanting. All needy and unsatisfied, and for what? Because you’re worried about what people might say?”

And because I’m frightened of sex, of what it will mean, of if it will hurt, and who I’ll be after.

I don’t say any of that to him, though. How would he ever understand? He’s been having sex ever since he was old enough to do so. It’s a part of who he is. I don’t even want to think about the number of people he might have been with—the thought alone makes me sick with jealousy.

But he hasn’t been with anyone at all for at least the last ten years, unless he found himself a chambermaid the other night to take his frustrations out on.

“I’ve told you my reasons already,” I say, shifting away to create space between us. I’m already missing the body heat, but what else can I do? “It’s not my fault if you keep using your Incubus magic on me.”

He snorts softly at that. “Is that what you think I’m doing? Using my magic to make you want me?”

Angrily, I roll over to face him. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

“No, it isn’t. You’re wanting me all on your own.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He shrugs nonchalantly, and I want to smack him.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Makes no difference to me if you do or not. It’s the truth. You want me, Princess. You want to fuck your stepbrother, and you hate it so much that it’s safer for you to blame me.”

26

RUAROK

“That’s not true,” she insists.

I can’t see her expression in the dark, but I can picture it perfectly. Her lips will be parted in disbelief, her eyes wide in shock. Her feigned innocence is starting to piss me off. She’s acting as though this is all my fault, but she’s the one who was grinding up against my cock like a cat in heat. That she then blames me for my reaction is a little much.

But instead of throwing a temper tantrum and storming out of there, I decide to play with her.

“You’re only lying to yourself. You want to fuck your big brother, and you can’t get your head around that. You act like a princess, but deep inside is a dirty whore desperate to get out.”

She draws another sharp intake of breath. “You can’t speak to me like that.”

I lean in closer, press my lips to her ear. “You’re a filthy slut, Princess. You want my cock in your throat, and my fingers inside you. You want my mouth on your pussy.

Or maybe you'd like me to play with your ass. To tongue your hole, then push it into you."

She jerks away, yanking the blankets from my body. "Stop! I won't hear such talk."

But her breathing is rapid, her chest rising and falling. I can't see it, but I bet there's a flush to her cheeks. And I can smell her arousal on my fingers.

"I know you're wet for me. I felt that for myself."

"I should have you locked back in that cage for speaking to me like that."

I'm not done. "Put your hand between your thighs, Princess. Touch yourself and then show me your fingers. If they're not glistening, I'll put myself back in that cage and lock the gate and throw away the key."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Try me."

She's actually entertaining the thought, but she knows she'll never win, because she is wet. She's sopping down there, her pussy perfectly ready to entertain me.

"You need to leave," she says instead. "Now."

I mock pout. "But then you'll get cold again."

"I'd rather be cold than have someone disrespect me in such a way."

"You didn't think you were disrespecting me when you were grinding up on my cock?"

She's so much fun to play with. How long will she continue to lie to herself? While it would have been better if she'd let me fuck her in this tent, so everyone around could hear, and rumors would fly faster than the dragonflies that are the kingdom's emblem, I can't pretend I'm not enjoying this.

"I did no such thing. It's not my fault it was just rightthere. I was trying to make space. You're the one who took things further."

I give a low chuckle. "Sure, you keep telling yourself that, Princess. Let's see how long you last before you're begging to ride me."

I throw back the blankets and get to my feet. She gathers them around her again. I can sense her glaring at me in the dark, and a smile plays on my lips. I will have her, eventually. Then I will ruin her.

Going to the front of the tent, I push back the flap and climb out into the open. The vast expanse of dark sky has begun to lighten, the stars blinking out, one by one. I stretch my muscles and roll my shoulders. After so long in the cage, even being out here feels like a luxury to me.

I understand why my father didn't banish me to the wildlands, the way he had so many of the criminals who came before me. He'd worried that instead of wasting away out here, I'd have thrived. He'd have thought that I would gather up all those men he'd banished—hard men, criminals—and returned to the castle with an army behind me.

He'd have been right, too.

I take a seat on the cold ground and wait for morning to arrive. In the tents around us, the guards snore and mutter in their sleep. The horses sense morning approaching and snort hot breath in the freezing cold air and paw at the ground, restless.

We've been lucky not to have to deal with any interruptions in the night. Huge, black, wolf-like beasts prowl these lands and are most likely hungry for their next meal. Gangs of outcasts also roam the moorland. I assume word of our journey hasn't gotten out yet, or we'd have been jumped upon overnight. I touch the dagger that's placed at the base of my spine, and the other one in my boot, reassuring myself of their presence. While I might not have the sword training of the guards, or damned Balthorne, who is probably the best swordsman in the land, I can still handle myself.

A sliver of light appears on the horizon.

We have another full day of travel ahead of us. I hope the princess isn't wasting her time. The Mage might tell her there is simply no way to stop the rot and send her away with nothing. If that happens, I don't know what we'll do. I'm trying to tell myself it's not as bad as the princess makes out, that perhaps the damage the castle and the city have sustained will be all that happens. But on this topic, I have to admit Taelyn knows far more than I do. Her homeland was destroyed by the rot, which is why she and her mother came to Askos in the first place. She has seen and experienced far more than I ever have.

The sun rises fully, and the small unit around me begins to stir. Men emerge from their tents and step off a short distance to relieve themselves. The fire is restoked, and cans of beans are heated in the flames, and water boiled for coffee.

Eventually, Taelyn climbs out of her tent. She doesn't speak to me or even look my way. She vanishes behind a small hillock to relieve herself then returns to warm herself by the fire.

Balthorne has already made her coffee, and he presses the tin cup into her hands. She offers him a warm smile, and I immediately want to ram my dagger into the back of the man's neck.

What was it she said about him? That she thought of him like a brother? Considering that I'm her actual stepbrother and I had my fingers inside her a few hours ago, I guess that doesn't really mean much. He's looking at her as though he's picturing her naked, and I hate that she's completely oblivious to it.

She's mine.

I shake the thought from my head. Since when have I ever been possessive? I've never cared in the slightest what any of the women I've been with before have done, or who they've been with. I've always had a 'more the merrier' viewpoint. It's different with Taelyn, though. The idea of anyone even thinking of her in such a way makes me want to tear their heads from their shoulders and use them as the rocks in a slingshot.

I have to keep reminding myself that we have no future. I refuse to share the throne with her. She is far more loved than I, and people will always look at her as being the greater monarch. Not that she would even agree to share it. There can only be one winner in this game.

"We should get back on the road," I say, getting to my feet. "We need to make the most of the daylight."

Balthorne nods. "I was just about to say the same."

We saddle up the horses again. I'm conscious of Taelyn the whole time. She doesn't allow someone else to take care of her mount but instead does everything herself, stopping long enough to give the horse's long nose a rub and speak softly against its cheek.

I wonder if Taelyn, or even Balthorne, will suggest for me to return to the castle, but the subject isn't brought up.

We ride again, navigating the desolate land. We stay alert for any sign of wild animals, or criminals, ready to make a meal out of us, or rob us of everything we have. The uneven ground makes the ride hard. Hours pass. We pause briefly for a lunch of hunks of bread and cheese then keep going.



I don't want to doubt the princess's plans, but the mood of our small group has fallen somber. The poor night's sleep, plus the ride through this nothingness, has done nothing for morale. Not that I'm someone who is much good at boosting the spirits of others. Normally, I'm the one who brings everyone back down.

Are we even going the right way?

No one here has actually seen the Mage, or even been out in the wildlands, so we're only going on word of mouth about which way to go to actually find them. I've never dared to suggest we might not know where we're going. It wouldn't go down well with Taelyn.

I keep sensing Taelyn's gaze on me. Is she thinking about last night—or at least this morning—and how it felt when the two of us were huddled beneath those blankets?

She has a right to be distrustful of me.

Being with her has made me stronger, too. It's different with her than it has been with anyone else. With others, it's as though I've needed to put them into a kind of a trance, and then I've physically drunk from their sexual aura. With Taelyn, it's as though I absorb her through my skin, and she is fully aware of everything I'm doing to her. I don't need to use my magic to make her want me. The difference is refreshing, and I can't put it down to anything in particular. Have I changed since being in the cage? Or is it her that's different?

27

TAELYN

I sense the mood of the group becoming despondent.

They say the Mage has been living out here for a thousand years. How can anyone survive for so long? Just a few days is enough to know we're taking our lives into our hands.

The ride was supposed to have taken us a day and a half, and we're at that now, which means we should be close. But how will we even know when we're at the right hillside? It's not as though the Mage will have a sign outside, pointing us in the right direction.

The wind whips around my face, pulling wisps of my hair from the braid that Skylar had done the day before—there had been no reason to undo it last night. I scrunch my shoulders under my cloak, trying to escape the worst of the cold. My fingers are dry and red around my horse's reins. Why didn't I bring any gloves?

I keep sensing Ruarok watching me. Every time I think of us in the tent, a heated pressure condenses between my thighs, and I have to force my mind away from it so I don't make the most of the rocking of that particular spot against the saddle. It wouldn't do to have the future queen climax among so many men while riding her horse. Just the thought mortifies me.

Ruarok brings his horse level with mine.

"Can I ask you a question?" he says.

I shrug. I've got no reason to say no.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Why did you not marry, Princess? Surely in all these years you’d have had suitors. Other princes from distant lands keen to offer their hand in marriage. Did you never want to start up your own home and family far away from here? You’ve stayed at Highdrift Castle the whole time.”

He’s right. I have had many suitors, but none ever seemed right. I wouldn’t have left Highdrift to start a home elsewhere, however. Highdrift is my home, and, if I were ever to marry, my new husband would have to accept that I’m the ruler of Askos and would never even consider leaving.

Was that the reason I’d never accepted a man?

Or was it that I’d been waiting? Waiting for what, exactly?

Him?

My heart stutters at the thought. No, surely not. We’d only shared that one dance, yet the memory of his intense dark eyes has lingered in my heart and mind. He was like no one else I’d ever met, and he made quite the impression on me at the time.

I still recall the plunge of disappointment I’d felt after hearing he’d been banished. I hadn’t wanted to believe it. After the dance, I’d gone to bed with my heart racing and my blood feeling as though it was on fire in my veins for the first time in my life. I’d never known my skin to be so sensitive, as though merely his presence lit up a million nerve endings.

Then I found out he’d been plotting to kill us, and that he was no longer allowed

anywhere near Highdrift, and I'd been forced to re-evaluate my impression of him. It had never occurred to me that both the story that he'd been banished, and that he'd been plotting to kill us, might have been untrue.

I lift my chin and focus on the ground ahead. "Some people are not made for marriage."

He lets out a small laugh. "I would have said the same about myself. Interesting."

I cock my head. "You never plan to marry?"

"Who would marry me?" he says. The corners of his lips quirk in a not-quite-smile. "I'm definitely not marriage material. Besides, up until a few days ago, I believed I would spend the rest of eternity locked away alone, so it's not as though I'd planned for any long-lasting relationships."

"What about before then?" I can't help it, I'm curious. "Did you have any longer relationships?"

"No, Princess. I never met anyone who interested me for long enough to want to stick around."

"I see."

Does he plan to stick around now? Highdrift is his home. Where else would he go? Perhaps he could leave for another kingdom, find someone of royal blood there who he could make his own.

The thought jabs spines of jealousy into my heart.

I hate how much I want him. I should be focusing on our mission, and instead my

thoughts are crowded by his face and his touch and his filthy words. They set my nerveendings alight and warm my skin. I'm craving more, but I can't give in to my desires.

The cost is too great.

"Princess Taelyn," Balthorne says, interrupting us, "look ahead."

I do. In the distance, beyond the flat expanse, the ground rises sharply. It's like a woman's breast risen out of the moorland, several of the strange, stacked granite rocks at its peak, like a nipple.

"Could that be it?" I ask in wonder. "The place where the Mage resides?"

Balthorne nods. "I believe so."

I draw a breath and kick my horse's flanks so she breaks into a trot. Those around me do the same. My heart beats faster in anticipation. Will the Mage even be able to help us? I have no other plans if this one doesn't work. I'll just have to accept I will lose Askos to the rot and do whatever we can to save as many of my people as possible.

The horses cover the ground quickly, seemingly happy to have picked up the pace. Plumes of white breath snort from their nostrils, and hooves pound the moorland, the rhythmic thudding filling the air.

Will the Mage have used magic to protect themselves? It's possible. There's a good chance I won't be able to simply walk inside. My stomach churns with anxiety. I know I need to do this, but I'm allowed to be nervous.

The distance is farther than it looked, and it's still another hour before we reach the hillock. We dismount and tie the horses up on one of the gnarled trees that has

somehow managed to cling to life despite the thin, rocky soil of the moorland. The horses seem uneasy, eyes rolling to show the whites, hooves pawing the ground. I reassure my mare with a couple of pats and then stroke her long, velvet nose. Intelligent brown eyes study me in return, and I could swear she's silently asking me if I really want to do this.

"Search for the entrance," Balthorne tells the other guards. "It most likely won't be easy to find."

Ruarok comes to join me. He sees himself as too high up to be searching with the guards.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he says.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I shoot him a look. “You sound like my horse.”

His brow furrows. “What?”

I give a small laugh. “Nothing. Yes, of course I do. We haven’t come all this way only to turn back again when we’re so near.”

He stares up at the hill. “If the Mage is in there, they’ll be living in total darkness. No light can get in. Think what that can do to a person.”

“Can the Mage even be considered a person? I’m not sure. I think they might be something else entirely.”

He grimaces. “They say the Mage has all of the world’s knowledge. How is it possible to have that sheer volume of information inside your head and not be completely insane?”

A shout comes from the west side of the hill. Ruarok and I exchange a glance, and then we hurry in the direction the shout has come from.

Balthorne is waiting for us. “We’ve found something.”

I step closer for a better view.

The entrance to what appears to be a deep cave is hidden by hanging green fronds of moss and weeds. A tangle of briar bushes, their spines long and sharp enough to go straight through a man’s foot, should he stand on one, also protect the cave from

being seen.

“This is the only entrance?” I ask Balthorne.

He nods. “That we’ve found.”

I stand at the mouth of the black hole and stare into it. “I should do this alone.”

Ruarok steps closer. “No, Taelyn. It’s not safe.”

“What is, these days?”

I don’t understand fully why I feel I need to be alone, but something deep inside of me knows. Perhaps it’s magic—mine or the Mage’s.

Beyond the foliage is pure darkness. It’s as though even the faint rays of daylight out here are unable to penetrate the black. If I step inside, will it swallow me? What if I can’t find my way back again?

My heart feels like it’s in my mouth. Fear leaves me dizzy, but I can’t back out now. We’ve come all this way, and, besides, what choice do I have? If we go back, I’ll be abandoning Askos to the rot, and what kind of ruler would that make me?

I force one foot to lift and take a tentative step toward the cave. The sooner I’m in and find the Mage, the sooner I’ll get back again, and then we can all go home. I lift my arms to protect my face from the thorns of the bushes and duck my head to push through their scratchy branches.

A part of me wants one of the men to stop me, but no one does. I tell myself that’s because they respect my choices, and that’s a good thing, but the coward in me hopes one of them will grab me and refuse to let me go any farther.



I take one more step, and then another, and a third. Cold, damp fronds of vegetation brush past my face, and I shiver. It was cold outside, but in here it's close to freezing. I wrap my wings around my body to form a kind of cocoon and pull my cloak tighter. I grip it at my throat and reach forward with my other hand to try to find the way. I'm concerned I'll bump my head against a low hanging piece of the cave roof and knock myself unconscious, but, so far, the way has been clear.

The skittering of many sharp little legs comes from high on my right. In my mind, I see the creature the noise might belong to—a multilegged centipede, perhaps, or a huge, hairy spider with fangs as long as my little finger.

Now my shivering morphs into a shudder.

I keep going.

How far into the hillside have I walked now? In the soupy black, I've lost all sense of time and distance. It's as though Ruarok and Balthorne and all the others no longer exist. There is only me and the cave. When will this end?

I fight the urge to turn and run back the way I've come, straight into Ruarok's arms.

I catch my breath at the thought of him. I can't let myself be distracted now, and he is my worst distraction.

Placing one foot in front of the other, I carry on.

Ahead, there is finally a change in the darkness. I'm unsure what it is at first—it's not full light, but a loosening of the black around me, so it no longer feels so oppressive.

A crackle and snap—a noise I recognize—filters through to my ears. Then I see the flicker of light. A fire is burning.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I don't know how anyone could have a fire this deep in the hillside, but as I walk closer, I see I'm not mistaken. The bright light after the sudden darkness has hidden the person seated behind the fire, but as my eyes grow used to the change in illumination, I can make them out.

"Come closer," the Mage says from where they're seated on a carved wooden chair on the other side of the fire.

I haven't spoken a word, and I'm sure I've been treading near silently, yet they must have heard me.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I know everything, Princess Taelyn."

Their knowledge of my name catches my breath. "How did you?"

"I know everything," they repeat.

Now I'm closer, I'm able to make out their features. The Mage is hideously ugly. In the center of their face is a flattened nose, the nostrils wide and flared, so they appear as though they're just holes in their skull. The lips are pale and cracked, their teeth an array of yellowed tombstones.

But those aren't even the features that capture my attention. The Mage is completely blind. Where their eyes used to be, now thick black stitches close their lids.

Their voice is cracked and creaky. “You’re wondering what happened to my sight?”

“No, I—” My instinct is not to be rude, but the Mage cuts me off.

“I can see more now that I removed my eyes.”

My stomach does a sickening flip at the thought. They removed their own eyes? By the gods, who does that?

Are they completely insane? Is that what centuries of living alone in this cave does to a person? I think of Ruarok. Would he have ended like this creature after centuries if I hadn’t found him when I did?

It occurs to me that the rot actually worked in Ruarok’s favor. If the king hadn’t been killed, his magic may never have worn off, and I would never have found him. My heart skips at the thought. How could I have just gone about living my life while he was locked up down there?

I wonder why the Mage has a fire when they can’t see anything, but then realize it must be for the warmth it offers. Do they ever leave the cave? What do they eat? I can’t imagine going for any length of time living this way, never mind a thousand years. I lift my head to try to understand where the smoke is going—we saw no sign of it outside, and a chimney at the top of the hill would surely have allowed smoke to curl into the air—but there is nothing. It just seems to vanish.

“Come closer, Princess.”

I’m not sure how it’s even possible to know everything, but if that’s true, they’ll also have the answer to the question I’ve traveled all this way to ask.

The Mage lifts their hand, the nails long and sharp, the fingers curled and bent, and

lightly runs their touch down my face, starting from my forehead, down my nose, over my lips to my chin, where they linger.

“A beauty,” they say, and then lets out a wistful sigh. “How it must feel to have such beauty.”

A part of me wants to tell them it can be a curse, especially for a woman. It’s far harder to get anyone to take you seriously. If I were six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a plain face, I’m sure fewer people would question my decisions.

“Let me touch your wings, girl. It’s been a long time since I was close to a Fae.”

Internally, I shrivel at the thought. I don’t really want their hands on me. It feels too intimate, but I can hardly refuse. It’s a small price to pay for what I’m asking.

I turn to the side and remove my cloak. My wings unfurl and spread, and I beat the air lightly, working out any stiffness from being confined for so long. The Mage reaches for me and runs their gnarled hands up and over my wings, pressing them between their palms.

“It used to be the Fae could really fly,” the Mage says, half to themselves. “Their wings would fill the skies. Now they are too big and heavy. Too much inbreeding.”

I bristle at the comment. “I am of an ancient Fae bloodline. There is no inbreeding in my family.”

They chuckle at that, but the sound is like a knife scraping on stone. “You are not, Princess. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you as much.”

They don’t sound sorry in the slightest.

My stomach lurches. “That’s not true.”

“I already told you; I know everything. Have you never wondered why your magic is so weak?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

My cheeks warm at their words. Of course I've wondered about my lack of magic. It's something I've been ashamed of my whole life. It's not as though I don't have any—I'm not sure I'd have found the key to Ruarok's cage if I didn't—but it certainly isn't as strong as either my mother's or the king's had been. I've always had something of a complex about it, worried that it somehow made me less of a Fae, but I told myself I simply hadn't grown into my magic yet, and that it would come, one day.

But now the Mage is telling me what, exactly? That I'm not full-blooded Fae? What does that mean? That my father wasn't who I'd been told? Or that my mother, or father, or perhaps both, weren't as full-blooded Fae as they'd believed?

The Mage speaks again. "When two people come together to create a child, that child gets half from its mother and half from its father. But who knows which halves. While you may look Fae on the outside, that doesn't mean it's who you are inside."

Their words are like a blow to the stomach, winding me. This isn't the news I'd come here to get.

Have I been judging Ruarok all this time on how he looks, how he's not full-blooded Fae, when, in fact, I am no different? The news has rattled me to my core. I'm grateful, at least, that no one else is here to overhear. It will be my secret to keep, if I choose.

Maybe neither my father nor mother lied about who they were, but they believed themselves to be full Fae, except they weren't. Then the part of my father that wasn't Fae somehow found its way into me, as did the part of my mother that wasn't Fae.

It's true that we've inbred with other species for thousands of years. How could we ever fully understand our bloodlines, even if we claimed to? How we've changed from those original Fae, who were tiny and light of bone, and whose wings were strong enough to allow them to fly among the clouds? They simply do not exist any longer.

Though I'm aware I'm not here to be asking these questions, I can't help myself. "If I'm not fully Fae, what am I?"

The Mage takes my hand. "Does it matter?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Maybe."

"You need to be your own person, away from the expectations of others."

"I am to be queen of Askos. How can I not focus on the expectations of others? That's all I exist for."

The Mage curls their pale, cracked lips and shakes their head. "No. You must accept who you are before you can lead anyone else. A person who is not strong within themselves cannot expect to be strong for others. And sometimes strength reveals itself in strange ways. Sometimes to be stronger, we need to accept that we are weak."

I hesitate. "I'm not sure I understand."

"You will."

Their breath is like a snake's rattle, shaking in their lungs. I do my best not to show my revulsion.

This kind of questioning is too easy to get lost in. I need to remain focused.

I inhale and start again. “The reason I’ve come here is to ask how to stop the rot from destroying the kingdom. It’s already taken my mother and the king. People have been left without their homes. It destroyed my homeland of Torremora. I can’t bear to see the same thing happening here.”

“A great query like that requires a great sacrifice.”

“I’ll do anything,” I say. “What kind of sacrifice?”

“A sacrifice of love.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“For everything that is light, there is dark. For everything that is good, there is bad.” They curl their hands into fists and press their knuckles together. “The rot is a great badness, is it not, so to fight it there must be good.”

I feel frustrated and helpless. “What kind of good? I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“I can’t tell you that. It’s personal, an individual choice. Whatever a person loves the most in the world they must also sacrifice.”

“The kingdom,” I say automatically.

But how can I sacrifice that?

Unless the Mage means a person, and I don’t even want to go there. The person I’d loved most was my mother, but she’s already gone. Then I have Skylar and Balthorne, but no, I won’t even entertain the idea.



To kill one in order to save the many?

I blink back tears at the thought.

28

RUAROK

I pace outside the entrance to the cave.

I listen hard, trying to pick up any sense of what might be happening inside, but it's like a void and Taelyn has been swallowed by it. I want to yell and shout and break things. I want to fight the other men who are standing around, waiting with me, while we let our princess face the danger.

"She's been too long," I say to Balthorne. "We should go after her."

He shakes his head. "No, she told us to wait."

"I don't give a fuck what she said," I growl. "She could be in danger."

"She's trying to save the kingdom."

"I don't give a fuck about the kingdom either. She's all that matters. The rest of it can go to hell."

I don't mean that, do I? Isn't the whole point of my plan that I ruin her and take the kingdom for myself? If she were to die inside that cave, my problem would be solved. I'd be the only heir left to rule.

There is one fatal flaw with my plan. If she doesn't find a way to save the kingdom,

there will be no kingdom to rule. That is the only reason I want her to survive. The only reason I'm barely holding back from ignoring commands and tearing into the cave to save her. It has nothing to do with the way I can't get her off my mind, or the way I've become addicted to her scent and the softness of her hair. The reason I spend every waking second trying to find a way to be in her company.

I was the person who suggested she come here. If something happens to her, it'll be my fault. The knowledge tears at my heart, making it hard for me to breathe.

Movement comes from somewhere deep in the cave, the scraping of footsteps on stone.

"Taelyn?" I call.

She emerges into the light—pale-faced and shaken, but physically unharmed. I don't think I've ever been so relieved to see someone in my entire life. Even when she opened the cage, I wasn't this happy to see her.

"Thank the gods. You're safe."

Automatically, I reach for her, wanting to hold her, and reassure both of us that she's okay, but she jerks back like I've burned her. Of course, we have an audience now, and she's not going to want me touching her in such an intimate way when others are watching, or perhaps she simply doesn't want me touching her at all.

"Did you find the Mage?" Balthorne asks.

She takes a deep, shaky breath and nods. "I did."

I butt in. "What did they say?"

“That in order to stop the rot, there needs to be a sacrifice.”

“What kind of sacrifice?” I ask for clarification. “One of blood?”

She doesn’t meet my eye. “No. They say it needs to be a sacrifice of love.”

Love? “What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

I continued to press her. “Didn’t you ask?”

She snaps her gaze to mine, fire burning in her blue eyes. “Of course, but it isn’t exactly easy to get a straight answer out of someone who’s been living in a cave for a thousand years and who cut out their own eyes so they could see better.”

She’s clearly upset, and I don’t want to push her anymore.

I soften my tone. “The good news is there is a way to stop it.”

She scoffs. “Through love. As if there is such a thing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

This doesn't sound like her. Has something else upset her, other than her encounter with the Mage? What did she see in there? What else did they tell her?

Balthorne clears his throat. "Princess, we have a long journey back to the kingdom. If we are finished here, we should turn back so we can find a suitable place to camp for the night."

She gives a curt nod and pulls her cloak around her. "We're done here."

She goes to her horse, jams one foot in the stirrup, takes hold of the saddle, and pulls herself up and over in one easy move. I admire that she's an accomplished horsewoman. She's strong and brave and beautiful. She talks about love. Is thinking these things about a person what love is? Or the way I can no longer think or care about anything other than her?

No, I don't love her. I've never loved anyone—sometimes I doubt I even loved my own father. It wasn't as though he ever gave me any reason to love him. He robbed me of my mother and had the castle staff raise me. Then he locked me inside a cage for the rest of eternity.

If that's what love does to a person, I'd prefer to have none of it.

I return to my horse as well.

I'm still convinced Taelyn's not telling us the whole truth of what happened in that cave. Perhaps it is none of my business, but I'm curious, and I hate to see her upset. I vow to find a moment alone with her before the day is out.

We turn the horses around and head back the way we've come. The mood hanging over our small group is somber, which feels wrong. Shouldn't we be celebrating? We achieved what we wanted. Perhaps the Mage's answers weren't as clear as Taelyn would have liked, but we still have time to unravel their meaning.

I want to ride beside Taelyn, to question her further, but it's clear she's not in the mood to talk. I tell myself the important thing is that she's safe, but I don't think she'd agree with me. She came here to get answers, and from what she told us, she came away with only more questions.

We ride for a couple of hours. There's still light in the sky, but the temperature is dropping, signaling night will soon be upon us. We'll need to set up camp before it's too dark to see what we're doing.

I wonder if Taelyn will allow me to slip into her tent again to keep her warm, or if she'll be guarded against me now. Maybe I shouldn't have said what I had, but I'd meant it. She does want to fuck me; she just hasn't admitted it to herself.

"This is as good a place to stop as any," Balthorne announces, bringing his horse to a halt. "The ground seems firm enough."

I glance around at the barren moorland. He's right—it is as good a place as any. Everything looks the same around here. No one has dismounted yet, though. It's as though we can't bring ourselves to accept that we have to sleep out here for another night.

My horse paws at the ground, shakes his head, and gives a low whinny. The animal's behavior is quickly picked up by the other horses.

"I don't think the horses want to camp here," I say.

Something has spooked them. They neigh and snort, and one rises to its hind legs. Another turns a full circle, against its rider's wishes, as though it's looking for something.

"What's happening?" Taelyn asks, clearly nervous.

"I don't think we're alone," Balthorne says.

"What should we do?" I ask. "Dismount and cover the princess? Or should we keep going and hope to outride whatever it might be?"

For once, the normally confident man seems unsure. He doesn't reply but scours the surrounding moorland. We still have light, and nothing is obvious, but that doesn't mean there's nothing here. These lands are filled with dark magic and monsters.

"What do you think it is?" Taelyn presses him.

He shakes his head, his lips thinning to a line. "Honestly, Princess, I have no idea."

"If we can't see it, we can't outrun it," I say. "My vote is that we dismount and prepare to fight."

We always knew coming out here was going to be dangerous. The other guards pull their horses to a halt. Staying mounted isn't safe. The animals are becoming more distressed, their ears pinned back against their skulls, the whites of their eyes showing. Several rear up and snort their distress. I don't want to see Princess Taelyn being thrown. A broken leg out here would not be a good thing.

Balthorne nods. "Agreed."

We climb off and draw our weapons, moving into a circle to protect Taelyn. I don't

have a full-length sword like the guards, but I have a large dagger, the weight of which feels good in my palm. The horses still aren't happy, and their nerves filter through to the rest of us.

Seemingly from out of nowhere, a flash of sleek black fur darts out in front of us. One of the guards lets out a scream of agony, and then he's gone, leaving only a patch of dark blood on the cold, hard ground.

"By the gods," Taelyn says under her breath.

She pulls a dagger, too, and stands with her legs apart, braced for attack. We surround her, trying to offer her protection, but what if this creature kills us all and leaves her vulnerable?



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“This isn’t how this is going to end.” I grit my teeth. “I did not survive ten years in a cage only to end up as some mutt’s dinner.”

We wait, ears straining for any sign the monster is going to return. There’s a possibility it took what it wanted—a man to fill its belly—and won’t bother to come back for more.

In the distance, something, perhaps the creature itself, lets out a long, mournful howl. The sound is picked up by another and is echoed back, the cry rolling across the moorland.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

Several of the horses break free and gallop away. Our supplies are carried in the bags attached to their saddles. If we lose all the horses, spending the night out here, or making the journey back to Askos, won’t be pleasant. That’s assuming we survive long enough for us to make it back at all.

The beast streaks back across our group, and a second man is snatched. It disrupts the circle we’ve created around Taelyn.

“Fall back in,” Balthorne yells.

The man’s screams filter across the moorland, and I don’t like to think I hear the crunch of bone.

How many more of us is it going to take?

“Fuck this!” one of the guards cries. “I’m getting out of here.”

“There’s nowhere to go!” Balthorne says, but the man is already running in terror, glancing over his shoulder at the thing he’s running from.

It must have sensed fear as, a moment later, the creature appears, bounding across the moorland, heading directly for the man. It opens its jaws wide and closes around the back of the runaway guard’s neck. A split second later, only the man’s body remains, and, headless, he falls to the ground.

Behind us, Taelyn gives a cry of horror.

Is there only one of these creatures attacking us, or is it different beasts that we’re seeing? A pack of them. If it’s only one, it isn’t killing because it’s hungry. It would have just taken one of us, if that was the case, and retreated with its meal. No, this beast—or beasts—are killing for pleasure.

If we’re dealing with a pack, then we’re all dead.

One, however, we might be able to take down.

I take a step outside the circle.

“Ruarok, what are you doing?” Taelyn cries.

I don’t respond but lower myself to a crouch, every muscle tensed, my dagger in my hand. If my instincts are right, then the creature will come for me as I have separated myself from the pack. I just have to be ready for it when it does.

I might have been ready, but it’s far faster than my eyes can take in. I feel it as a whip of wind, followed by the stench of a muddy peat bog, old blood, and death.

Then it's on top of me, standing over me. It's huge, far bigger than I am. It snarls, and spittle falls from its jaws, landing on my face. I don't even want to think about how sharp the rows of teeth that I just caught a glimpse of are.

With a roar of fury, I drive my dagger up into its throat. The blade seems pitifully small compared to the size of the creature, and I'm not sure it's even going to slow it down. It opens its jaws wide, and I'm certain it's about to tear off my head with one swift bite. I brace myself for agony, followed by death, and experience a wave of regret for all the things I didn't get to do in my life.

But then something else punches the animal's side. It lets out a roar of fury and turns its attention from me, snapping out at something to its left.

It's Balthorne. He's just stabbed the creature in the ribs.

The distraction gives me time to reach the dagger held in a cuff around my ankle, and I wriggle out from under the beast. It's hurt but far from dead, and now it's snapping at Balthorne, with Balthorne's sword protruding from its side.

With a yell of fury, I throw myself back at the creature. I raise the dagger high and bring it down, aiming directly at its red eye. The point of the blade finds its mark, and I grimace at the sensation of popping before the dagger sinks deeper, straight into the monster's brain.

It goes rigid, several spasms jerking through its body, and then falls to one side, its legs sticking out as though a bolt of electricity is running through it. I look at those claws, how huge, curved, and lethally sharp each one is. It could have gutted me in a second, and I'm incredibly lucky it didn't. No, actually, it wasn't luck. If it hadn't been for Balthorne stabbing the monster with his sword, I would be dead.

I wipe my palms on the seat of my pants and then put my hand out to him. He glances

down at it and realizes what I'm doing and places his palm in mine.

"Thank you," I tell him as we shake. "You saved my life."

He gives a subtle nod. "Of course. Your bravery may have saved all of ours, too."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

We both turn our attention to the princess. “Are you okay?” I ask her.

She’s still staring down at the creature that attacked us. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Do you think there are more of them out there?”

I glance out over the rugged landscape. “It’s certainly possible.” I hope my earlier thoughts about it possibly being one of a pack were wrong.

She visibly shivers, but I don’t think it’s from the cold.

“How many men have we lost?” Balthorne asks the surviving guards.

“Three,” one of them says. “Haron, Arnain, and Korzith.”

“Damn it.” Balthorne closes his eyes briefly.

I imagine he’s thinking of the men’s families back home, and the devastating news he’ll have to break. More families torn apart. The world is a cruel, cruel place.

“Let’s gather the horses and keep going,” Balthorne instructs. “We still need to find somewhere to camp before dusk, and we can’t stay here now.”

“We’re still camping out here?” Taelyn asks, her voice trembling. “I want to go home.”

“We don’t have any choice, Princess. It’s too dangerous to ride in the dark, and the city is still a good half day’s ride away.”

TAELYN

No matter what we do, it'll be dangerous, but I trust Balthorne's decision.

Besides, I am fatigued, and I'm not sure I have any more reserves for traveling overnight. The information about my ancestry that the Mage gave me continues to weigh heavily in my heart, as does my hopelessness at the so-called 'fix' to save the kingdom.

Men are dead, and it was my decision to come out here. I'm returning with what feels like nothing, and they've sacrificed their lives, and for what? I feel like going back to the Mage and grabbing them by their bony shoulders and shaking another answer out of them.

We gather our horses. Several have run off into the moorland, taking our supplies with them. I hate the thought of leaving them out there to fend for themselves, but it's too dangerous to try to catch them.

We can't take the remains of any of the men with us either. While I'd prefer to give them a proper burial, no one wants to ride along with the headless remains of one of the men slung across the back of their horse. The other men's bodies are gone, probably meals for whatever other monsters live in this forsaken place.

We ride a short distance in silence, until we're far enough away to no longer be able to see the remains of the monster, or smell it, either. I'm terrified to still be out here, but what can we do?

We erect the tents, with mine in the center of what remains of the men. I don't want to be alone, but I also don't want to give voice to my fears. Both Balthorne and

Ruarok have agreed to take turns on watch, and the guards will also join them, but after witnessing what just one of those beasts is capable of, I fear it's not enough.

I think back to the previous night, how all I'd really been worried about was the cold. The sheer depth of my naivety hits me again. I don't want to doubt myself, but after the news the Mage delivered, how can I not? I'm not the person I'd believed myself to be.

I'm exhausted, but I know I won't sleep. I doubt anyone else will either. We're all just lying awake, our ears straining for the presence of any of the beast's friends, and waiting for daylight to arrive.

The moment the first few faint shafts of sunlight breach the horizon, we pack up once more and get back on the road.

We've made it through the night, and that's what I need to be thankful for, but my heart is still heavy.

By the afternoon, we return to the city. We're welcomed like warriors returning from war, with the streets lined with people cheering and waving flags containing the dragonfly emblem with its deadly sting in the tail.

I feel like a failure. I don't deserve their cheers. Men are dead, and what have I achieved? Nothing. We're no closer to learning how to stop the rot than we were before we left.

Still, I turn over the Mage's words.

A love sacrifice? Who could that be? I loved my mother and even the king, but they are both dead. I love Skylar, and Balthorne, too, in a completely platonic way, but I will never sacrifice them. Not even for the kingdom.

I gaze across the city, toward my home. The castle looks strange at the top of the hill, and for a split second, I forget why. Then it hits me that the tower is no longer standing. I'd forgotten, if only for a moment.

We reach the castle and ride into the courtyard. I'm weary from the long journey and from staying awake all night. Every muscle in my body aches from either lying on the cold, hard ground, or from spending hours on horseback. I probably haven't eaten enough either, but I hadn't been able to find much of an appetite. Every time the possibility of food was raised, I pictured that man with his head torn off, and my stomach turned over.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I dismount, give my horse a couple of strokes, and thank her for her service, and then hand the reins over to the stable hand. The mare has earned her rest, too. I think of the poor horses we left out there and close my eyes to stop myself bursting into tears in front of everyone. I know they're only animals, but I hate to think of them lost and afraid. I want to tell myself they'll find their own way back to the borders of Askos and reach safety, but they've most likely become meals for those creatures by now.

Balthorne stops beside me. "You should rest now, Princess. You must be tired."

I shake my head. "There's something I need to do."

"If you mean informing the dead men's families of their deaths, that is my job. I am head of the guards. They were my men."

It wasn't what I meant, but I place my hand on his arm. "Thank you, Balthorne. Make sure their families know we will take care of them."

He ducks his head. "Of course."

Balthorne walks away, and Ruarok takes his place. I've noticed the two men seem more comfortable in each other's company since they slayed that monster together. Isn't it strange, the things men bond over?

"Do you want company?" he asks.

"No. I need to be alone."

So much time alone. Is that what I'm destined to be?

I walk through the grounds of the castle, around the side of the building, to where the King's Tower once stood. Now there is only a gaping hole, and I can't even see the bottom. My mother's body is somewhere down there, and it breaks my heart that I won't be able to give her a proper burial. I'd asked Ruarok to help organize a service, but since he's been with us in the wildlands these last few days, I assume no progress has been made.

When will I break the news to my people that the mission failed? Not because we were unable to find the Mage, but because I'm unable to do what was requested of me?

I force myself to the edge of the hole, getting as close as possible to where the ground gives way and falls into darkness. Earth at the sides shifts, dirt dribbling into the nothingness, and stones and rocks bouncing hollowly into the void. Though I'm at ground-level, the drop only inches from my feet makes me feel as though I'm standing at a great height, and the acrophobia sends tiny pinpricks of pain up through the soles of my feet and leaves me weak at the knees.

The feeling I'm getting here is similar to the one I experience when I'm with Ruarok. It's dangerous and I know I shouldn't be here, but I still can't seem to bring myself to step away. It would be so easy, just to take those couple of steps forward, and plummet down to join my mother and the king. All the sadness and fear and crushing responsibility would be over.

Who would even miss me? I'm sure Skylar and Balthorne would, but they'd get on with their lives, and Ruarok would probably be delighted if he was left to take on the kingdom.

It occurs to me that I could allow my stepbrother to take over. What's stopping me

from doing exactly that? Would he be a better ruler?

The problem with my stepbrother is that all Ruarok thinks about is Ruarok. The decisions he'd make wouldn't be made because it would benefit the kingdom and the people who live here, but because they benefit him. He showed that much when he protested me giving out the castle's coin to those in need. Maybe he'd made out like he was objecting because he was worried about the people, but I could tell the truth from his first reaction.

Deep down, I'm always going to be concerned there was a word of truth in the reason the king had Ruarok locked away for all that time. Had he really been considering killing me and my mother back then? The thought both hurts and angers me. I don't want to believe it, but why else would the king go to such extreme lengths to rid himself of his only son?

The ground shifts again, and I let out a little cry and stumble back. My wings vibrate and lift me into the air. I wish they were strong enough to allow me to fly properly. Then I could fly down into the pit and perhaps learn where it ends, and what happened to my mother and the king.

But my wings aren't strong enough for anything more than a few seconds of flight, and my feet touch solid ground again.

I don't want to die. I know that now. Life may not be easy, but it's all we have. Besides, my people need me. I might not be who I'd thought I was, and I might be a Fae princess with barely any magic, but I need to trust my heart and stay strong.

It takes a good twenty-four hours before I'm feeling anything like myself again. I slept for most of that time, and, when I wasn't sleeping, I remained in bed, lost in thought, just staring at the walls.

I need to pull myself out of this fugue, but I'm struggling. Ruarok hasn't even been to see me, and I don't know how I feel about that either. I rejected him—as I should—but there's definitely a part of me that wishes things were different. I could always request his presence—demand it, even—but that's not the same. I want him to come to me because he wants to.

A light knock comes at my door.

“Enter,” I call from my bed, my heart hitching, hoping maybe my thoughts of my stepbrother have conjured his presence.

I try not to let my disappointment show when Skylar enters, carrying a tray.

“I've brought you food,” she says, “and you're going to get up and eat it, then you're going to take a shower and get dressed, and I'm going to work all those knots out of your hair.”

I roll over in bed, so my back is toward her. “I'm still tired.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“And I don’t care. We’re all tired. You’re going to be the queen of Askos, and queens don’t lie around in bed all day feeling sorry for themselves. Now, get up.”

I groan and pull the blankets over my head.

Skylar yanks them back down and claps, once. “Now. Don’t make me say it again.”

“Since when did you become such a matron?” I complain.

“Since you started acting like a child. Now, get out of bed before I have to fill up a bucket of cold water to tip over you.”

I sit up, my mouth agape. “You wouldn’t dare.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “Try me.”

I let out a low growl and swing my legs out of bed. “Fine.”

She’s right. I do need to face the world, however much I don’t want to. I’m battling the sense of overwhelm. The weight of grief from the loss of my mother, combined with fear for our future, and shame about what I am, and for the failure of the journey into the wildlands all feels like too much.

Despite this, I take a shower and wash my hair. Still wrapped in a towel, I sit at my dressing table and allow Skylar to brush out the tangle of knots. There are pieces of twig and grass tangled into the strands that even washing it didn’t get out.

“Have you seen Prince Ruarok?” I ask, not meeting her eye in the mirror.

“No, I haven’t. Like you, he’s been keeping himself to himself since you returned.” She gives my hair a couple more brushes, and then, feigning innocence, asks, “Did something happen between the two of you while you were out in the wildlands?”

An image of him under the blankets in the tent, his fingers inside me, while he speaks utter filth into my ear, bursts into my head. My cheeks flood with heat, and I can see how pink I am in the mirror. Even my throat and chest have become mottled.

Skylar presses her lips together and raises her eyebrows. “Should I take that reaction as a yes?”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

I’m surprised she doesn’t smack me with the hairbrush.

“You are telling fibs!” she exclaims. “It might as well be written across your forehead.”

I cover my face with my hands. “By the gods, is it that obvious?”

She lets out a shriek. “Tell me everything.”

“I didn’t have sex with him, if that’s what you’re asking. It was cold in the tent, and we got...close...but that’s all. And you mustn’t breathe a word of this to anyone, okay? He’s my stepbrother, and you know what his reputation is like. It doesn’t look good for me as a future queen.”

She blinks at me. “Are you even still related with the king and queen dead? I don’t know how these things work.”

Truthfully, I'm not completely sure either.

"It doesn't matter," I say finally. "People will still judge me. They'll probably smack Ruarok on the back and congratulate him, but you know it's not the same for women, especially someone with my high standing. I need for people to take me seriously."

She meets my eyes in the mirror. "They do."

"For the moment, perhaps, but I'm young and female, and I already have that going against me. Imagine if people hear that I'm also...intimate...with my stepbrother. It'll be all I'm known for."

"I understand. I won't breathe a word. I promise."

I offer her a smile. "I trust you, Skylar."

My thoughts linger on my stepbrother. He hasn't hidden the fact that he wants me, but I can't help but question his motives.

Is what we seem to have together real, or is it just because of what he is? Am I simply connecting with the part of him that's Incubus? Does he have this effect on everyone—woman or man? Perhaps that's what makes him so dangerous. Was it part of the reason he was locked in the cage in the first place?

Skylar finishes with my hair. There is much to do. I shouldn't have been lying around in bed, but I'd needed to recuperate. I need to see what progress has been made with the service to honor my mother and the king, and then there is my own ceremony. I'm not yet crowned, and the kingdom needs a ruler.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Am I the right person for that job? I'd never questioned it before—I'd always assumed I would simply step into those very big shoes—but now I'm not the only available heir to the throne. Would Ruarok make a better king than I would queen? I've always told myself he wouldn't, but now I wonder...or is this just my own weakness talking? My fear. Does a part of me want to hand this responsibility over to him so I won't have to deal with it?

I try to think back to how Ruarok acted about me being the one to take the throne. On occasion, he's behaved as though he's fully behind me, but then on others he's made it clear that he expected to be the one seated in his father's place. Maybe he's right—he is the blood heir, after all—but then he was also locked away by his own father, so the king clearly had no intention of making Ruarok his heir.

It's all so confusing.

I leave my chambers and head toward the king's offices—no, my offices now. I need to start thinking of them that way.

In the corridor, Balthorne stops me. He seems troubled, his features taut with worry. "Princess, it's good to see you up and about."

The way he speaks is as though I've been ill. Is that what people have been saying about me? I feel my hold on the kingdom loosening. The certainty I've had that I've been doing the right thing is starting to erode. I no longer feel confident in my decisions.

"Word is getting around that the journey to see the Mage was unsuccessful,"



Balthorne says.

His words jolt through me, and the heat of shame rises through my body.

“It wasn’t unsuccessful,” I blurt. “We just haven’t worked out how to use the information yet.”

“Even so, people are worried. There’s been another part of the city affected by the rot. Not as big as the first time, but several homes have fallen into the ground, taking the people who live inside with it.”

This isn’t news I wanted to hear. “How many are dead?”

“Around fifty, I believe, though that number might yet go up.”

I cover my face with my hands, distraught at the news. “By the gods.”

“You need to make a decision, Princess. What are we going to do?”

I blink back tears, frustrated by my own lack of knowledge. I’d give anything for my mother and the king to be here, someone to take this weight of responsibility off my shoulders.

“I don’t know, Balthorne. I honestly don’t know.”

31

RUAROK

A knock comes at my door.

I frown and glance in that direction. I don't get many visitors.

"Enter," I call.

The door opens, and a man steps through, shutting the door carefully behind him.

It's Cirrus Planetree. The man has never liked me, and the feeling is mutual. He was the man who led my arrest all those years ago and forced me into that cage.

"What do you want, Cirrus?"

He stands with his hands behind his back, his head lowered submissively.

"I'm concerned for the future of the kingdom."

I cock an eyebrow. "Aren't we all?"

"Princess Taelyn has been lying around in bed ever since you returned from seeing the Mage, and she's brought back no information that is of any use. We need someone who is going to be decisive during these hardtimes, someone who is willing to make difficult decisions, and I'm worried that she is not that person."

"You are?" I wonder where he's going with this.

He nods. "She's made mistakes that have gotten people killed. She gave money to those poor people in the city, and they were murdered because of it. She took guards out into the wildlands, and they never made it home again, and for what? Some mumbo-jumbo about love sacrifices from a crazy old Mage?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I bite my tongue, not telling him that visiting the Mage had been my idea.

I wonder how much this new opinion of Taelyn is down to her replacing Cirrus with Balthorne. Cirrus used to be head of the King's Guard, but now he's what? There is no King's Guard, and Taelyn has made it clear that she wants Balthorne in that role. Cirrus has found himself without a place in court and is clearly worried about his future.

Is it possible I have an ally here? I never would have thought it of Cirrus Planetree, but it seems that way.

"The princess has been through a lot," I say, not wanting to appear disloyal. "She's lost her mother and the king, and been put into a position she's unused to. It's understandable that she'd find all of this challenging at first."

"So, you support Princess Taelyn in taking the throne?"

The frustrating thing about speaking to Cirrus is that he knows exactly who I am. While I might be able to pull the wool over the eyes of so many others, making myself out to be the loyal, subservient stepbrother. But it isn't going to work. Cirrus isn't so easily fooled.

"I support whatever is right for the kingdom," I reply.

"If we don't act soon, there may be no kingdom. Another part of the city has been swallowed by the rot, and all the while, the princess lounges around in her chambers, doing nothing. The people are beginning to talk, Prince Ruarok. They're getting

nervous. They need to be able to look for leadership in these times, and I'm afraid that is something we're sorely lacking."

I study his expression. I don't trust Cirrus, but I can't deny that he's offering me something I've wanted my entire life.

"Do you really believe her incapable of running a kingdom?" I ask.

"The princess is responsible for that poor mother and her child being murdered in the street. She makes rash choices. She's too emotional to be able to rule."

I feel myself swell with power.

I am the true ruler of this kingdom. I'm the one who shares the Loftborn bloodline. She might be pure Fae, but she still doesn't have a right to the throne.

"No matter what we think," I say thoughtfully, "at the end of the day, it'll be the people who decide who they want to crown. They love Princess Taelyn. They will want it to be her."

"They have loved her," he agrees, "but people are whispering in the streets. They're not stupid. They can see what she's done. It'll only take a few more mistakes before they turn their backs on her."

I press my finger to my lips. "Mistakes that will tarnish her reputation?"

His pale blue eyes glitter like ice. "Exactly."

Does he know about the tension between Taelyn and me? I can't help but wonder. He's one of these men whose seems to have little ears everywhere, gathering whatever knowledge he can to use against people. Is it possible someone overheard us together

and reported back to Cirrus? Perhaps when we'd been in the tent? It isn't as though canvas is a great defense against noise.

I remind myself that this is exactly what I wanted. But, if that's the case, why do I feel the knot of unease, like a sickness, deep within my chest? I do my best to ignore it and allow a slow smile to curl my lips.

"I think that can be arranged."

"Good. I have people who can help to spread the word that Askos would be far better off with a king than a queen. When the time for the coronation comes around, the citizens of Askos will be cheering your name, not hers."

"And I assume you will regain your position as head of the King's Guard," I suggest, making sure my suspicions are correct.

He offers me a sly smile and ducks in a bow. "Only if that should please his majesty."

32

TAELYN

As I'd suspected, nothing has been put in place for a service for the king and queen. I'd asked Ruarok to take charge of it, but instead he'd followed me out into the wildlands. Irritation at his lack of cooperation rises inside me. Must I do everything myself?

But then I remember I'm not the only one who has been going through a hard time. Ruarok has spent the past ten years locked inside a cage, only to be released to this madness. It can't be easy for him either.

A knock comes at the office door, and it opens.

My stepbrother enters, and I draw a breath at the sight of him. I hadn't realized quite how desperate I'd been to see him. His presence is commanding. His height, combined with that shock of dark hair and his almost black eyes, make him stand out among the generally fair and petite Fae. I know he would prefer to look more like his father had, but I think he's beautiful.

"Ruarok," I say. "I wondered where you'd gotten to."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“There’s been work that needed to be done,” he says. “Our city is not in a good place.”

I experience a pang of guilt. So, Ruarok has been doing my job while I’ve been lying around in bed feeling sorry for myself. I’d been mentally berating him for not doing as I’d asked, but the people of Askos have had far bigger things to worry about than a service for those already dead.

“Did you hear we lost another part of the city to the rot?” he continues. “Fifty people or more are dead. Where is it going to end? With the loss of the whole kingdom?”

I remember my homeland, the utter devastation the rot caused. Toward the end, there was no safe place, and we’d had no choice but to leave. I understand that Ruarok doesn’t have any love for his father, but, without the king, my mother and I would have been left without a home.

My voice is barely a whisper. “Honestly, I don’t know. I wish the Mage had given me something more substantial to go on.”

He glances away. “About that. I need to speak to you about something. It’s important.”

A chill condenses in my veins. “Oh?”

“It’s been brought to my attention that people are concerned you’re not the right person to take the throne.”

His words hit me right in the heart. “Who has been saying such things?”

“Just little birds.”

Isn't it exactly what I've been thinking myself? It's as though all my worries have just been voiced back at me.

I force myself to keep my chin up and shoulders back. “And what do you think about that, Prince Ruarok?”

“It's not really my place to say what I think.”

His dark eyes glitter. I don't believe him.

“What if I command you, as your future queen?”

He twists his lips. “We are equals. Until the coronation happens, you can't command me to do anything.”

“Very well. What if I ask as your stepsister?”

“Do you really want to know?”

I bristle. “I wouldn't have asked if I didn't.”

He takes a breath. “Truthfully, I do not believe you are the rightful heir to the throne. That person is me.”

I grit my teeth and try to remain calm. “But you'd been banished.”

“I'm here now.”



I shouldn't have released him from the cage.

Guilt spears me at the selfishness of my thought. If I hadn't freed him, he'd have spent even longer inside that godforsaken cage. How much longer? Years? Centuries? Did I really have it in me to leave someone to that much suffering, no matter what they might have done?

"Are you saying you plan to take the throne from me?"

One corner of his lips turns in a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I can't take something that was never truly yours, Princess."

I can't look at him. I turn from him and go to the window, to gaze down at the ruined city. "At the end of the day, it'll be the people of Askos who crown their ruler. They will decide who they want."

Before now, I had no doubt that it would be me. I've been here for the last ten years, walking among the people, have sat at the king's and queen's side as they've sat on their thrones. The citizens of Askos have watched me become a woman, and I've never done anything wrong in their eyes. Until now, that is.

Ruarok, however, has spent the past ten years locked away by his own father. He already had a terrible reputation, and everyone knew the king hated him. What reason would the people of Askos have for wanting Ruarok as their king? Surely, that would only happen if he were the only option available.

I realize what this means. If he were to be rid of me, then there would be no one standing in the way of him taking the throne.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Am I being naïve? Too trusting?

I spin back to face him. “Do you want rid of me, Ruarok? Would you do what the king accused you of all those years ago?”

He stares at me. “Rid of you? No, quite the opposite.” He moves closer. “I thought I’d made my feelings clear on that matter. Just because I want to sit on the throne doesn’t mean I can’t also want you.”

A part of me wants to give in. I can let him take the throne, and I will retire to my books.

He reaches out and runs the back of his finger down my jaw. “This isn’t personal, Princess. You need to know that. I think very highly of you. Very highly indeed.”

“I honestly have no idea what you think of me.”

It’s the truth. Being around him is like having the rug constantly pulled out from under my feet. One moment, I think he’s on my side and wants only what’s best for me and the kingdom, and the next I get a flash of the Ruarok I suspect existed when his father had him locked away for ten years.

His touch lingers. My body reacts to him, my nipples crinkling and tightening, the heat condensing between my thighs.

He stares into my eyes as he speaks. “I think you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. I think you’re fearless and loving, and that the kingdom would be lucky to

have you at its helm. But that still doesn't mean you are the rightful heir."

With every word, he leans in closer. He studies my face, searching for the effect his speech has on me.

I want more of what we did in the tent. He was wrong about me being fearless. I'm weak and frightened, and right now it's easier to give in to him than keep fighting. I want the distraction from the internal torment I've been going through ever since the King's Tower fell.

"You're the one who survived with your sanity still intact after spending ten years in that cage," I say. "I don't know how you did it. How you didn't completely lose your mind."

"I felt as though I had, on occasion," he admits. "But I thought of you, Taelyn. You were there with me, even if you didn't realize it. This connection we have, it isn't just physical. I believe our souls spoke to one another. That's why I dreamed so vividly about us being together before we'd even met. Some things are meant to be. You and me, together, we're destined."

"Destined?" I echo.

His lips part, and my gaze darts down to his teeth and tongue. He's going to kiss me, and I'm powerless to resist.

"I'll take care of you, Taelyn. I'll look after you. Isn't that what you want? To have someone to support you?"

His lips press to mine, and I moan into his mouth. My resolve vanishes, and I fold against him, my arms wrapping around his neck as our kiss intensifies. He jams himself against me, making his hardness known. He does want me. Isn't being desired

better than being loathed? I need that right now. I need someone on my side.

Our tongues tangle. We're like two teenagers, stealing forbidden kisses and touches. Our breathing grows harder and faster, and we claw at each other's clothing, wanting to be rid of them.

It's as though I've been caught in the rapids of a river, and no matter how much I might want to fight against it, I have to let myself be carried along.

He moves me backward, until my thighs bump with a dark velvet chaise longue. His hand supports my lower spine as he reclines me onto it.

"Lie back, Taelyn. Let me do what I described to you. Let me kiss you down there."

I blink in surprise. I know exactly what he's talking about. It's been on my mind ever since he described it to me.

"You want to do that?" I check.

"More than anything. I want you to come all over my tongue."

The thought embarrasses me, but it also excites me.

"I'm so hard for you, Taelyn. You're all I've ever wanted. We're something special, you and I. Made for each other."

I want that so badly, to have someone in my life who is just for me. Someone who loves me and desires me and worships the ground I walk on. I want someone who will listen to my problems and help ease my pain. I have Skylar and Balthorne, but it's not the same. Though I love them like family, they'll never fully understand what it's like to be me. In Ruarok, I have an equal.

He pulls down the front of my dress, exposing my breasts. My nipples tighten further in the cool air.

He stares at me. “By the gods, you’re beautiful.”

I go to cover myself, but he knocks my hands away. He covers my breasts with his fingers, pulling and tweaking my nipples into long points, and then he ducks down and sucks one into his mouth, and then moves to the other. I lace my fingers in his thick, dark hair, my head tilted back against the chaise longue, my lips parted as he suckles me. His hand pushes between my thighs, and he maneuvers around my underwear to touch me. I’m wet down there, and that embarrasses me, too. Will I ever feel comfortable doing this kind of thing? Perhaps if I’d started younger, it would have come more naturally to me, but I’m still a virgin at my age.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I press my hips up into his hand, my breast into his mouth. I want him to consume me.

“Let me hear you, Princess. Tell me how good this feels to you.”

“It feels so good,” I murmur.

“Louder. What do you want me to do to you? Say it, and I’ll do it. I want to hear those filthy words come out of your mouth.”

“I-I can’t.”

“Yes, you can, Taelyn. Tell me what you want me to do.”

I force the words from my lips. “I want you to kiss me down there. I want your tongue on my pussy.”

“Good girl,” he praises.

A rush of warmth and pleasure goes through me.

“Now I’ll give you what you want,” he says.

He tears my underwear to one side, ripping the material. He parts my thighs, spreading my legs wide. I try to squeeze my thighs shut, but he holds them open.

“No, let me look. I want to see every part of you.”

He touches me, drawing one finger between my pussy lips, parting me. He makes contact with my clit, and sparks of pleasure jolt through me.

“Such a beautiful pussy,” he murmurs. “Tight and untouched. I’m going to kiss you there now, Princess.”

He shifts his position slightly, leaning in. His face brushes the inside of my thighs, and then his mouth covers me, hot and wet. As Fae, we are naturally hairless down there. I let out a cry of both pleasure and surprise. I hadn’t expected it to feel that way. I don’t know what I had expected, but nothing like this. It’s as though I’ve been blessed by all who are living.

By giving in to him, aren’t I only making him stronger? Is he feeding from me down there, drinking my energy? But by the gods, it feels good.

He flicks his tongue over my clit, sending little lightning bolts of bliss through me. I cry out and rock my hips, pressing into him, wanting more. He dips his tongue inside me.

“Sweet as a juicy peach,” he murmurs.

Is this what other couples are doing, every night, in secret in their beds? Their mouths on each other, kissing and licking and sucking? I picture myself taking his cock into my mouth. Could I do that?

The thought excites me.

“I want to suck you,” I gasp. “I want to taste you, too.”

He lifts his face to observe me. “Suck my what?”

“Your cock,” I say, feeling breathless and out of control. I’m not used to any of this. “I want to suck your cock.”

He ducks his head again. His tongue, hot and firm, circles my clit, and I cry out, my back bowing from the chaise longue.

He pauses long enough to speak. “Come for me, and then I’ll let you suck my cock.”

Ruarok slides two fingers inside me and goes back to sucking on my clit. The pleasure is intense. What if someone were to walk in here and catch us? I’m trying to be quiet, but it’s not easy.

Is this what it would be like with an ordinary man, or is he increasing the pleasure for me because he is part Incubus? I have no experience of what this would be like with anyone else, so nothing to compare it to.

Pleasure courses through me. My climax is close; I feel it rising, rising. My wings vibrate on either side of me, creating humming through the air. A part of me wants to fight it, worried I’ll lose control, that something bad or embarrassing will happen, but Ruarok shows no sign of letting up. My body is his now, and I’m like a puppet on his string.

I think I’m going to lose my mind.

Then it breaks, sweeping over me. I squeeze my eyes shut, my toes curling. Stars flash behind my eyelids, and my body bucks and shudders, over and over. I had no idea it could be like this, the utter unleashing of everything feminine about me.



## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

My climax releases its grip, and I float back to earth, utterly spent and a little shellshocked.

“Wow,” I murmur.

Ruarok lifts his head and wipes his mouth.

“Good girl. Now you get what you wanted.”

I’m breathing hard, my heart racing. I can’t believe how good that felt. Will it feel the same for him? I want to give him that.

He climbs onto the chaise longue with me, straddling my hips. His pants are undone, and his huge erection protrudes from the gap. I can’t take my eyes off it. It’s almost as thick as my wrist, and the length is ridged with veins. The head is smooth and darker in color, and a bead of fluid leaks from the slit.

“Scoot down,” he instructs. “Bring your mouth in line with my hips.”

I do as he says, my heart beating faster at the anticipation of what’s about to happen. I can hardly believe I’m going to do this, but I’ve got no intention of telling him no.

He takes my chin between his fingers. “Open those pretty lips.”

I part them, staring up at him.

“I’m going to come in your mouth,” he tells me, “and you’re going to swallow me

down.”

Like his eager servant, I nod. He edges his hips closer, and the smooth head of his cock presses to my mouth. I open wider, sliding out my tongue, allowing him in. He tastes salty, and I inhale the masculine musk of him.

He’s rock hard, but the skin is silky soft, and I marvel at the contrast.

I hold him at the base and use my tongue on him, swirling around the tip, and then sinking lower. I’m careful not to grate my teeth against him—though, for all I know, he might like that.

I pause for a moment and take my mouth from his cock. “Am I doing it right?”

He gives a brisk nod and grabs my hair. “Yes, don’t stop.”

He rams himself back into my mouth, deeper this time. I gag slightly, and he groans. “Ah, fuck.”

I slide my mouth up and down his hard length, but he’s moving, too. I no longer feel like I’m the one in control. His grip on my hair holds me in place, and he fucks my mouth, deeper and deeper. I can feel him at the back of my throat, and I’m sure I’ll be bruised tomorrow. Tears fill my eyes, and strange noises emit from my mouth. He seems angry, almost, as though the slamming of his hips equates to his fist.

“I’m coming,” he groans. “Fuck, oh, yes, fuck.”

I’m shocked by the sheer volume of cum filling my mouth and spilling down my throat. He comes again and again, spurts hitting the back of my throat, coating my tongue. I feel like I’m drowning in it, choking.

In a panicked rush, I push him off me and sit up, wiping my mouth. I'm aware that my breasts are still on show, and my underwear is torn, and now I have cum dribbling down my chin. What kind of princess am I? I'm to be the ruler of Askos, and I've allowed myself to be defiled like this?

Ruarok gives a slow smile. "How was that for you, Princess?"

I wrap my wings around my body, hiding myself, and yank down my skirts. "I-I'm not sure."

"You didn't enjoy it?"

"It was a bit...much."

He reaches out to smooth my hair from my face, but I jerk away. What have I done? Did anyone hear us? Any number of servants could have walked by and seen us. What if they're talking now? Gossip flies around the castle quicker than a dragonfly.

I glance at the door. There's a sliver of light shining between the crack of the door and the frame. My heart lurches. Hadn't Ruarok shut the door properly when he'd entered? I should have checked.

Had someone been watching while he fisted my hair and fucked my mouth, my bare breasts bouncing, my skirts still rucked up around my waist and my pussy still swollen and wet and exposed?

The thought is utterly mortifying.

He seems troubled. "I've upset you. I'm sorry. I forgot who I was with. It's been a long time since I've felt the touch of another person. I got carried away."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I take two things from this. The first is that he didn't go off and fuck some chambermaid the night after he came into my room, and the second is that he is far more experienced at these things than I am.

“You haven't been with anyone else since I released you from the cage?” I check.

He shakes his head. “No. You are the only one I want.”

“But your magic. Don't you need to...fuck?”

The word sounds coarse coming from my lips, and I cringe.

“It doesn't need to be full sex, no. It's the arousal I drink from. The person's sexual energy.”

“Did you take from me?” I want to know.

“A little, but you're different.”

“In what way?”

His dark eyes narrow, a line appearing between his eyebrows. “I'm not sure. I noticed the first time we met that you don't have the same kind of aura as others. It's as though I can stay strong just from being with you. I don't need to drink in the same way.”

I'm still curious. “What does it feel like when you do—for the other person, I mean?”

“It can leave the other person drained.”

“I don’t feel drained when I’m with you.”

He shrugs. “Like I said, you’re different. Being with you is different.”

I wonder if this has anything to do with what the Mage told me. Could it be that I have an element of Succubus in my blood, too? I want to tell Ruarok, but something tells me to keep my mouth shut. One thing I have on my side right now is that people believe I’m full-blooded Fae, and it should only be right to have a full-blooded Fae on the throne.

If people learn the truth, maybe they’ll decide Ruarok is a better choice to be king.

33

TAELYN

I make a promise to myself that whatever this is between Ruarok and me, it has to end. I need to be focused on Askos, and the rot, and not distracted by carnal pleasures with my stepbrother.

For the next twenty-four hours, I do exactly that. I send help to those most recently affected by the rot, offering food and shelter this time, instead of money, and I start to put in place the service for us to say goodbye to the king and queen. I do my best to avoid Ruarok, and, if we ever do end up in the same room, I make sure we are never alone.

I know this won’t be enough to prevent rumors from flying, but it’s the best I can do. That doesn’t stop me recalling all the details when I’m alone, however, pressing my thighs together as the memory causes little aftershocks of pleasure to ripple through

me.

I'm in the office, speaking with the cleric about the service, when the ex-head of the King's Guard comes to find me.

"I need to speak to you in private, Princess Taelyn," Cirrus says.

I nod to the cleric. "You can leave us."

We wait until the older man has left the room, and then Cirrus steps closer.

His expression is grave. "I hate to be the one to raise this with you, Princess Taelyn, but people are talking."

I grit my teeth. "So? Let them talk."

"They are concerned about some of the choices you are making."

"What kind of choices?"

"The journey out into the wildlands that got guards killed, and the money that was given to the victims of the rot."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“I’m also saddened by the deaths of those innocent people. I never meant for that to happen.”

He clears his throat and glances at the ground. “There are also rumors that you have been partaking in certain...activities...that are not fitting for an unmarried princess.”

Anger floods through me and I gesture toward the window. “The city is falling into the ground. I’m sure there are far more important things to worry about than what I choose to do in my private life.”

He straightens his shoulders and lifts his chin. “When you are a queen, there is no such thing as a private life. You belong to the kingdom.”

“I’m not queen yet.”

“Then perhaps you should think of taking a husband.”

His words shock me further. Is he talking about Ruarok? He can’t be. We are stepsiblings. What would people say?

Cirrus continues. “I have word that the kingdom of Imnor is sending a messenger to you from King Robertus.”

I know of the kingdom of Imnor, which is at least five days’ ride west of Askos. And I’ve also heard of King Robertus.

“Why would King Robertus send a messenger here?”

“Word has spread about how we are the latest kingdom to be affected by the rot. Perhaps he plans to offer his help.”

“His help?” I ask. “In what way?”

“I’m unsure, exactly, Princess, but I suggest we listen to whatever he offers. The gods know we are in great need of help.”

I nod. “Yes, of course I will listen.”

But even as I say the words, unease churns inside me. I’m losing control of the kingdom. I know I am. It breaks my heart, but I don’t know how to steady myself again.

If only I hadn’t released Ruarok from the cage, life would be simpler. He’s the one who’s been messing with my head. My heart and body, too. No one would be talking if he wasn’t around. It would just be accepted that I am to be the new queen, no questions asked.

However much I might want to, I can’t go back in time, and I can’t put Ruarok back in his cage...

Can I?

34

RUAROK

Today is the service to say goodbye to the king and queen, and I am in torment.

Whispers are echoing all down the corridors, in the kitchens, through the courtyard



and stables.

No one is mentioning me, of course. That I like to fuck is of no surprise to anyone. The princess, however...now, that is a scandal. I've changed the way people look at her.

The sky is gray and low, and a cold wind whips around us. The clouds skitter around the tallest parts of the castle, swallowing the flags that snap in the air. It's as though the weather understands the mood of those gathered here today and is doing its best to mirror it.

The service is taking place at the edge of the pit where the King's Tower once stood. A platform has been erected, which I'm now stood upon, together with the cleric, and several other prominent members of the king's court.

Princess Taelyn stands on the opposite side, doing her best not to make eye contact with me. She's been avoiding me, too, and that is worse than anything. Does she know I left the door open deliberately? That I made her say words I knew would shock anyone who overheard them? I did my best to make her appear as un-queen-like as possible, and it worked.

I've betrayed her trust.

And I feel sick at myself.

By the gods, she looks beautiful, though. Her long, silvery-white hair is braided and knotted on top of her head. Her pale complexion is striking against the black of her dress.

Everyone has dressed in black. Citizens of Askos have gathered as far as the eye can see, a winding trail of them leading from the castle, down into the city. They won't be

able to hear every word spoken, but they will pass it from person to person.

## Page 70

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I try to focus on the prize. All I needed was to create doubt in the minds of the people of Askos as to who they should want their ruler to be. Cirrus is doing the rest, making sure his little mice scratch around in all the right places. Soon, the people of Askos will demand that I take the throne, and I will get what I've wanted all along.

I keep telling myself that. The throne is what is important. Women come and go. The throne is forever.

So why do I feel so wretched?

Is it because she means more to me than any woman I've ever met?

Feelings aren't something I'm used to. For the most part, all I've ever felt is anger and lust, but this is something different. I'm worried about her, and not just because of the effect that might have on me. I actually care about her.

I might even love her.

I close my eyes and scrub my hand over my face. No, I can't let this happen. All I've ever wanted was to sit in my father's seat. How can that happen if I've stolen it from Taelyn?

Or was she the one to steal it from me in the first place?

This whole thing is so fucking confusing.

The only thing I'm not confused about is wanting her. By the gods, she'd tasted

incredible and now I want the main course. I wish I hadn't been so rough with her, but I'd lost control. I'm half Incubus and I've spent the last ten years locked up alone without being able to even touch myself. Is it any wonder the first time I'm with a woman, I forget myself? Perhaps I should have found a couple of whores to fuck before I'd gone anywhere near Taelyn so I'd have been able to control myself, but I simply hadn't wanted anyone but her.

Now I may never have her.

The cleric stands and goes to the front of the platform. A hush descends on the crowd.

Cirrus has tried to convince me to say a few words, but how can I? I have nothing good to say about the king, and I didn't even know the queen, except for in a few passing moments ten years ago. He's concerned that allowing Taelyn to speak alone will not look good for me and will put her in a better light with the people, but I can't bring myself to do it.

The cleric begins to speak.

I only catch parts of what he says, but it's enough for me to get the gist of it. "Beloved king and queen...Lost before their time...Leave behind the queen's daughter, Princess Taelyn, and the king's son, Prince Ruarok. Much missed...National mourning..."

And then he finishes and steps down

Taelyn stands and takes his place. "I understand it is a lot to ask for us to expect you to mourn your king and queen, when so many of you are mourning the loss of loved ones as well. You have lost your homes, and your way of life is threatened." She places her hand to her chest, right above her heart. "I understand fully what you're going through because I've been in exactly the same place myself. If it were not for

the kindness of the king, my mother, the queen, and I would have died ten years ago when our homeland was taken by the rot.”

The mention of the kindness of the king makes me want to snarl with fury. It had nothing to do with kindness. He’d wanted to bed a beautiful woman and have a full-blooded Fae princess to take the place of his bastard son.

Now is not the time to give voice to my thoughts, no matter how much I might want to.

There are no bodies to be lowered into the ground. Instead, a flock of white doves are released into the air, symbolizing the release of their spirits.

Their wings beat the air in a flurry of movement. A couple of white feathers are caught in the wind and whisked away. I stand with my neck craned upward, watching the birds move seemingly as one, flying in a circle and then into the distance.

One thought lingers in my mind.

Good riddance.

35

TAELYN

I am in the Great Hall when Cirrus Planetree comes to find me.

“Princess, you have a visitor,” he says.

I immediately know who it is. “The messenger?”

Cirrus nods. “That’s right. Shall I show him through?”

“Give me a moment.”

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I straighten my dress and take a seat on the king's throne. A part of me feels it's wrong to be sitting here, but I need people to see me as their queen. I have to get used to it.

A number of guards usher a young man into the hall. Cirrus and several other members of court follow them in. I'd been alone only moments before, but now the Great Hall is filled with people. I have an audience.

The messenger seems nervous and drops to one knee in front of me. "Princess Taelyn."

"Rise," I tell him. "Explain why you are here."

He gets to his feet. "I'm a messenger from KingRobertus of Imnor. He heard of your plight and wishes to offer his help."

I smile and nod at the messenger. "I'm touched that word has traveled so far so quickly, and someone from another kingdom has reached out. How does he wish to help?"

"He heard that your family is dead and knows you have been left alone. He wishes to offer his hand."

I pretend I haven't heard correctly. "I'm sorry? He's offered his hand to whom?"

"His hand in marriage. To you, of course, Princess Taelyn."

Though Cirrus has prepared me that this might have been coming, I still find my stomach churning.

“He expects me to leave Askos and travel to him to marry?”

The messenger ducks his head. “Yes, Princess.”

“And who would be left to rule Askos?”

The messenger suddenly realized his offer hasn’t gone down the way he’d intended. “Well, Askos is being taken by the rot, Princess, so I believe he’s not expecting for there to be any need for anyone to rule Askos in the future.”

I close my eyes briefly. “I see.”

He clears his throat. “In return for your hand, the king offers safe passage to ten thousand of your people to Innor where they will be allowed to start new lives for themselves.”

I say nothing else, and the silence reverberates around the Great Hall. People become uneasy, shifting from foot to foot and sending awkward glances at one another, waiting for my response.

“Thank King Robertus for his kind and generous offer, but please return to Innor and inform him that Askos is not over yet and will still require a ruler for many years to come.”

The young male Fae appears uncertain what he’s supposed to do next. Perhaps he’s wondering if he should try to convince me rather than go back to his king and tell him I refused the offer. Instead, he ducks his head, spins on his heel, and leaves the Great Hall.



The people standing in front of me turn to each other, murmuring their thoughts. I can sense the disapproval in the air, and my stomach flips. Am I not wanted here? I've been noticing the way people have been whispering behind their hands about me. Do they think I won't make a good ruler for Askos and that I'm better marrying myself off to some king in a far-off land? Maybe I've made mistakes, but it hurts that the people would want rid of me so easily.

Members of the court gradually filter from the room, leaving me with Cirrus Planetree.

He approaches the throne. "May I speak freely, Princess?"

"Of course."

"I hate to have to say it, but I fear you are making a grave mistake, Princess Taelyn."

I tense, my hackles immediately going up. "By not abandoning my people?"

"But you are abandoning them. That offer of safety for ten thousand people—almost half the city's population—isn't something that can just be tossed away like it's nothing."

I'm aware I'm being defensive, but I can't help it. "I'm not tossing it away."

"Really? Because that's exactly what it sounded like to me and to everyone else in court."

His accusation steals my breath. I blink back tears. He's right. All I thought about was ruling the kingdom and not wanting to leave Askos...not wanting to leave Ruarok either.

“There are some people I want you to meet,” Cirrus says.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

He beckons to one of his guardsmen who ushers in three children. They range from about fourteen or fifteen down to a little boy who I'd put at about three years old. The boy clutches the leg of the older teenage girl and plugs his mouth with his thumb.

I dart my gaze from the group of children back to Cirrus. I can already tell I'm not going to like this.

"Who are they?"

"The remaining family of the mother and baby who were killed in the street because you gave them that money. Don't you think they deserve a chance? Or do you want to see them swallowed by the rot, or murdered like their mother and sibling?"

Tears blur my vision. "No, of course I don't."

The weight in my chest is like nothing I've ever experienced before. It's utter helplessness. Everything I've tried to do has failed. I've risked our lives to find the Mage, and even that hasn't helped.

With a flick of his hand, he sends the young family away again and turns his attention back to me.

"Then what's your plan, Princess Taelyn? How are you going to save them, otherwise?"

The question hangs over me.

I don't have any other answer.

Cirrus ducks his head and scuffs his feet on the floor. "Considering the rumors that are currently circulating about you and your stepbrother, I feel this offer of marriage may be the only one you'll get. King Robertus is too far away to have heard such whispers."

My head snaps up. "What rumors? How I conduct my private life has nothing to do with anyone else."

"A princess belongs to the kingdom, not to herself. You understand that, surely?"

Bitterness floods through me. "But not a prince. He can do whatever he wants."

"Don't concern yourself with Prince Ruarok," Cirrus says. "He's the one who started these rumors about you."

I lurch back as though he's slapped me. "He what?"

"Prince Ruarok deliberately left the door to the king's office open that day so people would hear the two of you together. It's been his plan all along to ruin your reputation among the citizens of Askos, so he is the one who is crowned. I'm afraid it's worked, too. The people would rather you accept this offer of marriage so you give them somewhere safe to go, if needed, and they will crown your stepbrother instead."

It's as though the air has been stolen from my lungs. Did Ruarok really do that? I remember seeing the door hadn't been shut properly and how he'd encouraged me to tell him what I wanted. That bastard had manipulated me, and now he'd gotten what he wanted.

Cirrus still hasn't finished, but now he seems embarrassed, not meeting my eye. "The

king will expect you to be...whole, however, Princess. He's aware you're unmarried and would expect you to still be...intact."

My face flares with heat. "I understand. I assure you I am still that way."

"That is good to know. Should I get the guards to make sure the messenger hasn't left already?"

What else can I do? I'm unwanted here, betrayed, and my people need to know they have a place of safety.

"Yes," I say. "Stop him from leaving. He can tell the king I'll accept his offer."

36

RUAROK

Taelyn is still avoiding me.

I should be focusing on taking the crown now that the service to say goodbye to the king and queen is out of the way, but instead, all I'm thinking about is her. The uneasiness in my stomach refuses to leave me. What if I've made a terrible mistake?

Cirrus comes to find me in my chambers. Having this man as my ally should surely be enough of a reason to make me uneasy. He played his part in locking me inside a cage for the whole of eternity, and now he wants to place me on the throne? He acts only in his own interests...but haven't I done exactly the same? Perhaps we are more similar than I'd like.

"I have excellent news," Cirrus announces.

I eye him warily. “What is it?”

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

“Princess Taelyn has agreed to take the hand of King Robertus of Imnor.”

My blood runs cold. “She’s what?”

“She will leave in the morning, and she’ll take that fucking Balthorne with her.”

I don’t even care about Balthorne anymore. “Why would she do that?”

“King Robertus has offered a safe passage to the people of Askos, should they need it. If she marries him, that is.”

Of course. An offer to help the people is the only thing that would have convinced Taelyn to say yes.

“Will they need it?” I ask.

“Perhaps, though it might not be for many years.”

I consider this. What is a kingdom to rule without any subjects? Am I to be the king of a ruined kingdom?

But that isn’t even the thing that bothers me the most.

“It’s excellent news,” Cirrus continues. “Now the subjects will have no choice but to crown you king.”

I don’t want it, I suddenly realize. Not without Taelyn by my side. It’s as though the

news has hollowed out my chest. If she leaves, she'll take my heart with her.

I push past him. "I need to speak to her. Where is she?"

"I'm not sure. In her chambers, I expect. She'll be wanting to pack."

I break into a run, ignoring the concerned looks of the servants as I race past. I know she's not leaving until the morning, but it feels like every second I'm not with her, convincing her to stay, is a second wasted.

Why should she even listen to me, after what I did? What do I even have to offer her, except myself?

But my thoughts are conflicting. Even while I believe I'm not good enough for her, I'm also filled with raging hot jealousy.

How can she even think about allowing another man to take her? Do I mean nothing to her?

I reach her chambers and burst through the door without even knocking.

Taelyn is leaning over a bag on her bed, folding clothes into it. Her lady's maid is helping her. They both lift their heads in surprise at my sudden entry. I draw to a halt, my mouth opening, but nothing comes out. Now I'm here, I'm unsure what I'm going to say.

How can I ever find the right words that will convince her to stay?



Ruarok sees we're not alone and draws to a halt.

He doesn't say anything, just stands there, staring at me. His dark eyes are filled with fury.

I don't want to see him, and yet, at the same time, I do. I want him to tell me Cirrus was wrong, and he'd never do anything to hurt me. I want him to take me in his arms and tell me everything will be okay, that he'll fix this.

Still, he says nothing.

I glanced over at my lady's maid. "Please, leave us, Skylar."

Her gaze darts between me and Ruarok's furious expression. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll be fine."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Ruarok won't hurt me—not physically, anyway.

Skylar nods and leaves, carefully closing the door behind her.

I know why he's here. "You've heard the news, then?"

"You're leaving?" he snarls.

"Yes. I've promised my hand in marriage to KingRoburtus of Innor. He has agreed to allow ten thousand of our people into his kingdom to find a safe haven in exchange for my hand. We can prioritize younger families so they have a future."

Ruarok shakes his head. "King Robertus is old. Like four hundred years old. And he's huge, too. Last I heard, his belly looks like he's nine months pregnant. He'll want to lie with you, Taelyn. You understand that, don't you? That's what marriage entails."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not completely naïve, Ruarok. You've helped me with that. I know what it means to be married."

"And you're happy with that? The idea of some four-hundred-year-old whale humping you? What if he puts a baby in your belly? Then you'll have to carry his child as well."

"A child is always a blessing."

"No!" He slams his fist against the wall. "I won't have it."

I grit my teeth. “It’s not your decision to make.”

“Curse the gods. I don’t give a fuck if it’s not my decision to make. I’ll travel to Innor and murder the son of a bitch before I let him put his filthy hands on you. I swear it, Taelyn. I’ll not rest a single moment for the rest of my life if I know you’ve become his whore.”

“His wife,” I snap. “And the queen. And I’d leave what remains of Askos to you to rule. You should be happy, Ruarok. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted? Isn’t that what you’ve been fighting for, ever since I released you from the cage? Isn’t it the reason you made sure the door wasn’t shut properly the day you shoved your cock down my throat? You wanted to make sure people didn’t want me to rule here. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you?” he chokes. “How could I thank you for spending the rest of your life torturing me? You think I would get a moment’s peace? You think I wouldn’t constantly have my head filled with the image of you with that man? You think it wouldn’t make me want to tear my heart out of my chest every single second of the day? I swear to the gods, I’d rather spend eternity locked back inside that cage than think of even a moment where someone else is touching you. You’re mine, Taelyn. How can you not see that? You’ve been mine from the very first moment I asked you to dance ten years ago.”

Tears fill my eyes. “No. You don’t get to say that to me. Not now there is no choice. Don’t you see? I have to do this to save our people. I don’t have a future here anymore. You saw to that.”

He grabs me and yanks me against him. “I don’t give a fuck about our people. I’ll stand back and watch every one of them plummet into the depths of the earth before I let you marry someone else.”

I force myself to lift my chin, though my heart is breaking. “And that is why you’ll never make a good king. Because being a good leader means making sacrifices for your people, no matter the hurt it might do to you personally.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” he growls. “All I want is you.”

He grabs my face, and then he’s kissing me, hard, his tongue forcing its way into my mouth. His hands are all over me, tearing the clothes from my body.

“Ruarok, stop,” I gasp.

“No, you’re mine. Your mouth is mine, your pussy is mine, your ass is mine. I’ll die before I let another man touch you that way.”

He tears down the front of my dress, baring my breasts. He cups one roughly in his hand, pinching the nipple so hard I cry out. He’s lit that desire inside me, though, that need I only ever seem to experience when I’m with him. My pussy tingles and throbs, needing to feel him there.

It’s just sex, I remind myself. That’s all he wants. All he cares about. If I said I was in love with another man, but nothing was ever going to happen between us physically, he probably wouldn’t even care.

Sex is his sustenance. His lifeforce. His everything.

I refuse to believe he can feel anything deeper.

I need to be inside her. The thought of King Robertus being the one to take her virginity is too much.

I can't let her go to him a virgin.

I can't let her go to him at all.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

Ducking my head to her bare breasts, I suck one nipple into my mouth, laving it with my tongue, and then go to the other. I push my hand beneath her skirt and shove her underwear to the side. She's searing hot, and, as I'd predicted, wet for me, too. She's so soft and swollen, I groan with pleasure at the feel of her. How I long to ram my cock inside her, to experience the walls of her pussy gripping me tight. I want to devour her. To become a part of her. To lose myself in her completely.

The soft noises she makes are the sexiest thing I've ever heard. It's as though she's embarrassed by them and is doing her best to be quiet. It's unsurprising after I made sure everyone heard her the last time.

I push one finger inside her, but already that feels tight. How's she going to handle my cock? I'll split her in two.

I use my body to push her onto the bed, so I land between her legs. I reach down to free my cock and go back to kissing her. We're both breathing hard, hungry for one another. How can she even consider marrying someone else when we have this together?

Adding a second finger to her pussy, I stretch her wide. She's dripping around me, and from the way she's arching her pelvis against my hand, fucking my fingers, I can tell she's already close.

I take hold of the base of my cock and position it at her pussy. The feel of her heat against the head of my cock is incredible. I could die here and be happy. I give an experimental nudge of my hips, wanting to be inside her.

Taelyn stiffens. “No, I can’t. King Robertus expects me to be a virgin.”

I grind my teeth. Fucking King Robertus.

“He’ll never know.”

I rub the head over her clit then down over her entrance. Her hips roll against me, and I know she wants more.

“I’ll know,” she whimpers.

“Just get a feel for it,” I encourage. “I won’t go all the way in, I promise. Just let me know how it feels to have your pussy around my cock. Give me that, at least, to remember you by.”

Her pussy is so perfect, wet and pink and swollen. I rub my head between her puffy lips.

“Ruarok, we can’t...”

“It’s okay, Princess. Just feel me at your entrance. It’ll be so good.”

She stares down between us, where our bodies are so close to being joined.

I nudge my hips forward, just a tiny amount, and the head of my cock vanishes inside her.

She goes rigid. “Ruarok, no!”

“Hush...”

I reach down and touch her clit, and her body bucks involuntarily, and my cock enters her just a fraction deeper.

“By the gods,” she cries. “No, no, please...”

I press in a little more, and her pussy clamps around me so tightly. She’s lost in this heady drug of arousal, her heels digging into my ass. I dip my head and place my lips to her neck, drinking her in, feeling myself grow stronger.

I know I’ve got her. The hunger in her eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about fucking you from the very moment I saw you. That pretty mouth. That virgin pussy. That tight asshole. I want to ruin you with my cock.”

She groans again and arches her hips. I sink in another inch.

“You’re such a good girl,” I murmur. “You’re taking me so well. Only another few inches to go.”

“Oh, fuck. You need to stop now.”

I grab her hands and pin them above her head. “I don’t think I can, Taelyn. I’m sorry. You’re doing so well, though, Princess. Look at how deep you’re taking me.”

“Ruarok, please, you can’t.”

“Shh, it’s okay. We’re so perfect together. We were meant to be, you and I. I know you can sense it, too.”



## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I meet resistance but keep going.

She cries out. “It hurts.”

“My princess. My beautiful princess. You feel incredible.”

“The king,” she groans.

The mention of the word fills me with a possessive anger and jealousy. I ram harder inside her, right down to the hilt. I’m fucking her now, taking her completely.

“I’m going to fill you with my cum. If anyone is going to put a baby in your belly, it’ll be me. You can go to King Robertus with my child growing inside you. Then a part of you will always be with me.”

“Oh, fuck, Ruarok. By the gods.”

She grinds on my cock, as though she wants more. I reach between us again, my fingers finding her clit. I know this is all it’ll take to tip her over the edge. I rub the engorged nub, even while I slide my cock in and out of her.

Her back arches and her pussy clamps down. Her inner muscles pulse around me, and she shudders and bucks. Her nails claw into my back; her eyes squeeze shut. I give her a moment then fuck her hard and fast. Within a few seconds, my own orgasm travels through my body, condensing in my balls and exploding from my cock. I spurt inside her, jamming myself deep as I give myself to her.

We both go slack, breathing heavily, our hearts thumping. I let out a breath and roll to one side.

Taelyn props herself on one elbow and slaps my shoulder. “Fuck you, Ruarok. Fuck you. You promised you wouldn’t go any further, and you did.”

“It’s what I do, remember? It’s who I am. I’m able to sense when someone wants it.”

“Not with me. Never with me. I am my own person, and I get to make my own choices. About everything, but especially about that. You can’t use your magic on me like you do with others.”

“I’ve never used magic on you. I’ve never needed to.”

I don’t understand her anger. I’ve never had someone angry with me after we’ve had sex. Normally, they’re as though they’re in a trance or a dream, almost high from the fucking and orgasm I’ve given them. Taelyn seems the opposite, though. She’s fully aware and furious as hell.

I’m hurt. This should have been something special between us. How can she act as though she didn’t want it when I know she did? I’m an Incubus. It’s part of my senses to know when a woman wants to fuck.

“You’re lying to yourself,” I tell her. “You did want me.”

“Get out and leave me alone. I mean it. I’ll be glad when I’m gone from Askos and far away from you.”

How the fuck did that go wrong so quickly?

TAELYN

I leave this morning.

Silent tears fall down my cheeks. I turn in a slow circle, observing how bare my room already looks, though I've only packed a few cases and some personal items.

I have to travel light.

I'll take a couple of horses with me, including my gray mare, Arsher, but it's a long journey, and I don't want to put them under undue strain because they're carrying packs laden with stupid trinkets. None of it means anything. It's just stuff. Now that I've agreed to marry King Robertus, nothing seems to matter anymore. I'm not sure I even feel the sadness at leaving the castle or the city. I take my misery and stuff it deep inside me. It's better if I feel nothing.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Skylar asks as she helps me dress. "Isn't King Robertus a lot older than you?"

I nod. "And King Themaris Loftborn was a lot older than my mother, but she still married him, and, for the most part, they lived a happy life together. Sometimes, as a ruler, it's important to do what's right for the kingdom instead of what you want as an individual."

"But what about?—"

She cuts herself off, but I know what she'd been about to say. What about Prince Ruarok?

My heart aches, but I try not to feel it. He's not important. What we shared together was just a few moments of sex. It was nothing important. He is nothing important to

me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I feel as though I've been transported back ten years, to when we left my homeland of Torremora to come to Askos, only now I'm the person marrying a king she doesn't even know, and I don't have my mother by my side.

I have to believe King Robertus won't know I'm no longer a virgin. That I allowed my stepbrother to take that from me. It's said that good horsewomen are often thought to not be virgins, so that is the excuse I'm sticking to. There's a possibility he'll just throw me out, though, and refuse to allow any people from Askos into his kingdom, no matter how bad the rot gets here.

I haven't even spoken to Ruarok since, though he's tried to on many occasions. Every time I think of him—which is every minute, it feels like—my heart breaks anew. He'd been so angry at the idea of me marrying King Robertus, but what else am I supposed to do? It's not as though he's asked me to marry him, and, even if he did, it wouldn't save the people of Askos.

I have no choice but to go through with this and pray I don't end up homeless and alone.

Skylar picks up my final case. "I'll take this down to the courtyard and wait for you there."

She can tell I need a minute to myself.

She's about to leave, but I stop her again. "Skylar, thank you for coming with me. Both you and Balthorne. I don't know what I'd do without you." I'm aware they're giving up their homes for me.

“As long as Balthorne is coming, too, we’ll both be okay.” She gives a small smile. “He feels the same way.”

“Of course Balthorne is—” What she means hits me. “Oh, wow, that’s fantastic. I’m so happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Princess.” She gives a small curtsy and carries my bag out of the door.

I turn away, letting out a deep sigh and taking my final look at this place. I will miss it so much. Maybe it wasn’t my home to start with, but it’s become that way. I’d never wanted to leave.

“Taelyn?”

Ruarok’s deep voice comes from the direction of the door, and I spin to face him. He’s so beautiful, my heart aches for him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I can’t let you leave.”

I try not to let my voice wobble and fail. “You don’t have any choice in the matter.”

He takes a step closer. “If I’d done things differently, would you still be leaving?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“What if I promise to change?”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “Your promises mean nothing. How am I supposed to trust you now?”

“You have to.” He seems desperate. “I love you.”

His words catch my breath.

“Do you? I thought the only thing you loved was the idea of sitting on the king’s throne.”

His gaze flicks away. “Maybe, at first.” He brings it back to mine, locking our eyes. “That was before I got to know you. Before I learned how brave and strong and stubborn you are. Before I fell in love with you.”

A painful tightness constricts my throat. “How am I supposed to believe that? You planned to ruin my reputation. To make people hate me, all by being with you.”

“I’m sorry. I’d say it a million times if it would make you believe me. You know how I feel about you. The way I look at you. How we are together. I can’t fake that.”

“How you feel doesn’t matter. How I feel doesn’t matter. I’m not doing this for you or me. I’m doing it for the kingdom, for the people who live here, so they’ll have somewhere safe to go. One day, maybe soon, maybe years in the future, the rot will completely consume Askos, and then those people will need to find refuge, just like my mother and I found refuge here all those years ago. How can I deny them that? To take something from them that I was lucky enough to have?”

“Taelyn...” It’s as though he’s run out of words.

I can’t look at him anymore. My heart is threatening to break. “It’s too late. I have to go.”

I move to get past him, but he drops to his knees in front of me.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

He takes my hand, presses his forehead against the backs of my fingers, and closes his eyes.

“Giving you up goes against everything I want. I’d rather be locked away again than living my life knowing you belong to another man. But if you believe it’s the right thing to do, then I’ll support you. I’ll give you up, Taelyn, even though I love you with every fiber of my being, and I’ll never be happy again. I won’t fight anymore.”

A single tear slides down his pale cheek. He lifts his gaze back to me, his dark eyes glistening with pain.

I fall to the floor, facing him, my heart breaking.

A rumble comes from somewhere outside. We both straighten and turn our heads toward the sound. A split second later, it gets louder, rolling toward us in a wave. The floor beneath us vibrates and then becomes a shudder. Books and candles fall from shelves. Mortar rains from the ceiling. The candelabra swings wildly.

Oh, God, no. It’s happening again. The rot is going to take us. I prepare for the castle to collapse around our ears. Ruarok pulls me into his arms, shielding me with his body. We huddle together, clinging to one another. Is this the end? All that heartache and pain for nothing. I grieve for us, and for the future that had never been our destiny.

It's like living that terrible night I lost my mother all over again. The noise is deafening; dust falls around us. The ground shifts and shakes.



And, just as I believe we're all about to die, everything goes silent again.

We stay as we are for a moment, still clinging to one another, waiting for it to start again. When nothing else happens, Ruarok releases me, and slowly we unfurl, like ferns emerging from a winter slumber.

Cautiously, I look around. There doesn't appear to be any structural damage to the room, but that doesn't mean there isn't damage elsewhere. I remember seeing the missing tower that day, how it had felt like someone punched my heart straight out the other side of my chest. I brace myself for what might have happened this time, for the loss we're bound to have suffered.

"Are you all right?" Ruarok asks as he helps me to my feet.

I cough from the dust and nod. "I think so."

I'm still trembling, but my heart rate is starting to slow. I feel weak and shaky, and I don't want to look, but I know I have to. He keeps hold of my hand and we walk to the window together, to look out at the rest of the castle and the sprawling city below.

Ruarok draws to a halt, and I stop beside him.

"Taelyn, look."

My jaw drops. "I-I?—"

For once in my life, I'm lost for words. Where the giant hole had once been where the King's Tower had stood, there is now ground. It's not perfect, by any means—it's dirt and rubble—but it's solid.

"How is that possible?" he says.

“I have no idea.”

I release his hand and turn to run.

“Where are you going?” he calls after me.

“To take a closer look.”

Until I see for myself what I think might have happened, I’m not going to believe it. Ruarok, with his much longer legs, quickly catches up to me, and we hurry through the castle, down to the ground, and outside to where the King’s Tower once stood.

We come to a halt in the same spot where I’d stood only days before, peering down into the darkness, my toes on the edge of that deadly fall. Only now it isn’t a hole I’m on the edge of, but what appears to be solid ground.

I lift my foot, but Ruarok’s hand on my arm stops me.

“No, let me go first.”

He takes a tentative step out on the ground, the same place that had been a gaping void into nothingness only an hour earlier. My heart feels as though it’s in my throat, and I reach for him, planning to grab him should the ground start to sink.

“It’s solid,” he says and takes a couple of experimental jumps to prove his point.

I gasp and place my hand to my chest. “By the gods, Ruarok, don’t do that.”

“It’s fine, Taelyn. It’s no different than where you’re currently standing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

I walk forward to join him and understand what he means.

“But this is impossible,” I say, turning a slow circle. “Where did it all come from? It’s as though the ground has just closed itself in.”

“I think that’s exactly what’s happened.”

I shake my head in wonder. “It’s magic.”

In a perfect world, perhaps the magic could have raised the tower again, could have put my mother and the king safely back in their bed. But this is not a perfect world, and we still have to deal with their loss. I don’t dare hope for what this might mean.

Ruarok captures my hand then uses his other hand to point out across the city.

“Look.”

In the quadrant where the rot had hit the worst, and had felled so many buildings, the hole it had left has also sealed over.

“I don’t understand what’s happened,” Ruarok says. “It’s as though the rot has healed itself.”

“I think that’s exactly what has happened.” I remember the Mage’s words. “A love sacrifice. That’s what the Mage said would stop the rot. Something good against evil. Light against dark.” I turn to face him and take his other hand. “That’s what you did, Ruarok, when you said you’d give me up. You sacrificed your love for me for the

greater good, and it worked. For the first time in your life, you made a decision that went against what you wanted. You were selfless.”

This whole time, I’d believed I was the one who needed to make the sacrifice, but the Mage never actually said that. I’d simply made the assumption that it was supposed to be me. Instead, Ruarok made the sacrifice, unwittingly, without expectation of anything in return, only because he felt it was the right thing to do.

But he shakes his head. “No, I would never sacrifice my love for you. Even though I’d agreed to let you go, it didn’t mean I wouldn’t still love you. I’ll always love you, Taelyn, no matter where we are or what we’re doing. That will never die.”

“But don’t you see?” I urge him. “If the rot is gone, I don’t need to marry King Robertus to allow the movement of our people. They can stay here, and so can I.”

He stares at me as though he doesn’t believe what I’m saying. “You’re not marrying him?”

I laugh, but it comes out as a happy sob. “No, of course I’m not.”

He scoops me up and kisses me hard. “Then you’re marrying me instead.”

“We’re stepbrother and sister,” I say, though I’m grinning.

“So? Who makes the laws in this land? We do. We’ll have the biggest wedding Highdrift has ever seen.”

We start plans for both the wedding and the coronation almost immediately.

I imagine King Robertus won't be too happy when he learns that not only have I rejected his offer, but that I'm also marrying my stepbrother, but I'm beyond caring. We will have the coronation before the wedding, so I can be crowned queen, and Ruarok will be my king consort.

We will rule Askos together.

There was one thing we needed to deal with before we could marry. Cirrus Planetree manipulated us—or at least tried to—and we could not keep him as part of our guard. We confronted him together, and he cried like a baby and begged for his life. Perhaps he deserved to die, but I didn't want to start our new reign by hanging someone in the city square. I wanted to rule with love and compassion, not fear. Instead, he was banished, to live out the rest of his life in the Wildlands. Perhaps some might say it's a fate worse than death, but at least we gave him a chance.

We're in the king's—our—offices, looking at seating plans and selecting menus. I should be on top of the world, and I am, in many ways, but there is one thing still eating at me.

"You're quiet," Ruarok remarks.

"Am I?"

"You have something on your mind."

I press my lips together and nod. I have to tell him. I can't keep it in any longer.

"I'm not who I make out to be," I admit, tears welling in my eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

He frowns, his dark eyebrows drawing together. “What do you mean?”

“In the cave, with the Mage, she told me the truth about who I am. I’ve always been conscious that I don’t have the same kind of magic as many pure blood Fae, that it simply didn’t come easily to me, and the Mage explained why.”

“Why?” he gently prompts.

“I’m not full-blooded Fae. I might look like I am, but inside I’m not. I don’t know where the mixed bloodlines come from—I assume my father’s side, since my mother’s magic was always strong—but in the end it doesn’t matter. I’m not who I make out to be.”

He stares at me, and the corners of his mouth twitch.

I glare at him. “Are you...laughing at me?”

He clamps his hand to his mouth then spins away so I can’t see his face. “I’m sorry, Taelyn, I don’t mean to laugh when this is clearly important to you, but what exactly do you expect me to say?” He turns back to face me. “I mean, have you looked at me?”

Of course I’ve looked at him. I’ve imprinted his face to memory. I’ve brought it up in the darkest moments of night when I’m alone. I’ve held it in my heart during the times I’ve felt I couldn’t go on.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” I say eventually.

“Do you know what I’d give to look like you, or Balthorne, or my father? My whole life, I’ve lived with this face.” He gestures to his features. “With this color hair, with my lack of wings, my appearance has always made me stand out. I’ve asked myself over and over if my father would have actually loved me if only I’d looked like him instead of my mother. It’s blighted my entire existence.”

“But you’re beautiful,” I admit. “The first moment I saw you, I was entranced. Yes, you look different, but that’s not a bad thing. You wouldn’t be you if you were any other way.”

He takes my hand and holds it to his chest. “And you wouldn’t be you, either, if you didn’t have whatever it is inside you that makes you who you are. Who cares if you’re not full Fae? I don’t. It’s who you are as a person that’s important.”

“What if people find out?”

I’m ashamed, and I hate that I’m ashamed. I wish I had Ruarok’s confidence.

“People should find out. You should be honest about your struggles. Your people will admire you all the more for it.”

“Admire me because I’m not perfect?” I don’t understand why that would be.

“You’ll be perfect because of your flaws, not in spite of them.”

A Fae queen with no magic. Am I really the right person to rule the kingdom?

“You left the borders of Askos and went out into the wildlands to find a Mage to try to save the kingdom. Who gives a damn how much magic you do or don’t have, or what kind of blood runs through your veins? Your bravery and willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of your subjects is what matters. If people can’t see

that, then more fool, them.”

He speaks so passionately, as though my opinion of myself angers him, that I can’t help but smile. Maybe he’s right. Have I judged Ruarok badly because he’s not full Fae? Maybe I have, a little. Perhaps it’s time to admit my own prejudices, though before now I would have insisted I had none. I’ve been lying to myself all this time. Not having full Fae blood shouldn’t immediately mean I’m a lesser person.

“Thank you, Ruarok. You’re right.”

He smiles and pulls me into him. “It’s good to hear you say that. You should say it more often.”

Playfully, I bat my hand against his chest. “That would involve you needing to be right more often, which, frankly, I can’t see happening.”

“Would I be right if I said I think I should kiss you?”

My cheeks warm, my lips tingling. “I can’t tell you what you’re thinking. Only you know that.”

“In that case, I’m definitely right.”

He catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and places his lips to mine. I melt against him with a soft sigh and open my mouth to him, inviting in his tongue.

His strong body is like heaven pressed to mine. His erection is already hard between us. I reach down and cover him with my palm, squeezing my fingers around him.

“Fuck, Taelyn. You’re killing me. I want to be inside you.”



“Now?”

“Right now.”

He spins me around and bends me over the desk. He yanks up my skirts so they fall over my hips then tears away my underwear. I yelp in surprise but do nothing to stop him. I hear the clink of his buckle and glance over my shoulder to discover he’s already undone his pants and his cock is in his hand. By the gods, he’s so big. He gives himself a couple of strokes, but instead of trying to takeme right away, he drops to his knees so his face is level with my pussy. Then his hot mouth is on me, covering my pussy. He sucks on me then uses his tongue to spear me. I cry out and push back on him, wanting more.

He pulls away, and I move to straighten, but his hand on the small of my back pushes my torso flat against the desk again.

“No, stay right where you are. I want to look at you.”

“Ruarok, no!” I protest.

“So pretty,” he murmurs, caressing me.

He rubs my wetness and his saliva all over me. His fingers travel up, to my other hole, and he touches me there as well.

I let out a squeal of surprise. “Not there.”

“Doesn’t it feel good?”

He carries on, circling the tight hole, and then pushing a finger inside. I buck as though I've been electrocuted. He puts his mouth on my pussy, going back to licking and sucking, and all the while he fingers my ass. I can't believe this is happening, but yes, it feels incredible. I try to find something to hold on to but, instead, knock a notebook and pot of pens off the desk. They hit the floor with a clatter. I hope no one will hear and come to investigate. They'll find their future queen bent over a desk with her stepbrother licking her pussy and fingering her ass.

My orgasm builds until I think I'm going to lose my mind. It's too much, too intense. I creep closer and closer to the edge, but just as I'm about to come, he pulls away from me.

"No," I cry. "What are you doing?"

"Teasing you," is his reply.

He shifts position, bringing himself back up to standing. His finger is still embedded in me, but my pussy is bereft.

"Give it to me," I tell him. "I want you inside me."

"Your wish is my command, my queen."

He places the head of his cock at my pussy and, oh-so-slowly, slides inside me. I groan in pleasure. I still don't know how I've lived for so many years without experiencing this. He continues to finger my ass while he fucks me, and the sensation makes my head spin.

Gradually, we build our momentum until he's fucking me hard and fast, slamming into me with everything he has. I give myself over to the feel of him, thinking I will never again understand how I've lived without this for so long. It's like being taken to

the stars.

And then he stops, pulling away from me, leaving me empty.

“What are you doing?” I cry and look over my shoulder at him.

I’m so confused.

He smiles at me and languidly runs his hand up and down his cock. Frustratingly, my climax slips away from me.

“I want to hear you beg,” he says.

“Beg for what?”

“Beg me to fuck you. Beg me to bring you to climax.”

Normally, I’d have been far too self-conscious to do such a thing, and it’s not as though I care about anyone hearing us anymore, but right now all I want is for him to make me come.

“Please, Ruarok, I need you. I want you inside me again.”

He toys with himself. “No, be filthier, let those dirty words roll off your tongue.”

I’m not used to speaking like this, but I try it. “Fuck me, Ruarok. Give me your cock.”

“That’s better.” He caresses one of my ass cheeks. “See, you can be a good girl for me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

He moves in closer, and the head of his cock presses against my pussy again. I give a sigh of pleasure and push back on him. I groan as he edges deeper, stretching me around him.

“Oh, fuck,” I whimper. “Oh, the gods. That feels so good.”

He grabs my hair into a ponytail and uses it to yank my head back. My throat is exposed, my spine curved, and he fucks me hard again.

He takes me to the edge, and right at the moment of climax, he pulls away.

“No, no, please don’t.”

This is torture.

“What are you doing to me?” I sob.

“When I let you come, it’ll be the best you’ve ever had.”

He drives deep back into my pussy. I swear my eyes actually roll with pleasure. I’m so wet and ready for him, even his size doesn’t cause me any problems.

“You look so beautiful stretched around me, Princess. You’re so wet for me. I want you to come, but only when I say so. You’re mine now. Every inch of you. You might be queen, but in the bedroom I’m the one in control. Understand?”

I nod, frantic. I’ll pretty much agree to anything he says right now.

“A queen on the throne and a whore in the bedroom. What more could I ever want? You’re so fucking perfect, Taelyn.”

I let out a whimper as he fucks me.

My orgasm builds once more, and this time I chase it faster, frightened he’ll take it from me once more.

But instead, he says, “That’s right, pretty girl. Let go. Come all over your big brother’s cock.”

And I do. I don’t even know where I go, to some plane much higher than the one we’re normally on. Stars flash in my vision, and my whole body becomes one shaking, shuddering knot of pleasure. My wings vibrate, causing a humming sound to fill the air.

“Aah, fuuuck, Taelyn,” Ruarok groans from behind me.

He jams himself deep and pulls me up so I have my back and wings against his chest. I feel his cock jerk inside me, and the hot rush of fluid that is his semen. I love that he’s given that to me, that I have a part of him inside me now.

We slump together, our breathing slowing, holding each other tight.

Something occurs to me. “What if I get pregnant?”

He plants a kiss behind my ear. “What if you do? It’s the right thing, isn’t it? We’re already family. A baby would only cement that. We’re going to need a little king or queen to help rule the kingdom when we’re gone. The thought of seeing your belly swell with my child is the most magical thing I can think of.”

I smile at the thought.

We'll be a family.

41

RUAROK

The day of the coronation dawns brightly. Though it's early, people are already filling the streets, waving their flags with the dragonfly emblem and cheering Taelyn's name.

We're still in bed, hiding away from the chaos for just a little longer.

My chest swells with pride. I'm still finding it hard to understand how I've gone from living out the rest of my existence in a cage to marrying this incredible woman. I'm happy for the first time in my life. I'd never realized before just how unhappy I'd been—I'd simply thought it was who I was—but Taelyn has changed all that.

I'm proud to stand by her side, to know we love each other, and one day we'll have a family of our own. I wonder if our son or daughter will look like me or Taelyn, but then I decide it doesn't matter. I will love our child no matter what. I'll never treat our child the way my father treated me, to fill them with a life of shame. I'll help raise them to be a great leader—the kind all our subjects will be proud of, too.

I pull her into my arms and nuzzle her neck. "Your people are calling for you."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

“Ourpeople,” she says. “They’ll just have to wait.”

“Is that right?”

I slip my hand between her thighs, to that hot, wet place that always seems to be ready for me. We’re always so hungry for each other, like we can never get enough. My cock is already hard, and I flip her onto her back and hold myself above her on my elbows. She’s so beautiful like this, barely awake, her hair a mess, her wings crushed behind her, still creased from sleep. I stroke her cheek and kiss her mouth and angle myself between her thighs. My cock finds its way home, and I slide deep. Nowhere feels like home like being inside her does. I could happily spend my days with her naked in my bed, her pussy wrapped around my cock, my lips and tongue and hands tracing every inch of her skin.

“Taste me,” she says and throws a beat of sexual energy out at me.

But I shake my head. “Not today. Today you’re going to need all your energy.”

She pouts, and I love her for it. “But I like it.”

I chuckle and push myself deeper. “I like it, too. After the ceremony, but not before.”

I think of what she told me about not being a full-blooded Fae, and I wonder if that’s why she’s so strong with me. The sort of sex we have would have left any other woman drained for days, but Taelyn barely seems to notice it. I’m fully satisfied with her, too. I never get the urge to feed from anyone else. She’s all I could ever want.



We make love slowly and sensually, holding each other tight. I read her body so well now that I'm able to wait until the exact moment before she climaxes before I allow my own release to take hold.

We collapse, our skin pressed together, our lips finding each other, until our heartrates slow.

A banging comes at the door. "Princess Taelyn? You really should be getting ready now. You're to be crowned in less than an hour."

It's Skylar. I can hear the anxiety in her tone.

"She's probably right," I say to Taelyn.

She sighs. "I'd rather stay in bed, with you."

"There will be plenty of time for that later. Your people are expecting you."

"Fine," she says, throwing off the covers and standing, completely naked. "But you promise you won't leave my side for a second."

I drink in how utterly incredible she looks.

"Not for a second," I promise.

An hour later, I'm standing beside the thrones in the Great Hall.

The castle has been opened to allow as many of Askos's residents in to witness the coronation. Most of them won't be able to see a thing, but it's the experience we're gifting them, something they can tell stories about to their families for generations to come.

Skylar is beside the bigger throne—the one where the king used to sit—and I’m at the one beside it. I have Balthorne next to me. We’re waiting for Taelyn to make her entry.

I lower my voice as I address Balthorne. “This must be difficult for you.”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Seeing me with the princess when you’re clearly in love with her.”

He breaks out into surprised laughter. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I see how you look at her. You love her.”

“As my queen, yes, and as a woman I’ve known most of my life, but not in any other way.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I don’t believe you.”

“You should. I’m in love with her lady’s maid, Skylar. I have been for years.”

I never saw that coming. I feel like a fool. Maybe I’ll always be one when it comes to Taelyn.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

Music strikes up, an orchestra in the back of the Great Hall, and Taelyn makes her entrance. She's in a long silver gown, much like the one she was wearing the first night I saw her, all those years ago, only this one is far grander. There is only one thing missing.

She reaches the front of the hall, and I offer my hand to help her up. She comes to stand at the front of the larger of the thrones and throws her arms open to her people.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming today. I am so honored you are making me your queen. I will work every day to ensure your lives are filled with joy and your futures are certain.”

She turns to me and gives me a small nod and a smile, telling me it's time.

I take the crown from where it sits on a crimson cushion and place it on her head.

“Queen Taelyn Loftborn,” I announce. “First of her name and ruler of the kingdom of Askos.” I lean in closer and murmur against her ear. “And my love.”

And the crowd erupts in cheers.

42

TAELYN

One Year Later

I'm standing at the window of our chambers, gazing at the city below. Much of what had been destroyed during the rot has been rebuilt. The only thing still flattened is the place where the King's Tower once stood. Instead of rebuilding, a monument has been raised to the old king and queen. It was something Ruarok had mixed feelings about, but he understood how important it was for me to have somewhere I could go to remember my mother, and since she never got to have her own burial, he relented to the monument.

From behind, familiar hands slide around the massive swell of my belly.

Ruarok presses himself close to my back and nuzzles my neck.

"You know, I'm going to miss you being pregnant. You're so sexy like this. All curves and full of my child."

"I can't wait to get him or her out of me so I can see my feet again," I only half complain.

Pregnancy hasn't been so bad, but I've tolerated it mainly because I've loved how much Ruarok has loved it. But I'm overdue now, and I'm desperate to meet our child.

"You know what the midwives say? The way we got the baby in is also the best way to get the baby out again."

He hadn't been able to believe his luck when, upon me moaning to the royal midwives about how the baby was overdue, they'd suggested nipple and clitoral stimulation. I'd literally watched his dark eyes light up. Not that we've been avoiding that kind of thing since I've been pregnant—quite the opposite. All that extra blood flow down below has turned me into a complete nymphomaniac, and I haven't been able to get enough. Even my dreams have been filthy, and I've climaxed during my sleep more times than I can count. Ruarok and I came to an agreement in the end that

if he woke to find me moaning in my sleep and squirming against a pillow, he was allowed to have free use of me. He didn't even have to wake me. He helped bring me to climax by pushing inside me while I was still sleeping, and fucking me, slowly and carefully.

Yes, there are definitely parts of being pregnant that I will miss.

"Is that right?" I reply. "And I'm going to guess that's something you'd like to help out with?"

Ruarok's hands move from my belly up to my breasts. They must have doubled in size, as have my nipples, and it's another thing he can't get enough of. He cups their weight, his thumbs brushing over the peaks, and they harden under his touch. They're so sensitive. I can't imagine how it will feel when my milk comes in after the baby is born.

"I definitely would." He kisses my neck again and sends pleasurable shivers running across my skin. He lightly pinches my nipples. "Does this help?"

"A little," I murmur.

He pulls down the front of my dress, so my tits spill out, then rolls my nipples between his thumb and forefinger. It sends a direct line of arousal between my thighs. I'm exposed at the open window, but we're too high up for anyone to see us. Even so, standing like this, with the city and sky in front of me, gives me that extra thrill.

"How about now?" he asks.

"Better," I gasp.

"Good girl."

My pregnancy has meant I've had to forgo the usual structured corset dresses and underwear I'm used to. Instead, my dress is loose and flowing to accommodate the swell of my belly and the new size of my breasts, and it means easier access for Ruarok.

He's able to roll the material down over my bump, and then it simply drops from my hips.

"You know I only just got dressed," I say as his hands trace the curves of my body.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

“Well, you shouldn’t have bothered. If I had my way, I’d keep you naked in my bed permanently.”

I laugh. “I’m not sure I’d get much ruling done if that was the case.”

He growls. “I’m not sure I’d care.”

He presses his erection against my ass and kisses my neck again, and then down to the dip of my shoulder.

The baby moves inside me, too big now to roll and turn, but instead reminding me that he or she is there by pressing an elbow or a foot against the inside of my womb.

I smile at the sensation. “I think your child is saying ‘get your hands off my momma.’”

“Until the baby is born, you’re all mine.”

He unzips himself, and I reach back, wanting to touch him. The long, thick length of his erection fills my small hand, and I give him a squeeze, loving the way my touch affects his breathing.

At no point has he ever made me feel anything less than beautiful and desired throughout my pregnancy. Even at the start, when I’d felt as though I had constant seasickness, he’d held my hair and brought me ginger snaps to help with the nausea and made me feel loved and cherished. I’d never have thought he’d have it in him to care about someone more than himself, but he’s proven me wrong, time and time

again.

As I masturbate him, his fingers slip between my thighs, finding me wet.

“Let’s fuck this baby out of you.”

He spins me away from the window and bends me over the bed. I plant my hands on the mattress as support and push my ass out to him. My size means we’ve needed to be more creative with positions—missionary definitely won’t work.

He pushes his fingers inside me again, and I moan. I can’t believe how sensitive I am now. Just being penetrated by his fingers almost makes me come.

“The baby is low down,” he says, “and I don’t want to get too deep, but I can try something else.”

His fingers graze over my asshole, and I get what he has in mind.

“Don’t you need to come inside my pussy to help get the baby out?”

“I have no idea. I think it’s just your climax that works, but we can always try again later if this doesn’t help.”

I twist to look over my shoulder. “You just want an excuse to spend all day fucking me.”

His dark eyes shine, and he chuckles. “Do I need an excuse?”

I let out a breathy sigh as he slides his fingers in and out of me.

“You can do whatever you want to me,” I tell him.



“That’s what I like to hear.”

He uses some of my nipple ointment as lube, working it around my hole, dipping inside me and using his fingers to stretch me. I whimper and moan, unsure if I’m going to be able to handle his cock in my ass when I’m already so full of baby.

“Wait, I’ve got something else.”

He goes to the closet and rummages around in the back. He pulls out an object. It’s like a tiny saddle made out of some kind of green stone, but it has two protrusions from it—one longer and the other smaller. It’s beautiful.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“This is for you to ride while I take your ass.”

“Ride?” It won’t penetrate me deeply, but it’s formed so that a part of it will be inside my pussy, and the other rubbing against my clit.

“Here, try it.”

He slides the green stone between my thighs. It’s cold against the heat of my flesh, a contrast of sensations. The largest protrusion slides inside my pussy, while the smaller one hits directly on my clit.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

“Oh, fuck,” I gasp.

My pussy contracts around the intrusion. It feels so naughty to be fucking an inanimate object, but I know things are about to get even naughtier.

“Good girl. Focus on riding the stone while I push inside your ass.”

He uses one hand to hold the stone in place, while the other guides the head of his cock to my asshole. He nudges against there, and I stiffen.

“Ride the stone, my queen,” he commands. “This will feel good for you, I promise.”

I circle my hips, pushing back against him at the same time as fucking the smooth stone inside my pussy. My asshole stretches, and he slides his cock inside me. It’s a sharp sting of pain, and I hiss. He holds still to allow me to accommodate his size but rocks his hand against the stone to keep me aroused. Then he pushes deeper.

“Your ass looks incredible stretched around my cock,” he tells me. “I wish you could see this.”

I don’t need to see it. I can feel exactly what’s happening.

“So full of me,” he grits. “Full of my baby and my cock. My beautiful queen.”

He fucks me slowly in the ass. My legs tremble, and my breathing grows harsh. He cups my belly with his free hand, running it over my taut skin and up to my breasts.

“I’m going to suck these fat nipples when they’re full of milk,” he murmurs against my ear. “Then I’m going to fill you full of my cum and get you pregnant all over again.”

“Oh, the gods,” I cry.

I’m lost to the sensations taking over my body. I had no idea it was possible to be so full. The smooth toy inside my pussy gives my inner muscles something to clamp around, while his cock ravages my ass, and my belly is swollen with his child. Is this what heaven is like?

His movements grow faster, his breathing ragged. “Fuck, Taelyn, I’m going to come. I’m going to fill your ass, my Queen.”

I fist my hands into the sheets. “Me, too...me, too...Oh, oh!”

He pumps into me, and I cry out, not caring that someone might hear. They’d probably just think I’d gone into labor.

I ride out my orgasm, grinding my clit against the cool stone, soaking it with my arousal. Stars explode around me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, my toes curling. Pleasure rolls through me, over and over, until finally I slump, completely spent.

Ruarok grows soft inside me. He plants a kiss on my damp shoulder. “If that’s not going to get this baby out, nothing will.”

I can’t help but giggle. “Not that either of us would mind a second try.”

I wake that night to pain clutching my belly. “Oh!”

Ruarok is immediately awake beside me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I think it worked.”

“The baby’s coming?”

“Yes, it’s started. Get the midwives.”

I’ve never seen Ruarok move so fast. He leaps out of bed and races for the door. I clear my throat to get his attention.

“Umm, you might want to put on some clothes first.”

He’s completely naked, and I have no wish for the midwives to get such an intimate view of my gorgeous husband.

“By the gods,” he curses and grabs some pants.

Another band of pain wraps around my belly, and I curl into a ball and grit my teeth. I know this is going to get bad, but I really have no concept of pain—not physical pain, anyway. I’ve never been in bad pain before, and this is just the start. I try not to be frightened. Women have been birthing babies for thousands of years. But they’ve also been dying in childbirth for that same amount of time.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

“Be quick,” I tell him when I can breathe again.

“I will.”

He vanishes, and I hear him pounding on doors along the corridor. “The queen is having the baby! The queen is having the baby!”

I can’t tell if that’s excitement or terror in his voice.

In less than a minute, Skylar is by my side, holding my hand. “What can I get you, my queen? What do you need?”

“Some water to drink, and some towels for the bed.”

Her blue eyes shine brightly. “This is so exciting.”

“Easy for you to say.”

I groan as another contraction hits. When they come, it’s impossible for me to do or say anything other than fight my way through it. It’s all-consuming. All I can do is try to breathe until it passes.

Ruarok returns with the two midwives. He seems more flustered than I am, which would be almost comical if I weren’t in so much pain.

One of the midwives turns to him. “My king,” she drops a small curtsy, “the birthing room is no place for a man. You should wait outside, and we’ll call you in when the

baby is born.”

I want to call for him, to tell him to stay, but another wave of agony grips me.

I didn’t need to say anything.

He turns to the midwife with a snarl. “She’s my wife, and nothing will make me leave this room. Nothing. I am to be at the queen’s side, and I will watch our child take their first breath.”

She blinks in fright and curtseys again. “Of course. Apologies, my king.”

I reach for him, and he’s at my side in an instant, taking my hand and smoothing my hair, already damp with sweat, away from my face.

“I need you here,” I tell him. “I can’t do this without you.”

“I’m here, baby. I’m not going anywhere.”

I’ve never felt so vulnerable before. I’ve always tried my hardest to be strong, but I can’t right now. I need him to be strong for me, to protect me and take care of me.

“I believe in you, Taelyn,” he says. “You can do this.”

“I can’t,” I cry.

“Yes, you can. You’re so strong and brave. The strongest person I ever met.”

He stays with me as I go through contraction after contraction, helping me take sips of the water Skylar fetched, and to change position when I need to. The contractions get closer and closer together, until it feels like there’s barely time between them at

all, and my world blurs into one of pain.

“It’s time,” one of the midwives says. “You need to push now, Queen Taelyn.”

I can’t control it. My body is doing what it needs to, and I have no choice but to go along. It’s terrifying, but knowing my husband is with me helps. He’s the person I lean on. I bear down, gritting my teeth. The noises coming from my mouth are barely human. Even as queen, I’ve been reduced to my basest form.

“That’s right, my queen,” one of the midwives praises me. “The head is almost here.”

It’s unbearable, but I can’t stop. I couldn’t even if I’d wanted. I think I might pass out from the pain, but then the head is out and I’m given a few moments to catch my breath.

“The baby’s almost here. You’ve nearly done it.” Ruarok squeezes my hand almost tighter than I’ve been squeezing his.

I let out a sob. I’m overwhelmed and exhausted, but the ending is close.

Another contraction takes hold. I draw a breath and push again.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:27 pm*

“Push gently now,” the midwife says. “Baby’s shoulders are on their way.”

I do as she says, fighting against the pain, but all of a sudden, there’s a rush of fluid and a sense of relief, and the midwife catches the baby in a towel.

“It’s a girl,” she announces.

“A girl?” I cry, struggling to sit up.

Skylar and Ruarok help me, and the midwife hands me our child wrapped in a towel.

“By the gods,” Ruarok says in amazement.

Our child has jet black hair and dark eyes, and from her tiny shoulder blades unfurl two miniature wings. She blinks up at us, taking in her world for the first time.

“Hello baby-girl,” Ruarok says, touching her curled hand with his. “We’re your parents.” He kisses my forehead. “You’re incredible.”

I blink back tears of happiness.

“Let’s leave the king and queen alone for a moment,” Skylar says and ushers everyone out of the room. I know this process isn’t quite yet done, but it feels good for it to be the two of us for a moment—no, the three of us.

I stare down at our daughter. “I’d like to call her after my mother, Lorith.”



Ruarok smiles. “Your mother was a fine woman.”

I realize it must be difficult for him to say that, since she, like I, did nothing during his incarceration, but he knows how much I loved her, and how I love her still. I wish I had her with me during the birth, to meet her grandchild, and it breaks my heart that she’ll never get to see her grown up.

“Lorith Loftborn the Second,” I say, and laugh. “What a big name for such a tiny baby.”

Ruarok kisses the top of my head. “She won’t stay tiny for long.”

My heart fills with happiness. “We’re a family now.”

“Always, my queen, my wife, my love.”