



Runemaster

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: A kidnapped governess. A goblin prince. A world on the brink of disaster.

Anrid Fray left her sister for an arranged marriage to a dark elf; instead, she is stolen away and accidentally binds herself to a temperamental magic known as the Bifrost. She only wants to find her betrothed, but a harassed Runemaster and a pack of unruly orphans won't let her leave.

Prince Jael Daemon needs to save his kingdom from strange earthquakes, but the Bifrost protecting Agmon is inexplicably failing. The last thing he wants is responsibility for his wayward younger brother, a naïve human girl, and her homeless goblinborn children who are all in danger.

With the Bifrost under attack and their souls bonded to its fate, can these star-crossed lovers reconcile duty and desire before shadows consume all they hold dear?

Total Pages (Source): 96

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

Chapter 1

Plaintive crying echoed between the shadowy trunks of the trees in the Shadewood Forest. The sound of tears mingled with the chirp of insects, the hoot of a night owl, and the moan of the wind.

Anrid Fray told herself she must be imagining the sound that did not belong, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not force her sleep-deprived mind to concoct any explanation other than the obvious.

Someone was lost in the woods, and they were crying.

It sounded like a child.

Her heart twisted. She understood too well about children in distress: the fear, the loneliness, and the uncertainty.

She had once been a child in distress, forced to take care of not only herself but also her little sister.

Anrid stood at the perimeter of the clearing where her traveling party camped for the night. No one else had woken or heard the sounds that she heard. Even the guard, a broad-shouldered lad with hair the color of wheat, dozed on the other side of the clearing. She tilted her head and strained her ears to determine the source of the crying, but it seemed to bounce around in the trees and conceal the point of origin.

The crying cut off, as if a hand clapped over the victim's mouth to smother the plea

for help. Silence descended on the forest, an unnatural sort of quiet, almost like the Shadewood held its breath in anticipation.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she hugged her woven sheepskin shawl tighter around her thin body. Had she imagined it? Anrid used to experience nightmares as a child that lingered after she thought she had woken up. But this had not happened to her in years.

No. This was no dream. She had not imagined the weeping from deep within the Shadewood.

The wailing began again with renewed vigor. Anrid's heart tore at her. How could she ignore a child alone in the forest? Where had his parents gone? Had something terrible happened to them?

They aren't coming back. We're alone, Dagmar, we're alone. It's just you and me now.

She swallowed the bitter tang of the memory.

Years of watching out for her younger sister and caring for the children of her employers had heightened her protective instincts and drove her now to do the unthinkable.

She took one step beyond the protection of the clearing, between the trunks of two towering oaks. Then another. And another. A small part of her mind told her she should return to the clearing and enlist the help of the dragon rider, but the thought somehow eluded her. She couldn't focus on anything but the sound of the child weeping, lost and alone in a dark, forbidding forest.

She must find him. Save him. Comfort him.

It's what a governess was supposed to do, after all.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, another voice tried to remind her she had another duty—the one to her people who had sent her into the woods, not to find lost children, but to fulfill the terms of the peace treaty between the dark elves of Gelaira and the humans back in Haldor.

She was on her way to Nestra to meet her dark elf husband and begin a new life. Perhaps she would finally have children of her own to hold, rather than the children of others. Maybe her husband would come to love her, and her future would hold bright things...moments of happiness and contentment... Maybe Dagmar could come and visit them. Then Anrid would have everything she ever wanted right at her fingertips.

The thought made her footsteps falter and then halt. Trees towered on both sides as shadows encroached from between them. The trunks twisted toward the canopy of leaves between her and the sky above. A moment of confusion bonded with fear. Where was she? What was she doing?

But then the child whimpered again, and the sound of his distress drove thoughts of her duty to a place deep in her heart.

She also had a duty to care for those around her, to be compassionate and protective of those who needed it. Besides, she would only be gone a moment. Then she would return to the clearing and to the dark elf husband waiting for her in Nestra.

The uncertainty fled from her steps as she hurried deeper into the forest, her confidence and determination growing. The trees whispered as a gentle rain pelted the leaves from above. She remained dry, affected by nothing more than misty air as the canopy offered its thick protection.

Find the child. Find the child. Save the child. I must save the child...

The thought grew stronger until it drowned out all other thoughts. Her purpose for being in the land of the dark elves vanished. Her sister in Haldor flitted to the back of her mind. Even the aches and pains from her long journey trickled away until only the forest and the rain and tears remained.

She couldn't have turned back if she wanted to: her feet seemed to have developed a will of their own, and she no longer possessed control of them.

Anrid forced her way through tangled underbrush, barely noticing the briars that tore at her shawl and garments. She broke free of the growth and stepped into a clearing only a dozen paces wide. In the center, a tiny figure sat perched on a rotting stump. He sat hunched, arms wrapped around his knees, rocking back and forth in time to his pitiful wails.

Anrid hurried toward him while rain pelted her head and shoulders. "Do you need help?" she whispered as she rounded the stump to face the child.

A narrow, pinched face lifted to hers, tears mingling with rain. Her breath caught in her throat. The face was pale, almost devoid of all pigment, as white as the hair straggling around it. Ears stuck out on either side of the child's head, much too large, much too long, and tapered to points.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

And the eyes. Glittering blue eyes as bright as sunlight on an aquamarine sea stared back at her, fringed with tears on white lashes and hugged by droopy eyelids. He blinked his enormous eyes.

This was no human child.

“Who—who are you?” she whispered as she kneeled beside the stump. A small part of reason crept back into her mind. Was this apparition even real?

The child scrubbed his face with the back of his hand. “R-r-rig.”

He sounded real. At least, she heard his voice as clear as a bell clanging on a crisp winter morning.

“Well, R-r-rig.” She smiled for his benefit. “My name is Anrid. But you can call me Ani if you like. Most children do.”

He blinked at her, head cocked. “Uh-NEE?” he echoed, mispronouncing her nickname in a way she found quite adorable.

“Ani.”

“Uh-NEE!” He flung himself toward her then, spindly arms no more than bone wrapped in a parchment of skin squeezing around her neck.

She held him close, clucking her sympathy. “There, there. You’re all right now.”

She couldn't escape the rightness of it herself. She had the particular feeling that her entire life had led her to this exact moment, as if this was the one place in all of Rhuin she needed to be.

Purpose. Destiny. And affection. She sighed at the powerful wave of contentment sweeping over her as she hugged the small body against hers.

Not once did it occur to her that enchantment might be involved.

Chapter 2

The air in the underground hall smelled like the Styx, a river which cut through the soil and rock of Agmon. While there were places in these tunnels with air that smelled rotten or that held unseen dangers capable of killing an unwary traveler in mere minutes, here in the massive cavern where Imenborg jutted from the stone, the air was as fresh as a spring meadow.

Not that Jael Daemon had much experience with meadows.

In fact, he only visited them on rare occasions. They were pleasant things, he would admit, but he preferred the safety of stone walls, the darkness of the deep earth. Safe from prying eyes. Safe from wide-open spaces and endless possibilities.

No, here in Imenborg, beneath the mountains and far removed from the open sky, things were simple. There were tasks to be done, tunnels to follow. Jael's path wound ahead, chiseled out for him by the elders who went before.

Predestined. Uncomplicated.

Just the way he liked it.

The gentle thrum of the obelisk preceded its warm blue glow. When the obelisk came to life, it meant a sister stone reached out. The current obelisk reaching out sat in his father's office on the other side of Agmon. Jael clenched his fists and then forced his fingers to open and relax against his thighs as he faced the massive stone pillar.

His father's penchant for punctuality saw no parallel.

Jael cracked his stiff neck side to side and prepared for the obelisks to connect. Perhaps his life wasn't quite as uncomplicated as he might prefer.

He hated the first day of the month. It wasn't that he didn't wish to see his parents or hear how they fared in the capital of Elysium, the only above ground city in all of Agmon. He loved his parents. But most of their talks revolved around shortcomings. His shortcomings.

Eris and Kora saw to that.

Jael's nostrils flared in irritation. Brothers were a necessary evil at times. Eris was perfection incarnate, the mark to hold all others accountable to. And Kora...well...Kora was another matter entirely. That left Jael stuck in the middle, neither perfect nor imperfect, just in between.

The obelisk thrummed louder, and the cerulean glow pulsed in escalating waves until it flared fully to power. A ghostly white figure appeared in the stone, but it wasn't an apparition from the land beyond the mortal. Rather, the figure reflected a goblin noble of actual flesh and bone standing before another obelisk in another room far away. The image rippled as if Jael had dropped a stone into a pool of water.

The face in the obelisk did not belong to King Erebus, for this goblin was too young and broad in the shoulders, with pale hair and darker eyes. His face held a weariness Jael did not envy.

“Eris,” he greeted, somewhat surprised to see his older brother, the Crown Prince of Agmon and the apple of his father’s eye. Eris could do no wrong, but that wasn’t his fault. “Where’s Father?”

His brother ran a hand down his face before crossing his arms over his chest. He exhaled a noisy sigh. “What is the one thing that would make Father late to a meeting?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

“Kora.” Jael did not even have to think about it.

Eris smiled wanly. “Indeed. He insulted Lady Mab in front of half the elder court last night.”

“Of course he did. Perhaps Father should exile him and be done with it.”

A strange expression crossed Eris’s face that Jael couldn’t interpret through the obelisk. While the image of his brother was easy to see, the communication stone distorted things, as if they were viewing one another through a veil of water that rippled and stilled at irregular intervals.

But after another wave passed, Eris remained stoic as always.

“Yes. Perhaps exile would do him some good,” Eris agreed, but he sounded noncommitted, as if his mind was somewhere else. “But, knowing Kora, he would view his exile as a vacation and be happier for it.”

Jael snorted. Their little brother probably would. They both knew how Kora felt about his upcoming appointment as Minister of Goblinborn Affairs. It was an important position Kora was unsuited for. But King Ereb only had three sons.

As the eldest, Eris was destined to take over for their father when the time came. Until then, he was the king’s right hand in all things. Jael, the middle child, had shown a proficiency for runes since an early age. The decision to send him to Imenborg to take over for the old Runemaster when he died at the ripe old age of a hundred and two went uncontested by the entire court. That left Kora to handle

Goblinborn Affairs.

A knot twisted in Jael's stomach. "Kora still lobbying for my position?"

Eris shot him a knowing look. "Absolutely. He fancies himself more suited to the care of runestones than the management of the goblinborn."

"Cannot say that I blame him." Had their roles been reversed, Jael would have been unhappy too. The goblinborn were unruly and impossible to control, like a wild mob of children that never grew up. Keeping them in line required a firm hand and strict boundaries. They needed rules and structure and constant guidance. They were treasured...special...hence an entire political office dedicated to their welfare...but they were challenging and very, very complicated. "For all intents and purposes, Kora might as well be one of the goblinborn he is tasked to control."

Eris sighed. "But he isn't. He's an elder and should behave himself."

"I'm not arguing that fact. Few would want his job, is all I am saying. It's not for the faint of heart."

"Kora? Faint of heart?" For the first time, a glimmer of amusement crossed his brother's face.

Jael flashed his teeth in a return smile. "You know what I mean."

"I do. But can you imagine Kora trying to manage the runestones? He'd bring the mountains down on us before a month had passed."

"I shudder to think of it."

"As do I. But Father is determined. He's reached the end of his patience."

Jael's smile slipped away as he tried to make sense of his brother's words. What exactly was King Erebus determined to do with his wayward son?

"How are things on your end? I've been eager for a report."

Jael chafed at the change of subject, suspecting it a deliberate move on his brother's part. His mouth twitched. "Your concern is...appreciated...although unwarranted. I'm handling things here at Imenborg."

"Naturally. But Father's been complaining about the Bifrost. There have been vibrations all the way to Elysium. I can only imagine what is happening on your end." Eris eyed him, his expression grave and concerned.

Vibrations in Elysium meant earthquakes and rifts in Imenborg, which had been escalating at a disturbing rate the past two months. Jael had increased his rounds three-fold to keep the runestones intact.

But he put on a brave front for his brother's sake. "Nothing I cannot handle. As I will tell Father in my report. The runes are holding strong, and I have everything in hand."

"Of course you do." Eris's smile remained pasted on his face. "But a second set of hands can always be useful."

A second set of hands would only complicate things.

But Jael kept the remark to himself. "Like I said, I've got this covered. No need for concern."

"Relieved to hear it." A second voice cut in before Eris finished his thought. The image of his brother turned away and then stepped to the side, disappearing from the obelisk. The erect figure of King Erebus moved to take his place. With sharply slanted

eyebrows, the king of Agmon had the appearance of a hawk on the hunt. His keen eyes, set in a square pale face, missed very little. “Although, those vibrations are cause for investigation, I assume.”

“You assume correctly, Father.” Jael stood a little taller and locked his hands behind his back. “I am already deep in my investigations. I will be traveling to the border today to investigate a fault line in the Bifrost that has been unusually active. I suspect a runestone needs reinforcing. Nothing out of the ordinary. No cause for alarm.”

“Vibrations of this magnitude are always cause for alarm, Jael.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

“Of course, Father. I just meant...I’m pursuing the problem and will have results by my next report.”

He hoped, anyway.

King Ereb did not respond right away, one hand stroking his jaw. “I hope you’re correct. I don’t need to tell you how important the Bifrost is. Without the runestones...and the energy of the Bifrost...the mountain would crush our people. Our way of life depends on the work you do at Imenborg.”

“I’m aware.” His voice dropped to a hushed whisper before he squared his shoulders and steadied his voice. “I promise I will have an answer for the vibrations by next month.”

King Ereb nodded. “I will await your report. In the meantime, I plan to send your brother to you, to assist.”

Jael’s heart sank to the pit of his stomach. “Eris? Isn’t he needed in Elysium?”

His father squeezed the bridge of his nose and waved a dismissing hand. “Not Eris. Kora. He needs to get out of Elysium for a while. So I’m sending him to you. To assist.”

Rock and bone.

“Assist? How exactly do you think Kora can assist? He can’t tell an obelisk from a latrine!” Jael regretted the words the moment he said them. He could get away with

saying such things to Eris, but King Ereb would not appreciate the scathing sarcasm.

“Your brother can assist by getting out of Elysium. And I leave it to you to convince him that Imenborg is not to his liking. If anyone can dissuade him from this fool brained dream of his, it’s you, Jael.”

“I don’t have time to cater to Kora’s feckless dreams—”

“Make time. Because I need him back in the affairs office with his head filled with protocol and younglings, not runestones. This isn’t a request, Jael. Kora will join you at Imenborg. Let him get his hands dirty. Work him to the point of exhaustion. Pound some sense into him. I don’t care what you do as long as you change his mind. Then you may send him back.”

Jael’s hands curled into fists which he hid behind his back for fear his father would see. What could he say? He couldn’t refuse a direct order, not from his father. Not from the King of Agmon.

It seemed parenting would be added to his job description with no say-so from him.

“When is he to leave?”

“He packs his bags as we speak.”

Jael set his teeth and forced a smile. “Tell him not to pack much: he won’t be here long.”

King Ereb graced him with a rare smile. In fact, he seemed relieved to have the matter decided. “That depends on the success of your efforts. Keep your brother out of trouble, Jael.” With a curt nod, King Ereb stepped backward and severed the link between the obelisks.

Darkness mingled with silence as the obelisk went dormant. Jael left the hall and made his way down narrow stone corridors that wound through Imenborg. The corridors, lit only by amber runestones embedded at intervals on the floor, branched and intersected in what appeared to be random directions, but there was a pattern. It had taken him a dozen months to memorize the tunnels of Imenborg, to understand how they intersected and where they each led.

He came out of this particular corridor into a lengthy, low-ceilinged chamber filled with tables and benches that overflowed with boxes of tools and crates filled with runestones. Half a dozen workers scattered around the room, focused on their task of repairing the precious stones that sustained Agmon.

His second-in-command, a young apprentice with a book perpetually tucked under his arm, caught Jael's eye as he approached. "I take it by your expression the meeting did not go well." The young goblin rubbed a soft cloth against the dark runestone in his hand.

Jael stopped beside Math's bench and locked his hands behind his back. "We're to have company, Math," he said, seeing no need to withhold the ill tidings.

"Indeed?" Math bent closer to his task, squinting in the faint light.

"Indeed." Jael set his mouth in a firm line as he reached for the light stone on Math's desk. He traced the rune for light against the smooth surface of the stone: three lines resembling the rays of the sun. The stone flickered more brightly in response to his touch, invoked by the magic of the deep earth. He set the stone back on the table beside Math. "My brother Kora should be here in a couple days. The length of his stay is...undetermined. I'm depending on you to help me keep him busy. He wishes to learn the business of runestones."

Math's eyebrows pulled together. "And what need does the future Minister of

Goblinborn Affairs have for runekeeping?”

“None whatsoever.” Jael met his curious expression with a grim stare. “So let’s show him how tedious the task is and send him on his way.”

A ghost of a smile turned the apprentice’s mouth. “Understood. I shall find him the most abominable tasks.”

Jael felt the weight of the earth lift a wee bit. He couldn’t imagine doing his job without Math. The lad never complained and always supported his decisions without reservation.

“I’m off to walk the Bifrost line. If Kora arrives before I return...best of luck.”

Math’s smile widened. “Thanks for that, Your Highness. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

Jael hesitated. It would not be unwise to bring the young apprentice with him on his rounds—the new runekeeper needed more experience. And walking the Bifrost line to make sure the runestones were holding strong was one of the most important jobs of the residents at Imenborg.

But then, Jael didn't want company. Not when he would soon have more company than he knew what to do with.

“Not this time,” he said at length.

Math didn't question his decision, although Jael guessed from the lad's expression that he didn't entirely approve. His tactful silence was one thing he liked most about Math.

If only Jael's family understood more about tactful silence and the uselessness of meddling, his life would be almost perfect here at Imenborg.

He didn't need complications.

A simple life for him, in the mountain's solitude, caring for his runestones and working alongside his loyal companions.

What more could a goblin prince want in life?

Chapter 3

Anrid woke from pleasant dreams. Her body felt warm while her skin prickled from

strange sensations, perhaps remnants of the golden dreams eluding her.

She blinked into the darkness and stretched luxuriously before flexing her fingers to shake away the strange tingling. The cold hard stone against her back brought a sudden start of clarity.

She sat up too fast, and a wave of light-headedness washed over her. Blinking furiously, she waited for her vision to adjust. Only fathomless darkness greeted her. She swallowed hard, one hand clutching her chest. A moan preceded the stirring of a warm body beside her. Fingers reached for and rested on the hand she had pressed against the ground to stabilize herself.

The child.

Now she remembered the strange forest child she had encountered. A part of her wanted to pull away, to scuttle off in fright from whoever, or whatever, this creature might be. What was he? Where had he taken her? How had she gotten here? Did he intend to harm her? A million questions flooded her mind as she sat frozen in the pitch-black with only her frantic breathing for company. Ruthless stone lay beneath her fingertips. When she strained her ears to search for clues about her location, all she heard was a steady drip drip drip.

That could indicate just about anything short of the desert.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The chamber she was in possessed no other sounds. She couldn't see and couldn't hear. It was as if she was in a box with the lid sealed tight, trapping her inside.

Ever so slowly, she eased her hand from beneath the icy fingers resting on top of hers. Exhaling a slow, soundless breath, she gathered her feet and prepared to stand.

Her legs shook as she rose with arms stretched to either side for balance. She moved her hands around and searched for anything with which to stabilize herself: a wall, a chair, anything that might explain her situation. But all she felt was a soundless, voiceless ache against her ribs, a knot in her stomach, and sweat breaking out across her body, making her hands clammy and damp.

She needed to do something, but she didn't know what she could do. Without her eyes to guide her, with only that incessant dripping around her, she had no way to orient herself, no way to determine the right direction to go. She couldn't detect the dangers that must lurk in the darkness. Many hazards might lie in wait for her. Things she might trip over, or creatures in the shadows...

It became hard to breathe. The ache in her chest and the pit in her stomach expanded until she feared they would engulf her completely. Dizzy and sick to her stomach, she stood immobilized. A whimper tore from her lips.

Something stirred at her feet and bumped her ankle.

"Uh-NEE?" The sleepy voice nearly sent her scuttling into the shadows. What was this creature, she wondered for the hundredth time? A kind of imp sent to lure travelers down into the lair? Was he even real, or was he some sort of apparition born of the Shadewood?

The sleepy fingers tugging at her leggings felt real enough, though... Should she be comforted by that?

This far north, along the border between the forests of Gelaira and the mountains of Agmon, any sort of monster might dwell in the cold and the dark. She had heard stories growing up, scary tales swapped between her friends and the boys who ran the streets of Fangward, her home. Her sister Dagmar was rather fond of dark tales, the more monsters the better. Dagmar often took fiendish delight in whispering about

wyrds in the forest, harpies in the canyons, and strange ghostly spirits that haunted the dunes far to the south in the Dunewatch. Just then, Anrid wished she had her blanket and her bed and her sister beside her. She would give anything to be huddled underneath the heavy blankets, shivering and begging her sister to stop her frightening tales. She would trade everything to hear her sister laugh right now, a soothing, familiar sound in the darkness.

But Dagmar wasn't here. She was far away, left behind in Haldor. Guilt tugged at Anrid's heart that she'd left her sister behind, although it had not been her choice. When they told you that you'd been chosen to serve your people, to become a peace bride—a peaceweaver—and fulfill the terms of treaties and kings, you did what you were told. Poor girls like Anrid and Dagmar had few choices in life. You went where you were told to go, married who you were told to marry, and did what you had to do to survive.

But this? Being torn from her sister, sent into a strange new land, and carted off to the remote regions of a dangerous forest to marry a dark elf stranger she might never care for... Even that seemed better than her current situation. Whether she had been kidnapped or lured, it didn't matter. She had been taken from the safety of her caravan and she didn't know how to get back.

She didn't know how to get back to Dagmar, not with duty and danger standing between them.

The panic turned into a fist clutching her throat, making her gasp frantically.

“Uh-NEE?” Hands tugged on the hem of her skirt.

She flinched and squeezed her eyes shut. “I'm—I'm here. Um, where is here? Rig? Is that you?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

“Yes, I’m Rig. You are Uh-NEE.”

“Ani. But, yes. Where are we, Rig? Where have you taken me?” Still, lifeless air pressed around, without a whisper of a breeze. The air had an earthy taste to it that she didn’t recognize.

He hung onto her skirt as he clambered to his feet and leaned into her legs. “We are safe, Uh-NEE. Don’t worry. I’m taking you home.”

“Home? To your home? Rig, I can’t go home with you. You need to take me back to my campsite, to my people.”

He giggled and hugged her tighter. “Oh, Uh-NEE. You’re funny. I can’t do that. I need to take you home. We need you. I called for you, and you came. I didn’t think you would. No one has come before...” He trailed away into pained silence. But then he hugged her tighter and fervor returned to his voice. “But now you are here, and everything will be okay!”

She reached down and settled her hands on his narrow shoulders before sliding her fingers down to grip his arms. With gentle force, she tried to peel his arms free of her. “No,” she insisted. “I am not going home with you. You need to take me back to my home.”

“In the dark forest? I can’t do that. It isn’t safe. The trees aren’t safe. They have bad shadows. Bad voices.”

“Rig, you need to take me home. Now.” She tried to still the tremor in her voice but

failed miserably.

He clasped her hand in his cold fingers and squeezed. “The dark forest is a silly place to call home,” he said. “I’ll take you to my home. It’s better. Nicer.” He hesitated. “Well, most of the time it’s nice. Medda takes my things, and I don’t like that. She always takes my things.”

“Who—who is Medda?” Anrid tried the strange name on her tongue.

He tugged her forward. “Come on. I’ll take you to her. You’ll like her, really you will. I’ll tell her not to take your things.”

I don’t have any of my things, she wanted to tell him, a bit petulant about that fact. Shades, she had even lost her shawl! But she kept such thoughts to herself. It wouldn’t do any good to whine like a child. No. She was the adult and, even in this unusual and unpleasant situation, she needed to behave accordingly.

Perhaps this Medda would be able to help her get back to her caravan. If she didn’t show up to meet her future husband like planned, who knew what kind of political row that might cause. What if they thought she ran away and betrayed her people?

“I need you to take me back now, Rig. Do you understand? You need to obey. Take me back.”

He didn’t answer for the longest time. Then his arms seemed to lose their strength as he pulled away. “I will take you.” He sounded heartbroken and mournful.

Her heart ached, but she steeled herself against this motherly instinct. She wasn’t here to take care of this child. That was her job back home.

As Rig clasped her hand and led her into the darkness, Anrid clung to that thought.

She wasn't here to care for strange forest children. No, she was here to marry a dark elf and have his children.

Her own children.

She gripped Rig's hand a little tighter.

The thought thrilled her a little. She'd always wanted a family of her own...to feel the tightness of little arms around her neck, a man's palm pressed against hers as he leaned in for a kiss, not caring about the puke and snot smeared all over her apron.

To have a little place in the world that was hers—all hers—filled with the people she loved. Her sister and her sister's children right alongside her, growing old together in the same community longhouse.

Perhaps she might still have those things...some of them, anyway... She just thought she would be able to choose her own husband and begin that family based on love. But perhaps it didn't always work that way, and sometimes your family was chosen for you.

"Are we almost to the door?" she asked when they seemed to have been stumbling in the darkness a long time.

"Almost there, Uh-NEE. Don't worry. I know the way. I know all the ways."

All the ways.

She didn't like the sound of that. The temporary relief evaporated like a drop of water on a hot cooking stone. "All the ways to where?"

He giggled. "To everywhere, silly."

Everywhere did not sound like the way back to her campsite. Anrid considered pulling free of him, but what would she do? She couldn't see a thing in the darkness and didn't know where she was, let alone where to go.

She might stumble around down here until she starved to death and withered away to nothing more than bone.

“Oh, bother.” She drew a shuddering breath and plunged onward. What other choice did she have?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

None at all. But then, what was so strange about that?

She'd never had any choices of her own.

They'd only been stumbling through the tunnels for a couple minutes when the ground grumbled beneath her. She froze, mouth open in a question she did not voice. Rig clutched her hand harder and cried out, as if he guessed what was coming. Then, as the rumble rose to a roar, the floor pitched and knocked them off their feet with bruising force.

Chapter 4

Agmon braced for something horrible. Jael could feel it when he pressed his hand to the stone walls. He sensed the tension in the mountain, the anxiety wafting from the Bifrost that threaded through the rock walls. The runestone amulet around his neck filled the tunnel with aquamarine light. The magic within the stone, awakened by the runes he had traced against its surface, caught the facets and imperfections in the runestone and cast uneven shadows—beautiful patterns that spoke to the uniqueness of the natural world and the intricacies of the magic living inside all things.

The thought made him eager to preserve the fragile peace between the living and the magic, and he quickened his pace a bit. He had almost reached the furthest point of his round for the day, where he would check on runestones in the Bifrost. The Bifrost lines ran all over Agmon, and when properly guarded by runestones, created a magical barrier between Agmon and the rest of the world.

The Bifrost kept them sheltered, safe, and hidden.

He doubted the outside world cared much about them. Perhaps the humans and elves had forgotten about them down here in the deep places of Rhuin.

Which was just how he liked it. Attention brought meddling and meddling brought complications.

No one needed that.

Just thinking about it put a damper on his mood once again.

Jael ground his teeth together and plodded around a bend in the tunnel to approach the cavern that marked his destination. Here, several Bifrost lines intersected to create a sort of hub. He glimpsed the flickering aquamarine lights from the runestones and the more piercing rainbow shards of color from the Bifrost that carved a delicate line through the rock walls. He reached out a hand to trace the luminescent crack of light jagging its way through the cavern wall. The heat of the magic warmed his fingertips, pulsing erratically beneath his callouses.

Why was the Bifrost so agitated?

He entered the cavern with a disgruntled sigh. He needed no additional light here, not with the runestones glowing and the Bifrost pulsing. The chamber exuded light and warmth.

Too much of both, to be honest.

A frown pulled his mouth downward as he realized the cause. Many of the runestones embedded in the wall with iron clasps had gone dark, allowing the power of the Bifrost to run wild. More lines had already formed as the Bifrost forged new trails through the rock. The runestones should have kept the Bifrost from sprouting...but when numerous stones failed all at once, the magic often broke free and took on a

mind of its own.

No wonder the magic was so excited...like a child turned loose in the goblin market.

He swung his pack from his shoulder and peeled it open to reach the fresh runestones he'd brought with him. One by one, he would have to release the iron clasps, remove the spent runestones, and replace them with the fresh store in his pack. He counted the number of dark runestones on the walls and hoped he had brought enough. Too much power left to its own devices was never a good thing.

As if sensing his concern, the Bifrost surged, striking out at him with glittering white tendrils that knocked the runestone from his hand and sent it clattering across the floor. Jael couldn't help it: he yelped, fingers singed and stinging as he scrambled on all fours to retrieve the runestone. He returned to the place at the wall and jammed the stone into the iron clasp once again, this time braced for an attack.

For it had felt like an attack.

Which was ridiculous. Insane. The Bifrost and those of the under realms shared an unspoken agreement. A bond. A symbiosis. And it wasn't as if the Bifrost was alive, in the literal sense. But magic had life of its own, something the natural world couldn't explain.

For some reason, the Bifrost had been riled into what Jael could almost swear to be...a bad mood.

"Be still, you," he rasped to the grasping tendrils of magic trying to carve alternative paths through the stone wall. He traced the binding rune, two intersecting circles, on the runestone before moving on to the next one several yards down the wall.

The magic thrummed, almost as if it were hissing "no" back at him. At first, the

emotions radiating from the Bifrost felt irritated and petulant, but as he worked his way down the wall, replacing runestones as quickly as his smarting fingers could manage, he detected something else beneath the frustration. Something deeper churned within the glowing depths of the Bifrost. It took him a few minutes to place what it was he was sensing.

Fear.

The Bifrost was afraid.

The realization caused his own heart rate to spike. What would cause a magic that carved its way through solid rock to experience fear? Such magic seemed impervious to the passage of time, the cares of the moment, the things that the goblins and elves and humans must deal with.

The Bifrost seemed to sense his thoughts and pulsed harder against the walls of the cavern, as if it were whispering back to him. Help. Help. Help.

He studied the chamber, counting the number of runestones needing to be replaced. Since he was half done, shouldn't the Bifrost be calming down by now? Instead, the magic pulsed with renewed agitation.

He cut his thumb on a sharp bit of iron on one of the casings. Flinching, Jael wiped the blood on his tunic before snapping the clasp into place and tracing the binding rune against the smooth surface of the dark gray stone.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

The runestone pulsed to life.

And so did the Bifrost. This time, the spike of magic lashed out and hurled him backwards. He skidded across the uneven floor as the chamber began to shake around him. The deep places of Rhuin far beneath his feet seemed to roll over and convulse. Small bits of rock fell from the ceiling and pelted him. He wrapped an arm over his head to protect himself and waited for the quake to run its course.

Around him, stone crackled and screamed. Magic flared in fiery arcs, singeing his skin and hair as he curled into himself and braced against the onslaught. A heavy rock bounced off his thigh. He ground his teeth against the sharp stab of pain and the dull ache that followed.

As the stone and earth heaved around him, a new sound rose in the depths of Agmon. It took his rattled brain a few moments to identify it.

Somewhere close by, screams echoed through the tunnels.

Chapter 5

Anrid curled her body over Rig's small one while the very stone around them rumbled as if it meant to shake itself loose and bury them. She didn't know what to do, where to flee, when all that she saw was darkness and all she felt around them was bucking rock. Rig's terrified screams echoed in her ears, mirroring the shrieks of her own heart. But no sound escaped her mouth as she buried her face in the child's hair and clung to him. The instinct to protect his slight frame from the terror around them came naturally.

He was a child. And in that moment, he needed her. No matter what came next, in that moment, she had to protect him.

A rock slammed into her shoulder and drove her down to one knee, almost crushing Rig beneath her. He curled into a ball as she braced herself over him so she wouldn't squash him with her collapsing body. Another blow like that and she would crumple to the ground. Pain screamed through her shoulder, but she ground her teeth against it.

Then, out of the roaring darkness, someone wrapped their arms around her. She screamed this time, clutching Rig tighter to her. Her captor, her savior, plucked her and Rig from the ground as if they weighed nothing and lifted them with brawny arms locked around the both of them at once. Her feet left the ground as he swung them in an arc and carried them through the growling darkness.

Then he forced them to the ground, pinning them against a cold stone wall, arms still braced around them. Together, a tangle of arms and legs and hair and screams, they huddled in the darkness.

Their rescuer pressed his head over the top of hers as Rig continued to wail. Anrid held him tighter, grateful for the pressure of arms around them both. She smelled musk and something spicy, like cloves, and felt warm breath blowing against her ear from their rescuer's escalated breathing. His chest rose and fell with erratic breaths as it pressed against her back.

Danger. Safety. Despair. Hope. Frailty. Protection.

A tangle of conflicting emotions flooded her thoughts, and she could do nothing but wait while the world threatened to end around them. She rode the tumult and thanked the stars for the body shielding them from pelting rock.

The roaring in her ears dissipated the way a storm thunders in the distance. None of them moved, as if they had become a part of the rock they clung to. But then the stranger in the darkness shifted. His head lifted first with caution. Then the iron-hard grip relaxed, and he shifted away. His thigh pressed against her as he rose to his feet, and he left his fingers lightly touching the top of her head. Perhaps he didn't want to lose track of them in the utter blackness.

Then light flickered in the inky abyss. It was a cool, bluish light that flared into blinding intensity. She blinked until her eyesight adjusted.

"Are you injured?" The voice was deep but mellow, punctuated with ragged breathing.

Anrid lifted her head, aware that tears streaked her cheeks. "I—I—" Her thoughts fled momentarily. The man who loomed over her was young and handsome, with a jagged scar across one high cheekbone. His eyes, a piercing unnatural blue, bored into her and held her pinned in place. Her gaze roamed against her will, trying to make sense of who their savior was. A tangle of long dark hair. Skin pale as if it rarely saw the rays of the sun. Broad shoulders, a thick chest and waist. He wore dark robes cinched at the waist with a wide belt.

She snapped her focus back to his face. She noticed his ears then, peeking out beneath his unruly hair dusted in pulverized stone. Ears tapered to long points.

He wasn't human.

Her heart stuck in her throat. But he wasn't a dark elf either, judging by his skin tone.

"Are you hurt?" His fingers shifted from her head to press against her shoulder.

She recoiled and winced at the sudden stab of pain. He yanked his hand away, a deep

furrow between his bright eyes.

“You are. How bad?”

“I—I’m not sure. Rig? Are you all right?” She pressed a kiss against the top of his tangled white hair.

The strange child lifted his pale face to squint up at her. “I’m good. My knee hurts though. And you’re squishing me.”

“Oh my.” She released him and leaned away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

A firm hand gripped the elbow of her uninjured arm and guided her to her feet. She trembled, wobbling on weak legs, grateful the stranger did not release her.

She shot him a nervous look.

“How bad is your shoulder?” He released his grip on her elbow, his gaze shifting from hers to her potential injury.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

She hesitated before daring to roll her shoulder. Everything moved, although grudgingly. She probed her shoulder with a delicate touch. “I don’t think I’ve broken anything.” Heat rose in her cheeks as she slipped her icy fingers beneath the collar of her dress and prodded the skin of her angular shoulder. “No blood. It will most likely just bruise,” she speculated, as she removed her hand with a relieved sigh.

He offered a curt nod before letting his attention drift to the child. Rig leaped to his feet and wrapped his arms around Anrid’s hips, burying his face in the folds of her apron. She rested a hand on his head, unsure what comfort to offer other than her presence.

“I’m Jael,” he said after observing them. “And you are?”

“Anrid Fray,” she answered without hesitation, and then wondered if perhaps she might have exercised some caution. But why? If he intended to hurt them, he would not have saved their lives from the earthquake. “This is Rig.”

The stranger startled her then by reaching out. She held still while his fingers slipped alongside her face and tweaked her snarled hair away from her ears.

“You’re human.” Jael appeared shocked, then guarded, his eyes shifting between her and Rig as if trying to puzzle them out.

She moistened her lips with her tongue when he withdrew once again. “Y-yes.”

His gaze pierced hers as his frown deepened. “What are you doing in the tunnels?”

“I-I hardly know.”

The left corner of his mouth pulled down even deeper. “You hardly...know?” The words dripped with disbelief.

She felt like she was on trial then. She splayed one hand protectively over Rig’s head and wrapped her other arm around him. “I don’t know,” she reiterated as she tried to keep the tremor from her voice. “I haven’t an inkling where I am or how I got here.”

At this, his gaze flew to Rig, and he snatched the child by the shoulder and turned Rig so that he was forced to look up. Anrid’s heart twisted at the fright on the child’s face.

“Don’t—” she began, but Jael cut her off.

“Did you bring her here?” he demanded, his tone stern.

Anrid tried to tug Rig out of his firm grasp, but he stilled her with a frown.

“Well?”

Rig’s expression turned sullen as he released his grip on Anrid’s skirt and crossed his arms over his chest. “What if I did?”

Jael’s expression darkened, and he rather seemed like he wanted to utter words unfit for the ears of women and children. “You know that’s forbidden, don’t you? Where did you even find her? Where are your parents?”

Rig ignored the flurry of questions and leaned toward Anrid. “You wanted to come, didn’t you, Uh-NEE? Tell him.”

Anrid choked on a cough. What she wanted had never been taken into consideration through this entire ordeal. Yet...if she told the truth...what would Jael do to Rig? Would Jael punish him for bringing her here against her will?

She didn't want that, but she didn't want to lie either. Instead, she compressed her lips and remained silent.

"Well?" Jael's voice ground out.

She forced herself to meet his direct gaze, while she let Rig lean into her once again. "I wanted...to help him." She chose her words with deliberation.

He didn't believe her, she could tell. His left brow arched as he pursed his lips and scowled at her.

"Did he summon you here against your will?"

Rig's arms tightened around her hips, so she said nothing. Jael's expression grew frustrated, almost murderous. "I don't have time for this," he growled. "It isn't safe here. And until one of you starts talking to me, I can't do anything with you but make you come with me. I have work to do. Then I will decide what to do with you."

He snapped his fingers and pointed down the tunnel like he expected them to leap to attention and march off. His superiority over them bristled her frazzled nerves.

She wasn't a child after all, but a grown woman. While she wasn't yet twenty years old, she had been working and caring for other children since she was but twelve years old. First her sister and then the children of others.

Besides, she couldn't go with him. Her husband expected her to arrive in Nestra any day now. She needed to get back to the surface...except...how would she find the

way? So what choice did she have but to do as she was told?

She lifted her chin, careful not to move her injured shoulder. It took her several steadying breaths before she decided what she would say. “Very well. We will follow you for the time being.” She licked her lower lip before continuing, “But I ask that you refrain from shaking or shouting at Rig, please. He’s just a child.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

His frown deepened yet again. “Woman, he isn’t a child of yours. He’s one of the goblinborn, and you have no business taking responsibility for him. It will only get you into trouble.”

Goblinborn?

A tremor rippled through her, and she glanced down at Rig. Was that what he was? A goblin?

Jael exhaled an incredulous laugh. “You truly don’t know where you are?”

She tried not to reveal how wildly her heart raced in her chest.

Goblinborn. That meant Jael, also, was a goblin? He looked almost human. Almost elf. But not quite either. And if Rig and Jael were goblins, then that meant...

Her mouth fell open and formed a soundless circle.

“Yes, dear girl, you’re in Agmon.” This time his lips quirked into a wry smile. “Wherever you came from, however you got here, you’re in the domain of the goblins now.”

Anrid’s skin grew hot and itchy. She tugged at her collar as a wave of dizziness washed over her. “I’m sorry...did you say I’m in Agmon?” she asked, feeling rather dull and slow-witted. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible,” her goblin rescuer retorted with a grim sort of satisfaction.

Rig made as if to back away, but Jael launched forward with surprising speed and caught the little blighter by the collar. Rig writhed but made no vocal complaint, as if he suspected it would do him little good.

“No, you don’t understand,” Anrid argued. “I was in Gelaira. I couldn’t possibly have walked all the way to Agmon.”

“You could have if you were bespelled.” He shook Rig gently, and the goblin child squeaked. “Did you bespell her, imp?”

Rig caught hold of Jael’s fist and hung on for dear life. “She wanted to come, I tell you! She wanted to come!” He howled as if his life depended on it, and perhaps it did.

Jael of the goblins seemed quite furious indeed.

A bit of sense crept back into her thoughts. Anrid lurched and grabbed Jael by the arm. “Oh, do let him go. He’s just a child!”

“Just a child?” Jael sounded flabbergasted. “You really have no clue what is going on here, do you? Don’t they teach impressionable human girls anything? He isn’t a child. He’s goblinborn.”

Anrid blinked, both hands wrapped around his warm, thick wrist. He was speaking words she understood, but she didn’t understand him at all. Oh, she caught the part where he insulted the intelligence (or at least questioned the education) of human girls. She knew she should be irritated about that, but she couldn’t quite break free of her confusion.

“What exactly do you mean by goblinborn? Does that not mean a child born of goblins? A goblin child?”

“Mostly that is correct.” He snorted and gave Rig another gentle shake.

Anrid tightened her grip on his wrist and scowled at him. “Stop doing that and explain, please.”

The goblin stared at her, hard. “I don’t have time to educate you on the care and upbringing of goblins,” he said. When she continued to hold his gaze and his arm, he sighed. “Goblinborn does not necessarily mean child. He might be forty years old, for all I know. Tell her.” He shook Rig again. “How old are you?”

Rig kicked him in the shin, but Jael tightened his grip on the child’s collar and hefted him off the ground, so he kicked and swung like a puppet on a string.

“Yow! Knock it off! Lemme go!” Rig hollered.

Breathless with panic, Anrid curled her fingers into fists. If Jael didn’t put the child down soon, she was liable to lose control of herself and give him a swift kick to the knees.

“Tell her!”

“All right, all right! Ouch! Twenty and five! I be twenty and five, you big rock turd!”

Twenty and five?

“Watch your language!” Jael barked at the boy.

Anrid shook her head. “What are you talking about? You can’t be more than six? Seven? Ten at the most?”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

When Rig's expression didn't change as she increased the number for his age, heat swept through her again. She released her hold on Jael and pressed a stabilizing hand against the tunnel wall.

“You're really twenty-five years old? But you're so—so small!”

Jael finally released Rig with an exhausted sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose and appeared to have reached his limit. “That's the way with the goblinborn. They're never much more than children. They don't grow up. They grow old. They age and die like anyone else, but their minds...their bodies...they stay young. They're like children, but they are not children.”

She let that soak in for a moment. So she'd been kidnapped by a goblin five years her senior who was no bigger than a child of five? And lured into the tunnels of Agmon far from the safety of her caravan? To what purpose?

She opened her mouth to question Rig, but Jael cut her off with an abrupt swipe of his hand. “We don't have time for this.” He sounded irritable. “I need to get back to the Bifrost, and you two will come with me. Oh, no you don't.” He caught Rig by the collar again as the goblinborn tried to dart toward the nearest path of escape.

His focus swung to Anrid, and she feared he might scruff her too. Her hands flew to her throat, and she squeaked as she backed into the tunnel wall. “You, as well. Neither of you are going anywhere but back to Imenborg to sort this mess out. Rock and bone, I don't have time for this...”

The human girl seemed ready to bolt. Her thin frame rocked back and forth while one hand played with the dark red waves that hung over her shoulder. Not that he blamed her, but he was not inclined to chase her through the tunnels. And if he left her to her own devices in this section of tunnels?

It would mean certain death. She might wander in the labyrinth for days without finding another living soul.

And it wasn't like he could trust the goblinborn to return her to her people. Clearly Rig didn't respect the rules, to have kidnapped a human to begin with.

No, like it or not...he was stuck with them both.

The girl lifted hazel eyes to stare at him in a befuddled way, her thoughts too focused on the problem at hand. Clarity dawned with painful slowness. She was easy to read, her emotions close to the surface.

"I can't go with you," she breathed at last. "I need to return to my people."

Should have thought of that before you left them, he nearly ground out, but instead he exhaled. It wasn't her fault. "And you shall, but not until I've seen to my task. It isn't safe right now. I cannot let either of you wander off. Your blood would be on my hands."

Her face paled even further. "I see." She glanced at the goblinborn still caught in his tight grasp, but the little scamp moped toward the wall.

"Stay close," Jael said at last, when the silence continued to wrap around them. She studied him for a moment before offering a quick nod. Her eyes flickered to the goblinborn again but skirted away.

Jael led the way down the tunnel, back to the chamber and the task he had abandoned in favor of saving these two from themselves. He kept a firm hand on the small one's shoulder, not trusting him not to bolt at the first intersection they came to. Jael would need him if he had any hope of returning the girl to her people.

But that would have to wait. The Bifrost still roiled temperamentally. He needed to get those runestones replaced and figure out what had caused the magic to act out.

It mustn't happen again.

With Rig in hand and Anrid at his heels, Jael wound his way around fallen chunks of rock back down the abandoned tunnel. This section of the tunnels was not frequently used: since the goblins kept to themselves, what need had they for tunnels that led to the surface?

"You're in a lot of trouble, you know," he growled to the goblinborn. And if he didn't get those runestones replaced, they'd all be in a lot of trouble.

Rig responded by yanking against the hand on his shoulder.

"It's against the law to bespell humans."

"She wanted to come." The goblinborn spoke with confidence. Perhaps he believed he had done nothing wrong.

"It's still against the law. Besides, she does not seem like she came willingly."

Behind him, the girl coughed. "Perhaps not, but for the sake of transparency...I would have come if I thought he needed help. It's hard to say how much was bespelling and how much was just, well, me being me."

Jael paused and glanced over his shoulder, but Anrid's eyes were on her feet. She almost walked into him before she realized he had stopped. "You would have left your people?"

Her eyes were furtive above a wry, twisted mouth. "I'm a governess. Taking care of children is what I do. And before you tell me he isn't a child—" She raised a warning hand to him. "—it doesn't matter how old he actually is on the outside. He was alone in the woods and needed help. I didn't know who—or what—he was, and I am not sure it would have mattered. I had planned to find him and bring him back to my companions..." She rambled off and seemed to squirm under his intense perusal.

"I told you she wanted to come," Rig muttered.

But Jael ignored him, his focus on the willowy-thin human girl. Her resilience surprised him. "Why are you so determined to defend him when he has wronged you?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

“Who says I’ve been wronged?” Her voice quavered, however. She did think she had been wronged and yet she still defended Rig.

He maintained his stoic expression, but something inside him melted a little. She didn’t realize it, but she had a point. Rig wasn’t entirely to blame. His parents or keeper should have been taking care of him. If anyone was to blame...it was the future Minister of Goblinborn Affairs, who spent more time thinking about Jael’s job than his own.

He grunted and resumed walking. The thrum of the Bifrost called to him from around the next bend. Perhaps he was imagining it, but the magic seemed to be whimpering.

The cool light of the Bifrost mingled with the warm blue-green of the active runestones as they stepped into the chamber. Jael extinguished his amulet runestone he’d been holding to guide them.

Behind him, the human girl gasped. “What is this place?” She sounded breathless as she peeked around his shoulder. He shot her an amused glance but supposed she had a right to be curious.

From what he understood, they didn’t have runestones on the surface. They had no need of them.

But he didn’t have time now to answer her questions. He swept his eyes over the chamber, his heart skipping a beat as his stomach clenched.

A dozen new lines had split the rock walls, crawling up the ceiling and across the

floor. Heat flooded from the jagged cracks, the magic fresh and strong.

He should have brought Math with him. Rock and bone, he needed the extra set of hands now. He released the goblinborn with a stern point to the corner.

“Stay there.”

Rig made a face, his lips twisting beneath his sharp cheekbones, but he sulked over to the corner and threw himself down. The girl remained where she stood, head thrown back as she gawked at the chamber. The flickering runestones brought out the blues in her wide, hazel eyes, glinting off the broaches and beads strung across the front of her apron.

She didn't belong here, her skin browned and freckled by the sun. And her hair: he had never seen hair like hers. It was red, a deep shade, and she had so much of it. It fell down her back, a tangle of waves and small braids. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks, yet another reminder that she lived above ground, far from the tunnels he called home.

He'd never met a human before.

Jael tore his gaze away and searched the chamber for his pack. It lay a couple of yards away, runestones spilling from the opening. He snatched one up and moved to continue his work. The sooner he finished replacing the stones, the sooner he could rid himself of Rig and the goblinborn's kidnapped human.

They were distractions, complications, and he didn't need either of those things right now.

He was on his third runestone when he heard footsteps behind him. The girl stood at his elbow, peeking around his shoulder to watch him work.

“What are you doing?” Her whisper sounded almost reverent.

He suppressed a smile and wondered if all humans were so curious and impressionable. He’d heard that they were more susceptible to things—to the elements, to sickness, to magic.

“These are runestones,” he said at length. He hesitated and then handed her the dead stone he had just pried from the iron casing. She cradled it in both palms as he inserted a new stone and swiped his finger in two circles to activate the binding.

“And there! What do you do there to make the stone glow? And to what purpose?”

He moved down the wall to the next sconce. “The binding rune. The runestones help to keep the Bifrost contained.” He swept a hand to indicate the throbbing lines around the chamber. “Otherwise, they run wild and make the tunnels unsafe.”

She turned her attention back to the stone in her hand and seemed to debate something. Then she lifted a finger and traced the circles on the stone. She’d been paying attention. When nothing happened, her expression fell then turned sheepish.

He couldn’t help it: a chuckle slipped past his lips. “Not everyone has an affinity for runes,” he explained. “Humans less than most.”

Heat flamed across her freckled cheeks, and she coughed as if to hide her embarrassment. “Of course.” She set the stone on the pile he had been collecting to take back to Imenborg.

She paid attention to details: he had to give her that. Just not enough attention to avoid being bespelled by mischievous little scamps.

The Bifrost hissed as he moved to the next faulty runestone. Easy, he thought, I’m

coming. But the magic thrummed against his attempts to soothe. Such temper! He frowned when the clasp he was working with refused to open.

“It’s so warm,” the girl murmured to his left.

He grunted an affirmative and pulled a small knife from his belt to pry apart the prongs locking the runestone in place.

“And so pretty. It almost seems—alive—somehow.”

He suppressed a surge of irritation. Her chattering was a distraction he had no time for. There was something wrong with the prongs on this clasp. They simply refused to open...

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

A sudden cessation of feminine conversation caused him to glance up just in time to see the girl with hair the color of dark red clay stretching out her hand toward a large crack in the wall.

“Don’t—”

But his warning came too late. A blinding flash of light and recoil of magic flung the human across the chamber and against the opposite wall with a horrific smacking sound.

Chapter 7

For some reason, the magical force within the cracks in the cave wall called to Anrid. The warmth, the luminescent glow, and something else...she couldn't quite put her finger on it. It was almost as if she heard the whisper of voices calling out to her from deep within the vacillating light of what the goblin man called the Bifrost.

But that was ridiculous. Light didn't have a voice to speak.

And yet she swore it called to her.

She stretched out her right hand toward the radiance pouring out of the rock.

The world exploded. Blinding light wrapped around her at the same moment her body went rigid. She couldn't move or cry out. Pain roared through her entire being in alternating flashes of heat and ice. But that wasn't even the worst of it.

The voices screaming in her head drowned out all else. They were so loud, so frantic, she feared her head would explode from the pressure. Too many, too thunderous...

She longed to press her palms over her ears as the myriad of screams coalesced into a unified thought: They are coming. They are coming.

THEY ARE COMING.

A new pain slammed through her, a pain of body and bone. The shock of it ripped her away from the voices clawing at her mind. She gasped for breath and blinked her eyes, but she saw nothing but hot white light.

She must be dying. Is this what one saw when they faced the last moments of their life?

Already she felt the hands of those who had gone before clawing at her body. Hands tugged at her arms and firm fingers turned her face side to side. Strange, she could even feel calluses catching against the tender skin on her throat.

Did the dead have calluses?

They are coming, the unified voice whispered, but it was further away this time, in the back of her mind. The light seemed to recede as well, but the pain remained.

She moaned.

Something else remained too, besides the whisper of voices in her thoughts, but she didn't know what it was. Whatever it was, it felt foreign. Alien.

It didn't belong.

It clung to her insides as if clawing for purchase, digging in, anchoring itself to her thoughts, her memories, her feelings. She wanted it out—wanted it gone. But, unable to move, she couldn't do anything to make it go away.

At last, her blinking eyes cleared away the light and replaced it with impenetrable darkness. But that was even worse, the shadows pressing down on her from every direction. It pressed on all sides as if it were a malevolent thing, seeking to smother her.

“Steady.” A deep but gentle voice wove through the darkness. “You’re going to be fine.”

The shadows lifted her from the ground and held her close. Icy fingers caught hold of her ankle and a choking voice called out, “Is she dead? Uh-NEE?”

It occurred to her she knew that voice, that it was important or should mean something to her. But the memory linked to the impression eluded her. Instead, she rode on waves of consciousness, held fast in shadowy arms as she sank deeper and deeper into the darkness.

When she emerged from blissful rest, she felt anything but rested. She couldn't remember where she was or how she had gotten here. The lack of information rocked her with ripples of fear. When her arms and legs spasmed, arms tightened around her.

“Easy! You’re in no danger.”

She drew ragged breaths until she collected her senses.

The voice belonged to the goblin who had rescued her not once but twice now. She groaned, as much from embarrassment as from soreness. What her sister would think of her, getting into all this trouble and fainting and needing to be saved. Dagmar

would tease her mercilessly.

“What happened?” she managed at last. Her stomach roiled, and she pressed a hand against it.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

“You touched the Bifrost, fool girl,” Jael said. He all but grunted the words, as if annoyed by her recklessness.

She hadn’t known any better, she wanted to say in her own defense, but defending oneself against unfounded accusations required energy, and she had none to spare.

Her eyes refused to stay open.

Jael drew uneven breaths, his chest expanding and contracting as he kept a brisk pace. It occurred to her then the awkwardness of her situation.

“I think I could walk if you put me down.”

He didn’t answer right away but kept moving onward. “I don’t doubt you’d try,” he said at last, the words tinged with resignation. “It’s quicker this way.”

“Rig?”

“I’m here,” the small voice piped up from behind them. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave you.”

She managed a wheezing laugh that ended in a moan of discomfort. Every bone felt as if it had been knocked about, every muscle bruised, every emotion battered until it was raw.

She dozed and reawakened several times before she had the energy to put words together again. “Where are you taking us? Are we going back to the surface?”

His breathing hitched. “No.” The word sounded curt, almost guarded. “I’m afraid that’s not possible now.”

“I don’t understand.” She struggled to shift into a more upright position, but his arms were like iron around her, and it was clear he had no intention of setting her down. “I need to get back to my caravan.”

“I’m well aware. But you touched the Bifrost.”

“You glowed,” Rig whispered. The little goblin’s fingers caught hold of her ankle bone, just above her leather shoes. Goblinborn, she reminded herself. Apparently, it was an important distinction.

Wait. She must have hit her head hard, because she thought he had said she was glowing. What foolishness. She encouraged imagination in children, but not in times like these.

Not when she was being carted through dark tunnels by goblins with magic rocks stashed in their pockets.

“I admit I took a tumble,” she said at last. She frowned and searched for an argument that might sway him. “But I am quite recovered. You can take me back now, I assure you.”

“Would that I could. But you touched the Bifrost.” Why did he keep saying that? Before she might question his dogged persistence, he continued, “And it touched you back.”

A niggling voice in the back of her mind reacted to this. She should remember something, but she couldn’t recall much of anything before she fainted.

“You glowed like a fairy princess, Uh-NEE,” Rig said, still clinging to her ankle as he trotted to keep up with Jael’s long, steady stride. The goblinborn clutched a glowing runestone in his other hand and held it high to light their way through the dark section of tunnel they traveled.

“Don’t be silly,” she whispered back. “You’re letting your imagination run away with you.”

“No,” Jael said, his breath warm against her ear. The sickish roil in her stomach renewed with a vengeance. “He’s not. And until I determine the Bifrost has not caused harm to you or made you a danger to others, I’m afraid you’re going to have to stay with me.”

“I can’t do that!” she protested. “I need you to take me back to the surface. My—my husband is expecting me. I only agreed to come with you until you had time to help me find my way out of here.”

His step faltered. “You’re married?”

“Well, no, not yet, but I am promised.”

He was silent for a time. “You’re in Gelaira because of the Treaty. One of the peaceweavers for the dark elves.”

She winced at the disapproval in his voice. Did he object to her willingness to marry a stranger or to the stranger insisting she present herself to be married? “Yes. So, you see, I must return.”

He grunted yet again. “He will have to wait. There’s nothing for it. You’re coming to Imenborg.”

She clutched the fabric of his robes, feeling she was in danger of falling. Perhaps she should ask to be put down and then run away. But what foolishness! She wouldn't know where to go, and even if she did, she wouldn't be able to find her way in the dark. He certainly wouldn't be eager to give her a magic rock to help her in these dark tunnels. She swallowed the taste of bile in the back of her throat.

“And—and if I don't want to go to—to Imenborg?”

His breathing seemed to quicken. “I’m afraid you don’t have a choice in the matter.”

Chapter 8

Jael had to give her credit. The human did not dissolve into a sobbing mess at his refusal to return her to her people. In fact, quite the opposite, she’d gone silent. He glanced down at her face to make sure she had not swooned—she hadn’t—but the angle of her head made it difficult for him to discern her expression.

He cleared his throat and plodded onward. They were almost back to Imenborg. His arms ached. Although Anrid was slight of build, the journey back through the tunnels had been a long one. And his thigh hurt where the falling rock had battered him. He was sure he would have a nasty bruise to show for his heroic efforts.

Not that anyone would care.

All he would hear about were the tremors that had made their way back to the capitol. The earthquake had been of such a ferocity, he didn’t dare hope the shaking remained localized.

“You’re going the wrong way.”

The small but authoritative voice brought him up short. Jael turned to squint down at the goblinborn. The cocky fellow stood with one hand on his hip and the other pointing down a side tunnel that led to an abandoned cavern below Imenborg. It used to be an adjacent storage chamber but hadn’t been used in years.

“That isn’t the way to go,” Jael disagreed. He kept his tone calm, but he was feeling rather annoyed and anxious about the whole day’s events. “Imenborg is this way.”

“I know that,” Rig said with frustrated wrinkle of his nose. “But the others are this way.”

Anxiety pulsed against his temples with renewed strength. “Others? What others?” His stomach sank and twisted into a knot.

“Medda,” Anrid whispered with a resigned sigh.

“Yes. Medda.” The goblinborn nodded his head enthusiastically. “And the others.”

Others. Dragons bite him.

“You never said anything about others,” Anrid said, unaware of his distress and frustration.

“Oh, yes, a couple others.”

A couple...there were probably a dozen renegade fellows hiding down in that storage room. Perhaps he should send someone back to fetch them...

But no, the sensible thing to do would be to collect them now, since he was here. But he was so tired. And his body hurt.

Instead, Jael stooped to lower the human girl to the ground. She clung to his shirt before she felt the ground beneath her. Then she let go and pushed gently against his chest as if to shoo him away. She was probably glad to be free of him.

“Go and fetch your little friends then,” Jael ordered as he sat down beside the girl.

“I’m going to catch my breath.”

Rig nodded and tore out of sight, his shoes slapping against the cavern floor as he disappeared. The runestone he held cast erratic shadows and light against the wall before plunging Jael and Anrid into total darkness. He could have pulled out another runestone...but he just wanted to close his eyes for a moment.

“I’m sorry to have caused so much trouble.” Her whispered apology turned his head in her direction. Her breathing seemed loud.

Yes, a whopping load of trouble. But then he took hold of his irritation. “It’s not your fault,” he muttered. “Your little friend has much explaining to do, however.”

“You’re—you’re not going to hurt him, are you?” She sounded concerned.

“Why do you care so much? He kidnapped you, after all. Got you into this mess.” Got them both into this mess.

“I know you say he isn’t a child...but he seems like one to me. And I can’t help but...well, take care of little ones. I’ve been taking care of my sister since I was a child myself. I suppose you might say I was born into it.”

He said nothing as he made himself more comfortable against the wall, one arm resting on the knee he drew toward his chest. He closed his eyes and allowed a moment to collect his thoughts.

“I can understand that.” He didn’t elaborate. It wasn’t any of her business who he was or what he had been born to do. Or that her presence was interfering with that obligation.

It wasn’t her fault.

“What—what is going to happen to me?” Her voice had dropped so low he struggled to decipher her words.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

He winced, realizing she must fear for her life. He hadn't done a thing to assure her that he meant her no harm. Quite the contrary.

"No harm will come to you," he hurried to explain. "But I cannot let you go home until I determine why the Bifrost reached out to you. From what I understand, humans don't usually possess an affinity for magic. But I've heard your people are more susceptible to its effects. You're more...fragile. Vulnerable."

She snorted. He wished he could see her face then because he wondered what she was thinking. Had he insulted her?

"How long will that take?"

"You're the first human I've ever met. I can't predict what this all means."

A startled silence answered him. "You never met another human?"

"No. Your kind don't venture down here. Haven't as long as I've been here, anyway."

Something stirred in the tunnels. Jael's head lifted, and he scanned the darkness as the sound of footsteps echoed toward them. Rig must be returning with the rest of his little gang. He stood up and brushed off the back of his trousers. Soon rune light flickered against the tunnel walls, mingled with the shadows of approaching figures.

As Rig burst from the tunnel, brandishing his runestone high as if it were a trophy, a slew of tiny bodies crowded the opening behind him.

Jael's mouth went dry.

“Here we are!” Rig announced, beaming. A tiny goblinborn girl clung to his side, peering beneath jagged bangs. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and sucked as she blinked up at them. His gaze shifted to the others—the “couple” others.

Most were smaller than Rig, some with blue eyes, some with green, some portly and others thin. All of them wore tattered clothes covered in dirt and grime.

Dragon's bite him, his initial guess had been sorely too low. Heat rose from his belly into his face, and he curled his fingers into fists that dug nails into his palms.

At least three dozen faces grinned back at him from the shadows.

He felt a little ill as he led the way down the final corridor toward Imenborg. What in the world was he to do? They didn't have the staff or the facilities to take care of three dozen goblinborn orphans. Behind him, said orphans crowded around Anrid. They clamored for her attention, talking over one another as they giggled and bounced around. Already they were falling behind.

He paused and waited for them to catch up. Anrid caught his eye as she struggled toward him through the sea of small bodies. Dark circles of exhaustion hugged her eyes, but she managed a lopsided smile and arched an eyebrow as if to apologize for the delay.

A small hand tugged at his trousers. He studied the sleepy, heart-shaped face of the little girl that resembled Rig.

“I like you,” she said with a toothy smile.

“Um...thank you?” He hesitated before patting her on the head. In response, she

wrapped her arms and legs around his leg, latching onto him like a leech. He jostled his leg to dislodge her, but she giggled and clung tighter. Resigned, he shot Anrid a helpless look. A headache raged behind his temples, and he longed to find a quiet room to collect his thoughts. And his sanity. “Can you try to make—sense of all this?”

Anrid cleared her throat. “Attention, please. Attention!” She clapped her hands, but the goblinborn ignored her as they jostled each other around and pushed against her. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled shrilly. The sound bounced down the tunnel and silenced the crowd.

Three dozen expectant faces stared at her.

“Excellent. Now I want you to form two lines. Here and here. Youngest to oldest. No, no—what’s your name?”

“Crag.”

“Crag, you go to the back.” She caught the older boy by the arm and ushered him out of the front of the line. He whined in disgruntlement, but to Jael’s surprise obeyed her instructions.

Anrid turned toward Jael. “You too, pretty girl. Medda, is it?”

The leech wrapped around his leg giggled.

“Release the nice man, now—er, the nice goblin—and come get in line. You can be in front, yes?”

“Yeth!” she squealed and slid down Jael’s leg to sit on his foot as she untangled her limbs and tried to get back to her feet. The entire time, she laughed as if riding legs

was the funniest thing she'd ever done.

Anrid braced one hand against the wall after she'd successfully maneuvered little Medda and the last of the younglings into two ragged lines.

“You have some experience with wrangling hordes,” Jael muttered.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:54 am

She shoved bangs from her eyes with a weary smile. “Indubitably.”

He blinked. While he understood what she meant, that wasn’t a word he had heard used often. “It isn’t far now.” He furrowed his brow and considered his next words. “Are you well enough to continue?”

Her hesitance in responding suggested she wasn’t doing well. But she studied the young ones in a pensive manner before squaring her shoulders and lifting her head. “Perhaps if I might borrow your arm, we can continue?”

He nodded and jutted an elbow at her. She linked her arm with his, a strange expression on her face. Still, her fingers gripped his arm, and she drew a stabilizing breath. “Do you have food where we are going?” she whispered.

“Um...yes?”

“Good. I’m about to give it away,” she muttered before calling over her shoulder, “All right, children, stay in your lines and no falling behind. If you’re very good, I will ask our nice friend to give you a treat when we arrive.”

Cheers reverberated down the tunnel, heralding their approach to Imenborg.

Chapter 9

The tunnel opened before them into a massive cavern. Still holding tight to the goblin’s arm, Anrid caught her breath and took stock of her new surroundings.

She gasped aloud.

The cavern itself resembled a normal cave, with stalagmites growing up from the floor and more limestone and mineral columns growing down from the ceiling. Glowing runestones dotted the ceiling and flooded the chamber with pale light. And at the far side of the cavern, built into the wall itself, sat what must be Imenborg. Five or six stories tall, with balconies and towers and parapets, and more blue and amethyst light spilling from wide-open windows, Imenborg could have popped right out of a story book.

“Oh my.”

Behind her, the children crowded to see around them. “Is this it?” one boy asked. “Rig! Is this home?”

“Yeth!” Medda crowed as she climbed onto the Jael’s leg again. “Ma and Da have brought us home!”

Cheers erupted once again.

Anrid and Jael exchanged horrified looks. Ma and Da? Shades, did these children think they had been adopted? Clearly, Jael had no intention of adopting three dozen little charges, although Imenborg looked like it might have the room to house them, at least from here.

“I believe things have gotten rather out of hand,” she managed at last, knuckles white as she gripped his arm.

His mouth snapped shut, all expression vanishing. “You don’t say,” he growled. “This is a pickle. There’s nothing for it, for now: rally your troops, girl. And get this one off me.” He shook his leg, the one Medda clung to. The movement only made the

little one melt into roars of laughter. For one so small, she had powerful lung capacity.

Anrid stooped to peel the goblin girl free, but Medda merely transferred her affections and wrapped two bony arms around Anrid's neck. She sighed in contentment and buried her face into Anrid's shoulder. Anrid held onto the girl with one arm and tried to rise to her feet, but her weary, aching body failed her. She crumpled into an undignified heap on the floor. Oof, her shoulder hurt.

Tears pricked her eyes. She wasn't sure she could go another step on her own, let alone carry Medda. But then Jael leaned down and scooped her up. She squeaked and wrapped one arm around his neck while clinging to Medda, but the sound was lost in the goblin girl's giggles as she too was swept up into strong arms. The rest of the children burst into excited laughter.

"I want a ride too!" the one called Crag shouted. He shoved little ones out of his way, an imposing little figure with his broad shoulders and baggy trousers with bulging pockets.

"Stay in your lines," Jael barked to the giggling children behind them. They snapped to attention and jostled themselves around into rows even less organized than before. Crag had to be redirected to the back of the line again. Peeking over Jael's shoulder, Anrid was pretty sure there were three lines now. As long as they followed and didn't get lost, she didn't have the energy to reorganize them.

Her eyelids closed against her will. Why was she so tired? The heat of Medda's tiny body pressed against her mingled with the warmth of Jael's arms. Solidness and softness.

She exhaled and stopped fighting the battle with her exhaustion. As long as he insisted on carrying her, she might as well catch her breath for a moment. Medda laid

her head against Anrid's chest and also breathed a contented sigh.

The poor thing must be starved for attention, she thought, moments before she blacked out.

When she woke, Imenborg loomed above them. She groaned. Medda lay still on top of her, her breathing deep and even. Apparently, the poor wee lamb had fallen asleep too. She suppressed a yawn.

"Have we lost anyone?" she whispered.

He snorted. "I haven't counted them, so I wouldn't know. Although, judging by the state of them, the promise of food has kept anyone from wandering off."

So he had noticed their ill state: the jutting bones, hungry eyes, and rumbling bellies. That made her like him; perhaps she could forgive him for shaking Rig.

"Food is a powerful motivator," she agreed. A yawn cut off anything else she might have said. She let her head lean into his shoulder once again. "I'm really sorry..."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He didn't respond, and she hadn't the energy to prompt an answer from him. She yawned and watched Imenborg loom closer. They walked a wide path marked by rows of stones on both sides seeming to lead to the main entrance's double doors. Someone waited for them. A goblin man, she realized. He leaned against the wall, one ankle hooked over the other as he lazily watched them approaching.

Whoever he was, he didn't make much of a guard.

"He doesn't make much of anything," Jael grumbled in her ear.

Skadi's frost, had she said that out loud?

"Well met, brother dearest!" the goblin called as they drew close to the base of stairs leading up to the entrance. "What have you done now? Did you go and steal yourself a family?" He remained as he was, leaning against the wall as if he had all the time in the world.

The goblin holding her seemed to choke and fell into a fit of coughing. "Hold your tongue, Kora, or I will hold it for you. Rock and bone."

It sounded like a curse, but she couldn't say for sure. It wasn't an expression she had ever heard before. He should know better than to use such language in front of children, so hopefully it was a harmless expression.

"I suppose this is your doing," Jael continued, swiping a hand to indicate his whispering entourage. Anrid flicked a wide-eyed gaze between him and his brother. Kora, he had called him, still maintained his carefree pose, cutting an elegant and

rather attractive figure with flowing white hair and a piercing way about him. He was a fellow who looked good and knew it.

Kora studied her in return, then winked before he splayed a hand across his chest and turned back to Jael. “You wound me. I have nothing to do with this lovely bunch of lads and lassies.”

“Which is ironic considering you’re supposed to be the future Minister of Goblinborn Affairs.” Jael’s tone was more growl than speech. “Take charge of this lot.”

Kora waved a dismissive hand. “I am not here for that, and you know it. But I am interested in this beautiful lady. Wherever did you find her? Kidnap yourself a bride, did you? Jael, I didn’t think you had it in you!”

Heat exploded in her cheeks. Skadi help her, Kora was a forward one, wasn’t he?

Jael spluttered, his arms tightening around her and Medda. “I did nothing of the sort! It was your goblin horde that did that! Bepelled her right out from under her own people’s noses!”

Kora assessed her with a knowing smile. “I can see why you didn’t take her back, though. That hair.”

Anrid blew a noisy breath through her nose. “I don’t appreciate you talking about me, or these poor children, as if we were a litter of puppies you found under a bush.” The words came out sharper than she intended. Startled, she lost everything else she might have wanted to say. She floundered for a minute as Kora’s eyebrows rose, a smile quirking about his mouth. “And—and I don’t like you talking about my hair either,” she finally mumbled. “It’s none of your business.”

Kora blinked twice and then burst into laughter. He pushed away from the wall,

hands braced against his knees like she had been so ridiculously funny he couldn't even hold himself upright. The heat in her cheeks escalated even further.

She must be as red as her hair.

Kora straightened, flicking a finger at the corner of his eye to chase a tear she was entirely convinced did not exist. "I like this one, Jael. You can keep her."

"I have no intention of keeping her!" Jael barked at the same time Anrid spluttered, "I don't want to be kept!"

Medda lifted her head with a noisy yawn. "Why all da yelling?" she complained. She stretched luxuriously and then smiled at Anrid. There was something adoring and trusting in the child's little face. Anrid melted a little bit.

She was in danger of doing anything this little one wanted her to do, just to elicit more such expressions. That part of her that longed for her own family ached with joy.

Maybe her future dark elf husband liked goblin children and wouldn't mind if she brought a few home with her.

Chapter 10

"Perhaps you should put me down now," Anrid whispered. "I can walk from here, I think."

Jael experienced a brief pang of reticence and found it rather befuddling. Where had that come from? It's not as if he liked carting women through the tunnels when he was bone tired and preoccupied with other things.

Even if they were soft and doe-eyed with hair a shocking shade he longed to feel beneath his fingers to see if it was real.

“Yes, Jael,” Kora agreed. “Do put the poor woman down. You’re clinging to her like you’re afraid she’s going to get away. And if you don’t intend to keep her, you shouldn’t be so possessive. You might give the wrong impression...a prince should be careful of such things, you know.”

When Kora clucked his tongue in disapproval, Jael scowled. He was going to throttle him. “As if you know anything about making a good impression.” He adjusted his grip so that the girl’s feet swung toward the ground. She kept a tight hold on Medda, who whimpered in protest.

“Did he just say—did he call you—are you—” As Anrid situated her feet beneath her, Jael kept a supportive arm around her shoulders, still not trusting her not to collapse.

It was the gentlemanly thing to do, he was sure. Granted, he knew nothing about human gentlemen...but it was the decent thing to do for goblin runemasters.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Did he call you a prince?” She seemed to spit out the word.

“Um, yes? I suppose he did. I am one.”

Her eyes grew round as runestones. “You’re a prince?”

Why did she seem to find this so unsettling? Under the shocked intensity of her scrutiny, his skin grew rather hot around his collar. “Erm, yes, didn’t I mention that?”

Still gaping at him as if he’d sprouted horns, the human girl shook her head.

“Yes, well, we don’t make a fuss about it. So, um, just call me Jael and pretend I never said anything.”

Kora coughed pointedly. “I am a prince, too,” he said with a bright smile. “You can make a fuss about me, if you’d like.”

The human’s face flushed scarlet once again, and she stammered unintelligibly. Jael raked his brother with a fierce look, which prompted Kora to school his expression into something more solemn, although not contrite.

The girl drew a shaky breath. “Well. Oh. Um, you’re going to have to walk now, little one.” Anrid lowered Medda to the ground. “You’re too heavy for me to carry today.”

“Tomorrow?” Medda chirped. “You carry me tomorrow?”

“Er...” Anrid turned her face toward Jael, as if asking for permission.

He shrugged, too worn out to even speculate what tomorrow might hold.

“Perhaps. But be a good girl and get down. Here. I’ll hold your hand.” Medda clambered down and took a firm grip on Anrid’s fingers. Then she shot a smug look over her tiny shoulder at the others.

“I want to hold your hand, Uh-NEE!” Rig shouted.

This instigated a roar from the rest of the crowd as every last one of the little scamps dove for Anrid. She toppled into Jael and before he could catch her, she disappeared beneath a flood of arms and legs. The arguing escalated to yelling as the goblinborn pushed and shoved each other in their eagerness to get to Anrid.

Jael grabbed flailing limbs and tried to unearth the human girl squealing beneath the pile of writhing bodies. Someone bit him on the leg, and he barely refrained from kicking out.

Then Kora was there, carving a path through the melee like the Bifrost through stone. He hoisted Rig by the waist and chucked him in one direction, then caught another little fellow and flung him the other way. While Jael was still trying to peel a screaming Medda off his leg—again—Kora reached Anrid and plucked her from the ground. She climbed him with the agility of a rock monkey and ended up clinging to Kora’s back, one arm hooked around his neck as the goblinborn leaped about and wailed around her.

If the situation wasn’t so deplorable, Jael might have laughed at the surprised look on his little brother’s face.

Medda growled like a little bear. Jael yelped as her razor-sharp teeth dug into his calf.

That was going to leave a mark.

He finally peeled her off and hoisted her against his chest. She gripped his shirt with tiny fingers, a look of intense satisfaction on her face.

“Enough!” he bellowed, holding Crag, the biggest of the goblinborn, at arm’s length by splaying his palm across the lad’s forehead. The fellow swung and kicked as he tried to get at Jael. Something in the boy’s pocket moved moments before a creature scurried up the goblin child’s tunic and then up Jael’s arm. He yelped in surprise and tried to shake the creature off, but the animal scurried to sit on his shoulder and shriek and hiss in disapproval. It took him a moment to realize he was looking at a scruffy little rock monkey with a bright blue nose and bulbous black eyes. White tufts sprouted in place of eyebrows and from the tips of the ears.

“What is that?” Anrid demanded in alarm as Jael scruffed the monkey and shoved it back toward its owner. Crag collected his pet and cradled it against his stomach, glaring at Jael as if he were to blame for alarming the tiny thing. Jael brushed off his arm and shoulder, sure the rock monkey was covered in bugs and other things he’d rather not consider.

“Children, children!” Anrid called to get their attention. Then, she shifted her hold on Kora so that she could get her pinkies in her mouth. It brought her face dangerously close to Kora’s, and Jael felt a surge of displeasure. In fact, he didn’t like the way Kora had hold of her thighs to keep her from falling, either.

It wasn’t at all gentlemanly, for human or goblin.

But then Anrid loosed another shrill whistle.

The kerfuffle dissipated as one head after another jerked up and turned in her direction. Even Medda ceased trying to gnaw the flesh from his shoulder.

“That,” Anrid gasped, her face cherry-red and beaded with sweat, “is quite enough. I

am—appalled. Truly appalled. You get yourselves into your lines. Now.”

To his utter amazement, the snuffling, glaring horde pushed and shoved their way into their uneven rows. After only a minute or two of fussing, they stood in relative silence and peered at Anrid, waiting for instructions.

Jael didn't know what to say.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“You’re incredible,” Kora told her, turning his face so that his cheek brushed against hers. Anrid jerked back and wiggled to be put down. Kora seemed less than inclined to release her, but a warning growl from Jael seemed to change his mind.

Anrid steadied herself and stepped away from Kora, frantically smoothing her apron and hair as if trying to put herself back in order. She faced the rows of expectant faces and seemed to gather her wits about her.

“Now,” she said in a firm voice, “you will follow Prince Jael into the house without making a peep. Quiet as mice.” She held a finger to her lips. “If you want any food, you will not push and will walk nice.”

“Quiet as mice!” Rig giggled from the back of the line. His white hair stood on end, the flush of an emerging bruise on his cheekbone, but the lad grinned from ear to ear and held a conspiratorial finger to his lips.

“Yes. Quiet as mice,” Anrid confirmed. When she said nothing further, Jael realized she was waiting for him to take the lead.

He cleared his throat. “Well, then. Kora, you bring up the rear and make sure we don’t lose anyone. With me, you lot.” Still clutching Medda against his chest, he marched up the stairs and led the way into the keep.

Medda, bless her foul little soul, leaned her head on his thrice-bitten shoulder, grabbed a fistful of his shirt, and began sucking the fabric with happy sighs.

Apparently, all was forgiven.

With a roll of the eyes, he stalked into Imenborg with three dozen tip-toeing goblins at his heels, wondering how much scrubbing it would take to get the spit out of his robes.

They invaded the kitchen as quietly as a colony of shrieking bats. The orderly lines had dissipated several corridors prior, despite Anrid's best attempts to the contrary. The cook, a portly fellow with ruddy cheeks and prickly brown hair, sat in his rocker next to the fire, eyes bulging.

"My apologies, Granger," Jael hollered over the uproar. "We have guests. Please tell me you have some food. Any food. Bring it all out, mate. Every last crumb!"

Granger left his rocker and bolted to the larder on the other side of the kitchen, next to a pump that piped fresh mountain spring water into his massive sinks. But instead of throwing the doors open to feed the sea of growling bellies, he planted himself in front of said doors and brandished a wooden spoon.

Anrid's whistle pierced the chaos. This time, the technique wasn't as effective. But one by one she caught the rampaging goblins and guided them to benches around the long stone tables scattered on the dining side of the cavern. Jael assisted her, shooting vile looks at Kora who had made himself comfortable right in the doorway and watched them all with a smirk.

Medda planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek as he plunked her onto the bench next to her brother. He resisted the urge to wipe it away—the expression of affection had been more tongue than anything else.

Anrid paced around the table and tried to get everyone situated. Jael retreated to the safety of the kitchen and scowled at Granger. "Feed them now," he growled, "before she loses control of them again."

The cook arched a bushy eyebrow at him. “Feeding that lot will empty the larder.”

“I’ll get you more goods,” Jael promised, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just feed them. Please.”

Granger nodded, albeit cautiously as he scanned the mob on the other side of the cavern. “That lot’s half starved.”

Jael frowned in agreement while the cook summoned his nerve and dared to open his precious larder. Jael returned to the doorway, each step strengthening his resolve to murder his brother before the day was out.

“If I find out you had anything to do with this...” He let the threat trail into silence.

Kora sniffed and peered down his nose. “Why should I have anything to do with this?”

Jael didn’t grace that with a response, not when they both knew Kora was there lobbying for his position as Runemaster. “Make yourself useful and go find Trap, the housekeeper. Tell her we need reinforcements.”

Kora choked on a laugh at this but managed to school his features.

“Laugh all you want, but unless you find me some bodies, you’ll be the one rocking them to sleep tonight.”

His brother grinned and shoved off the wall. “Succinctly put, brother dear.”

“And baths.” Jael wrinkled his nose and peeked over his shoulder. “They all need scrubbing. We’ll worry about clothes tomorrow. Unless she can scrounge up some shirts from the rest of the staff. They would serve as sleeping clothes.”

Kora smirked at him and offered a mock bow. “Look at you, Jay. It’s like you were born for this.” He winked and spun on his heel, disappearing into the shadowy corridor beyond.

A horrible nausea yawned inside him. If he wasn’t careful, before this was over, he would find himself rocking little ones to sleep while Kora stole his job right out from under him.

He tried not to dwell on that too much. Surely his father would not put Kora into such an important position, not when he knew his sons’ strengths and weaknesses.

No. Runemaster was who Jael was, who he was born to be...that wasn’t going to change just because Kora had an itch to reinvent himself. Jael couldn’t imagine any future other than the one he had painstakingly mapped out for himself.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He turned, rather pleased with his logical reasoning, to watch Anrid settling the children down as Granger prepared a quick meal. She was setting the table and as she went, she touched a shoulder here, ruffled unruly curls over there, stroked a dirty cheek with the side of her little finger. She hesitated when she reached Crag, who lifted his rock monkey for a pet. To her credit, she patted the animal between its tufted ears before moving on.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, unaware he was mimicking Kora's own behavior from earlier, and watched as she moved around the tables. She must be exhausted and scared...and yet there she stood, offering comfort and compassion to complete strangers.

Compassion he had not been too keen to offer himself. But no, he reasoned in his own defense that he hadn't tossed them all out, and that he had chosen to bring them home. But he had done it grudgingly.

Anrid was anything but grudging, and she was the only true victim in the room. She'd been kidnapped, ensorcelled, mobbed, and attacked by magic. She didn't know these children, didn't owe them anything, and yet she was taking care of them as if they were her own.

He tugged at the tall collar of his undertunic.

Great. Now he felt like an unforgiveable cad.

They left the kitchen in total disarray. Anrid muttered an apology to the poor cook who had to clean up after them. She wanted to assist, but she suspected she wasn't even going to survive bedtime, let alone make it to wherever she was going to sleep for the night. She would make it up to the cook tomorrow, she decided.

Anrid gripped two sticky, yawning goblins and trailed after Jael and the female in a rumpled canvas apron he had introduced as his housekeeper. Trap was a stout goblin lady with brown hair and a square face with dimples. Her expression had been guarded as she observed the large number of children thrust into her charge, but then she rubbed her hands together and took things in hand.

At long last, they stopped at the top of the stone stairs and turned into a chamber on the right. Humid air washed over Anrid, sticking to her skin. She drew in a stabilizing breath before she tugged her two charges into what must be the bathing chamber.

A chorus of howls erupted as soon as they realized what lay in store for them. Half a dozen goblin maids in mobcaps and aprons waited to catch them and plunge them into steaming tubs. Anrid approached, tugging both her goblins after her, and peered into the steaming water.

The copper tubs glowed from within, the bottoms filled with blue runestones covered in tiny bubbles. She wondered if the stones only offered light or if they caused the water to be hot, as well. Perhaps she could find out later.

How she wished she could be the one climbing into that tub. Instead, she handed off her charges and let the maids take over. There were tears and bawling for the first few minutes, but after half a dozen of the children had made it into the washtubs and realized it wasn't so bad, the atmosphere gradually changed.

Soon splashing water and floating soap bubbles filled the room, along with the frequent shriek of mirth or a hearty belly laugh.

These little ones did nothing by halves, that was for certain.

Anrid leaned against the smooth stone wall and closed her eyes. She felt lightheaded and weary in a way she had never been before. Every bone, every muscle, every thought...it all hurt.

Rough fingers caught her elbow and gave a gentle squeeze. Her eyes flew open, but it was only Jael. He stared down at her; dark smudges high on his cheekbones revealed his own weariness.

“Come with me,” he ordered. “Trap can take it from here.”

“I promise I’ll tuck them into bed as if they were my own!” the housekeeper called from behind the largest tub where she scrubbed Rig’s hair with alarming force.

Anrid hesitated, concerned the housekeeper may not treat her own as gently as she perhaps ought. Rig stared at her mournfully as she moved to follow Jael to the door.

“Uh-NEE!” he shrieked and tried to clamber out of the tub, but Trap caught him just in time and hauled him back into the water, receiving a face-full of soap bubbles for her efforts. “Don’t go, Uh-NEE!”

Soon the others began to take up the lament. Tears of desperation pricked at Anrid’s eyes. She wanted to help them, wanted to help them more than she had ever wanted to do anything in her life, but she had nothing left to give.

A dripping-wet figure streaked through the room and threw itself at Anrid. She might have gone down had Jael not been holding onto her elbow still. Medda twisted toward them, betrayal of the worst sort etched all over her face.

The goblin child didn’t have a stitch of clothes on. One of the maids rushed over with

a towel and threw it around her, but Medda bared sharp teeth and fought back when the maid tried to pick her up.

“Don’t bother with that one,” Jael said. “She’s a cannibal.” He grabbed what might have been two bony elbows beneath the towel and hauled Medda up against his chest. “We’ll take this one with us. Give me one of those shirts.”

The rest of the children began to wail.

“None of that!” Jael shouted over the din. Then he glanced at Anrid and pursed his lips, a whistle echoing through the bathing chamber.

It did no good.

Tears leaked from Anrid’s eyes. She turned to him, almost desperately. “I can’t.” It was all she managed to say.

With Medda still curled into his neck, he caught hold of Anrid’s elbow again and herded her to the door. “They’ll be fine,” he told her as they left the sticky warmth of the bathing chamber and stepped back into the cool, dark corridor. He closed the door with a bang, but muffled wails still seeped past the door.

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Medda disentangled herself from the towel and patted her on the head. “S’okay, s’okay,” she murmured.

Anrid choked on a laugh that turned into another sob. The prince must think her a complete lunatic. She surreptitiously tried to wipe her nose on the shoulder of her dress. He said nothing and tugged her arm to prod her onward. They only went past a few closed doors before he stopped at an open one and stepped inside.

He touched something just inside that caused blue-green light to warm the dark chamber—a gemstone, she realized. Anrid wiped her cheeks and eased in behind him. A small bed greeted her along the far wall, carved out of the stone. She also glimpsed a wardrobe, a chair, and another sleeping cubby along the side wall.

“It isn’t much, I’m afraid, but the mattresses are decent. And the blankets are clean.”

She said nothing and moved straight for the bed and sank down with a groan of relief. More tears clawed at her throat, but she was determined to keep them at bay until she was alone. Jael set Medda on the bed beside her and handed her the crumpled shirt he had tucked under his arm.

“Will you two need anything?”

Medda was yawning and snuggling into her side, so Anrid shook her head. “Thank you,” she whispered when he was halfway to the door.

He faltered and half-glanced back, his face lined with shadows in the dimly lit room, but he said nothing else as he slipped away and closed the door behind him.

Medda was asleep before Anrid had the shirt pulled over her head. She kicked off her shoes, removed her apron, and climbed into bed alongside the little one.

She was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Anrid stood in a room flooded with blinding light. No longer in bed, she had no recollection of how she had left it without her knowledge.

Once again, she stood in the Bifrost chamber.

Anrid spun in a circle, throat closing tight as she stared around. The cracks in the stone shone with a brilliance that almost blinded her. And there were more of them now, splitting the rock with such frequency she wondered how the walls didn't crumble around her.

The magic thrummed and buzzed like an enraged hive of bees protecting their queen. She rubbed her arms and searched the room, half afraid she was about to get stung.

They are coming, voices whispered in her head.

She shuddered and hugged herself tighter. Her skin prickled with unease and the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. A sensation of being watched flooded her body.

Her feet moved against her will and brought her to the wall. She tried to stop herself, but her hand lifted and reached toward the crack, toward the glowing Bifrost within the rock and stone. Heat nipped at her fingers.

They are coming.

“Who?” she rasped. “Who is coming?”

Them.

“But who is it? Why are you telling me this? What do you want?” The questions spilled out of her. She might have continued demanding answers, but the voices muttered louder, repeating their warning.

For it was a warning, of that she had no doubt.

They are coming.

Soon her head ached from the screams. She felt as if they were pounding against the inside of her mind with invisible fists. The lights in the chamber grew impossibly bright. She squeezed her eyes shut to protect them from the piercing brilliance, one hand extended to shield her face. The air pressed against her on all sides, as if it had become flesh and blood and bone. The weight of it brought her to her knees. She curled onto her side, arms wrapped around her head to protect herself against an enemy she could not see or fight.

They are coming.

“Get out of my mind!” she sobbed, clutching her head as the agony became unbearable. The weight of invisible hands held her imprisoned in place.

Darkness crashed over her.

She awoke with wrenching force. No sound filled the stone chamber except her own ragged breathing. Her heart thundered at an alarming speed, her limbs frozen in terror. They refused to move. When she parted her lips, her mouth wouldn’t croak a sound either.

Logic screamed she needed to move and free herself from the hold of the nightmare. For it was a dream, she realized now, a terrible dream like the kind she had when she was a child. But her arms and legs still felt weighted down.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She lifted her head to see what held her captive. Lumps jutted from all directions as if she were not alone in the bed any longer. She struggled to prop herself up on one elbow and realized she and Medda were no longer alone. Half a dozen goblins sprawled across their bed. When she looked around the room, still lit by the blue-green of the runestone, she saw the other bed also piled high with children. More spilled across the floor, lumped together like puppies in a pile. Snores filled the room.

She disentangled herself and eased from the bed. Every bit of her protested, her muscles aching. Her wounded shoulder was especially tender. She felt sore and dirty and exhausted. Her throat was so parched she struggled to swallow, and when she tried to open her mouth, her dry lips stuck together.

And she needed to attend to certain natural needs.

She tip-toed around snoring goblin children and inched toward the door. She wondered how long she had been sleeping: was it morning? How did they tell time down here in the tunnels? Surrounded by rock, they had no glimpse of the sun to guide their routines. She glanced up at the ceiling and imagined the weight of the mountains hovering above her. The thought almost made her sick.

Outside, footsteps echoed in the corridor. She gripped the iron door handle and eased the door open so she might slip out of the room.

The housekeeper barreled toward her, one hand holding her mobcap in place. Her face was a ruddy color, lips parted as she breathed heavily.

“They’re gone!” Trap gasped, hurtling toward Anrid.

She guessed the problem and lifted a reassuring hand. “They’re in my room. All of them, by the looks of it.”

The housekeeper braced a hand against the wall and caught her breath. “I might have known.” She ran a hand over her face before exchanging a wry look with Anrid. “I should have checked here first, but I didn’t realize they knew where you were.”

“Well, they found me.” She let her mouth tip in a smile.

Trap smoothed her apron and seemed to shake off her flustered emotions. “Well then. I can find you another room.”

Anrid laughed at that, suspecting it would be a fruitless effort and that wherever she went, the goblins would soon follow. “Actually,” she said with an embarrassed wince, “I’m more in need of...facilities. To relieve myself.”

“That ingrate!” Trap gasped. “Why am I not surprised he didn’t think to sort that out with you? Come along.” She marched down the corridor with an authoritative air that demanded Anrid follow, not that she had anywhere else to be.

They returned to the bathing chamber at the stairs. “I will make sure you get an official tour later today,” Trap was saying. “But this is the residential wing, and everything you need will be in here.” She swept into the chamber and ran her fingers over the runestone at the entrance to brighten the darkness within.

The tidy room bore no trace of the bathing fiasco from earlier.

Trap motioned to a set of doors along the left wall that Anrid had not noticed the night before. “Those are the facilities,” she explained. “Would you like a bath afterwards? You appear like you need one.”

Anrid flushed at the frank assessment. “You’re quite right,” she admitted. “I would love a bath.”

She hurried to the nearest door and entered a tiny cubicle carved out of the stone. It seemed quite similar to the outhouses she’d used back at Fangward, except everything was made from stone rather than wood. Even the seat was just a stone slab with a hole in it.

After taking care of her needs, she returned to the bathing chamber to find Trap humming to herself as she dropped glowing runestones into one of the copper tubs.

Anrid pattered up to her and peeked down at the tub. “Is that how you make the water warm?”

Trap dropped the last stone into the tub with a splash. “Oh, yes. I imagine you do things differently where you come from.”

“Indeed. We don’t have magic rocks. We have to boil our water. Sponge baths are much more practical, so we rarely have the luxury of a proper bath.”

She must have sounded wistful because Trap snorted in amusement. “Well, this will be a treat, then. In you go. I will find you some clean clothes to wear. You’ll find soap on the ledge over there.” Before she left, the housekeeper pulled a privacy screen over and set it up between Anrid and the door.

Anrid wasted no time shedding her filthy garments and stepping into the steaming water. The rocks warmed the bottoms of her feet, the sensation delicious and soothing. She wasn’t inclined to sit on them, however, and cleared a space for herself before sinking down into pure bliss.

Chapter 12

Jael only slept for a few hours before he dragged himself out of bed. Too much needed to be done for him to laze about beneath his blankets. Between Kora, the Bifrost, and Anrid and all her goblinborn orphans? He had more than enough to keep himself busy.

He dressed in clean robes, then made his way down to the kitchen. Perhaps he could find something left in the larder to appease his rumbling stomach before he tackled the days' enormous tasks.

He found Granger snoring in his rocking chair beside a runestone fire that had petered to mere glowing rocks. The poor fellow hadn't even made it back to his bed before collapsing. Belatedly, Jael wondered how long it had taken the cook to clean up after last night's festivities. He should have found him some help, but none of them had been prepared for this invasion of unexpected company.

He needed to sort out this mess soon so that he and his staff would survive the encounter. A plan. That's what they needed. A battle plan.

Wrangling that lot rather resembled a battle.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He stole a bruised apple and a couple of carrots from the larder before heading down to the workroom. When he arrived, most of the workstations were empty, but one light glowed at the far side of the room.

His young assistant, Math, hunched over his table, a book spread open before him. Rather thin for the goblin kind with unruly brown hair and eyes so dark they almost seemed black, Math could usually be found with his nose in a book when he wasn't attending to his duties. He glanced up as Jael approached.

"You're up early," he remarked as he bookmarked his volume and shuffled it off to the side.

Jael sank onto the bench across from him. "We have a busy day ahead." He ran a hand over his face as he collected his thoughts. "Brace yourself, lad."

The young runekeeper smirked at him. "I heard about our guests. Not exactly a good time to entertain younglings, is it? The quake yesterday was a beast." He raised his eyebrows as he studied Jael and waited for his response.

"You have no idea. The Bifrost is acting up. The runestones aren't holding, and we need to figure out why."

And then there was the matter of the magic touching the human girl. He wasn't sure what to do about that. "I need you to go through those books of yours and find me something about humans and the Bifrost."

Math's brow wrinkled. "Not sure we have much on that subject, but I'll go to the

library and see what I can find. Does this have something to do with the girl you found?”

Apparently, the gossip had already swept through Imenborg. “Yes.” He clipped the word and didn’t offer more information. There wasn’t much else to offer.

They were in strange, new territory here.

Besides, if he was honest, he was much more concerned about the Bifrost than the human girl. He felt bad for her, yes, but his priority was keeping Agmon safe.

“If we have time today, you and I need to go back to the hub and reevaluate. We’ll want to bring extra stones, just in case.” He rose from the table, bracing his palms against the cool surface to push his tired body upright. “Oh, and if you see Trap before I do, tell her we need to replenish our supplies. Cook’s larder won’t survive the extra mouths for long.”

“Yes, sir.” The lad stood as well, tucking his book under his arm and reaching for his slate. He jotted himself a couple of notes with chalk and then pocketed the white stick. “Anything else?”

Jael rolled his eyes. “I’m sure there will be, but let’s start there.”

Math nodded and circled the table. But instead of setting off for the library, he hesitated, one hand cupping the back of his neck.

“Well?” Jael prompted.

Math’s cheeks darkened a bit. “Erm, sorry, it’s just that your brother was down here last night asking a lot of questions.”

Jael sighed. Of course he was. “Was he asking about anything in particular?”

“Nothing he shouldn’t be asking, I’m sure,” Math hurried to reassure him. “I mean, he wanted to know what you’re doing about the quakes and such, but I wondered how much you wanted me to tell him if he comes around again. I don’t want to invade your privacy.”

Too late for that. He felt as if his privacy had been shredded to pieces over the course of one day. First Kora, then a girl and her pack of starving orphans...what else could go wrong?

“Oh, just answer his questions.” He decided at last, pulling the corners of his mouth down into a deeper frown. “If he wants to know something, he’s going to wheedle it out one way or another. But if he starts poking his nose into anything too odd, let me know.”

He wouldn’t put anything past Kora.

Math grinned at him and seemed relieved. “Excellent. Of course I will. I’ll be in the library so just tell me when you’re ready to do the rounds, sir.” He set off for the library with quick steps. He was a good lad, eager and quick to accomplish his tasks when he wasn’t distracted by whatever book he was currently reading. Jael supposed there were worse flaws and didn’t mind allowing Math his books as long as he got his work done.

After the lad had gone, Jael made his way to the storeroom and refilled his pack with stones. Time to prepare for the day ahead.

He would deal with Kora later.

Math spent the first half of their rounds with his nose in a book. Somehow, he

managed to read and walk at the same time with only an occasional stumble. Jael would never have managed that feat without walking into walls.

He liked to handle one task at a time. Life was less complicated that way. Everything went into its box and only came out when it was time to deal with it.

The runestones along the main path were holding well. They only had to replace two, but as they drew closer to the primary hub where yesterday's fiasco had occurred, practically every other runestone had failed.

"I see what you mean," Math mumbled around the iron pick clenched between his teeth. His graceful fingers worked the clasp around the new runestone he had just finished installing. He completed the task and moved a few yards down to the next dark stone. "These were working yesterday?"

"Almost all of them. I missed a few in the main chamber, but these were all fine."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Jael moved past him and entered the main chamber. Too much light flooded into the corridor from the chamber beyond. The buzz of over-stimulated magic assaulted his senses. He eased deeper into the chamber, the hair on his body lifting as if raised by the siren call of magic. Almost all the runestones had blinked out. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of new Bifrost lines zig-zagged across the cavern; one especially large one even split the floor and divided the room in half. Jael approached it with caution, eyes widening when he realized the crack was at least two-hands-breadth wide.

“Rock and bone.” Math whistled behind him. “What would do this?”

Jael shook his head, wordless. His hands trembled as he kneeled and leaned to peer into the chasm in the floor. The Bifrost hissed and roiled, casting tiny sparks into the air. He could feel it seething—so angry, and perhaps afraid. He stared into the magic and wondered if he were in danger of losing himself to the intensity.

But there, deep down in the very heart of the line, he sensed something foreign. It teased the edge of his senses, like a shadow toying with his peripheral vision.

Yes, that was it. A shadow. A thin ribbon of shadow coiling through the Bifrost.

“Do you see that?” he whispered. “The thing in the Bifrost?”

Math’s breath heated his neck as the goblin lad leaned over him. “What is it?”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you think it’s causing the earthquakes and activity?”

Jael glanced over his shoulder, hating that his soul must be etched onto his alarmed features. This...whatever this was...this scared him.

“Leave me your pack,” he rasped. “I want you to return to Imenborg and get more runestones. We need all the runestones. And tell the other workers that we will be working rotating shifts. I want someone here at all times reinforcing the runestones. No, I want two here until we get a handle on this.”

Math straightened slowly. “You want me to leave you here alone, though?”

He exhaled slow and deep before giving the lad a curt nod. “I will be fine until you return. Just don’t dawdle.” He let a ghost of a smile touch his mouth. “Leave your book here.”

Math let his pack slump from his shoulder and hit the ground with a noisy thud. “I’ll go as fast as I can.” He caught up one runestone to light his way and jogged from the chamber.

Jael turned his attention back to the Bifrost and reached for his knife and the runestone at the top of his pack.

He had his work cut out for him today.

Chapter 13

The staff at Imenborg turned a large meeting chamber into a playroom for the children. Anrid had quickly surmised they would need something to do with them while they arranged for their long-term care. Letting them torment the cook in the kitchens wouldn’t do. And she wasn’t about to sit in a tiny bedroom with three dozen bored goblin children, either.

So, a playroom it had to be.

“This isn’t working,” Trap muttered out the corner of her taut mouth. She stood stock still, but her posture reminded Anrid of a predator waiting for its prey to step into a trap. “Prince Kora said he asked for supplies to be delivered, but it will take a couple days.”

Anrid held an ice-cold runestone wrapped in a towel against her sore shoulder. When Trap had seen the bruising Anrid suffered during the earthquake, she traced a symbol on the stone and gave it to Anrid to hold against her shoulder. It was even more effective than a handful of snow. Anrid’s braid, still damp from her bath, had left a wet streak on the back of her dress. She straightened her posture to mirror the goblin woman’s determination.

“Have they discussed what they plan to do with the children long term?”

“Not yet. Three dozen placements will take time to sort out.”

Crag streaked by, bellowing like a bull on a rampage, with his monkey clinging to his hair and three little ones pounding at his heels. It was good the maids had emptied the chamber of anything that might be broken or used as an instrument of bludgeoning. But finding something for the children to do...that was proving more challenging. They didn’t have any toys in the stone fortress.

This place was not intended for children.

The chamber reverberated with shouts and squeals of laughter as goblins tore around in circles playing a game that Anrid could only describe as Pinch and Run.

It wasn’t a very nice game, no matter how one tried to spin it.

“I don’t know what to do with them.” Anrid kneaded her lower back with one fist. When she had awoken in the lukewarm water of her bath, she’d discovered a dark brown dress waiting for her. It hung on her frame, intended for a larger goblin woman, but it was soft and clean. She had nothing else to wear, anyway, until her own clothes were cleaned. They’d even found her an apron to tie about her waist. “There are so many of them, all different ages...any activity that will engage a third of them excludes the rest.”

Trap snorted. “Anything but this.” She swept a hand to indicate the chaotic spectacle unfolding around them.

“Unfortunately, correct. I know nothing about training goblin children.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Training?” Trap shot her a look, her gaze intent. “You may be on to something there. We’ll put them to good use.”

Anrid’s spine stiffened. “You’re going to put them to work?” While she wanted to find them activities, and some schooling would be an excellent idea, she didn’t want to see them used for slave labor. “They’re just children! They should be allowed to play and go to school—”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not going to work them to death. It will be good for them to have something constructive to do.”

Anrid reached for a small goblin lad who tripped and almost face planted into the wall beside her. But before she could catch him, he vanished into thin air. She shrieked and grasped about, trying to figure out what had happened. Where had he gone? Was she losing her mind?

“Did you—where did he—”

Trap caught her elbow to halt her frantic spinning. “Easy, girl. There he is. Over there.” She jabbed a finger across the room, where a little fellow grabbed a fistful of his much-too-large trousers and hiked them up.

“It seems little Gorge can teleport,” the housekeeper said dryly.

Anrid’s heart skipped a beat. “Skadi’s frost. Teleport?”

“Yes, you know: here one minute—pop! Over there the next. The goblinborn do that

sort of thing, you know.” She said this matter-of-factly, as if Anrid should know all about it. In fact, she brushed off her hands, clearly deeming the matter settled. “Now, to set these crazies to something useful. I was thinking they might polish runestones. They’ll like that. It’s messy.”

Anrid pressed a hand against her stomach and tried to calm her breathing. She still hadn’t gotten over the Pop! Over there experience that Trap took so casually. “Oh, well, um, we’ll have to clean up after them.”

Trap smirked, her eyes glinting, and adjusted her mobcap like a general putting on his armor and heading off to war. “Pick your battles, love, pick your battles.”

With that gentle reminder, she marched to the door and disappeared, leaving Anrid alone with the children.

It had only been what? An hour? Maybe two since breakfast, which had been a complete disaster, by any definition. Hungry bellies had not deemed the spread sufficient, and a war broke out as the children fought over what little remained in the serving dishes. Already, Anrid needed a nap.

And what if there was more popping about the chamber? What else could the children do? Anxiety gnawed at her stomach as she scanned the room and waited for terrifying things to unfold around her. She tried to maintain a calm expression, for the sake of the children, but weariness and discouragement battered at her. This wasn’t where she had expected to be today. Skadi help her, teleporting goblin children? Really?

She’d never imagined that might happen in her wildest dreams.

No, today she should be meeting her betrothed and preparing for her future which was beginning to seem more and more imperiled. Would the dark elf she was supposed to marry wait for her when she didn’t arrive as expected? Would he come

searching for her? And what about Dagmar? How were they to contact one another if Anrid wasn't where she was supposed to be?

A part of her wondered if it would be possible to slip away, to sneak out of Imenborg and try to find her own way back to the surface. But common sense dictated she mustn't attempt that, not without a guide. She'd considered this option once and tossed it aside. And it had been the right choice: the labyrinths of Agmon had not been exaggerated, the endless tunnels and winding passages certain peril to a traveler unfamiliar with their ways. Attempting to run away would mean a slow death.

A pair of arms wrapped around her knees and hugged. Little Medda blinked up at her, her adorable face wreathed in smiles. Anrid reached down to ruffle her tangled locks, a part of her heart attached to the little goblin.

They were so easy to love, in spite of the wildness. They were like a family of young, feral racoons, cute beyond measure and yet equally as naughty.

"Are you having fun?" Anrid asked.

Medda bobbed her head up and down. "Yeth. Come play, Uh-NEE."

Her tired body protested the idea, but she couldn't disappoint the angelic face gazing up at her. Still, she eyed the girl suspiciously, wondering if she was going to do anything magical. What if she could teleport too? Or shoot lightning from her eyes? "All right." Anrid licked her lips and eased a step closer. "What shall we play? Something safe, yes?"

Medda squealed and pulled away to clap her hands and bounce up and down on her bare toes. "Gimme ride! Gimme ride!"

That sounded harmless enough.

Anrid kneeled so Medda could clamber up her back and cling to her neck. Her shoulder protested until she shifted the goblin child so that her other arm bore more of the burden. The tension eased.

“Go fast!” the child ordered.

So Anrid weaved around brawling goblins and hurried around the chamber. Every once and a while, she inserted a skip to her step that bounced Medda and elicited squeals of delight.

“Boop!” the girl squealed. “Again! Again!”

Rig appeared at her elbow, grinning. “My turn! I want a ride, too!”

But another child—she thought the stocky girl’s name was Ember—clawed at her skirts from the other side. “No, it’s my turn! My turn!”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Anrid's stomach flipped uneasily as the chaos in the chamber began to close in on her, more and more children begging for a ride. She reached behind her back to cling to Medda and keep her from being dislodged, but the pulling at her skirts was yanking her off balance.

"Children, please!"

But the uproar only continued.

Anrid cast about the chamber for help and spotted a lanky figure in the doorway. It was Kora, his arms crossed over his chest, one ankle hooked over the other as he watched her. Her heart sighed a little.

If Jael had been there, she expected he would have tried to calm the chaos. But Kora seemed more than content to recline against the door frame and watch her being pulled to pieces.

He smirked at her a little, as if wanting to see how she planned to get out of this mess.

She narrowed her eyes, more than a little annoyed. And goaded.

Very well then. If that's how it was going to be, she would rise to the challenge.

"Children! I have an idea. A fantastic idea!" She shouted to be heard over the clamor of voices.

The shouting quieted to excited inquiries about her idea. She flicked another look

toward Kora in the doorway and leaned down to whisper conspiratorially. The goblins crowded around her, giggling and leaning in to hear her.

“Do you see Prince Kora over there?” She looked toward the door. Three dozen heads turned in that direction.

“There’s two of them?” Crag gasped as if he’d never heard such a thing in all his life. The monkey chirped inquisitively, an echo of his master.

“Yes, yes, there are two princes. This one is Prince Kora. And I bet he would give each and every one of you a ride, and I think he can carry at least two at a time, don’t you think?”

Gasps mingled with more laughter. “Now, this is how we should do it,” she continued, holding a finger to her lips to keep them quiet. “The first one there will get the first ride. Shall we race?”

“Yes!” someone shouted but dissolved into giggles when the others shushed him. They all turned toward the doorway again and lined up to prepare for their race.

Kora straightened and shifted to stand in the middle of the doorway. He’d realized she was up to something.

She struggled to keep the smile from her face and set Medda down on the floor to join the race. “One, two...three!”

Screams erupted as the goblin children tore across the room and descended on the goblin prince. He barely had time to take a step backward before they threw themselves at his legs and caught hold of his arms. The little fellow who couldn’t keep his trousers on scrambled up Kora’s side and managed to latch himself to the goblin’s back. Two more broke into a fight trying to do the same thing.

Staggering to maintain his balance as they pushed and shoved around him, Kora shifted his gaze back to Anrid, where she stood along the far wall, hands primly folded in front of her. His eyes glinted, and he freed a hand long enough to flick two fingers off his forehead, as if to congratulate her success and concede the victory to her.

She allowed herself to grin and rocked back and forth on her toes, enjoying the moment. Although, judging by that expression on his face, this game was only beginning, and the next round may very well turn the scales against her.

An hour later, the children sat in lopsided circles, their hands and faces smeared with black grease as they attempted to polish a pile of runestones Trap had brought for them.

Anrid sat cross-legged behind them and enjoyed the reprieve. Trap had promised them a snack if they did a good job, and it appeared to be the necessary incentive. Even little Medda held a runestone in one hand and a grungy cloth in the other as she scrubbed the rock with gusto.

Footsteps thudded against the hard ground moments before Kora lowered himself down to sit beside her. He sat a little closer than she thought necessary, but he didn't touch her as he brought one bent leg toward his chest and leaned an arm lazily against it.

She peeked at him from the corner of her eye, a little too pleased to see he looked as disheveled as she did, his white hair tangled and his tunic all but pulled from the belt that had contained it.

“Remind me not to go to war with you,” he murmured as he watched the goblinborn and not her.

“Most wars can be avoided,” she said, “if people treat one another with kindness and offer their assistance when it is needed.” She stared at him until he deigned to acknowledge her.

A smirk lifted the corners of his mouth. “Point taken. I am properly chastised. I can offer no defense except being blinded by your brilliance.” The way he maintained eye contact made her uneasy.

Her cheeks warmed as she rolled her eyes away, trying to seem casual. “Please. You won’t get anywhere with me speaking like that.”

“Most girls like to be flattered, don’t they?”

I am not most girls, she wanted to say, but she feared that would only encourage him to prove her wrong. “A man’s behavior matters more than his flattery.” Keeping the focus on him and off herself seemed the safest route to go.

“I’m quite adept at flattery.”

She couldn’t help but be annoyed. He sounded so cocky and sure of himself, it nettled and made her want to put him in his place. “And I am immune to flattery of all kinds.”

He leaned a little closer, forcing her to shift away. “Are you?”

She focused on Rig and Medda, whispering back and forth as they worked. They seemed happy, and it warmed her heart and brought a smile to her mouth.

“Perhaps you are not as immune as you claim.”

He’d misunderstood her expression, thinking it for him and not the children. She pretended to smooth wrinkles from her borrowed dress.

“I suppose that could be true,” she confessed, “but my will is strong, and I won’t be easily enraptured.”

A rumble of laughter answered her bold statement. “Enraptured? Really?”

She frowned at him. “No,” she said. “I am not enraptured. You might as well quit trying because it won’t get you anywhere. Like I said, your actions mean more than pretty words that come today and are forgotten tomorrow.”

Kora splayed a hand against his chest. “Aw, that stings.” He appeared anything but pained, however, with his hooded, lazy expression that hinted of some secret humor.

She suppressed a sigh and turned her attention away again. He thought they were bantering, but there was more truth for her part than wit. She wished Jael were here instead.

The realization made her flush a bit. Why should she prefer one stranger over the other? She didn't know either of them. But at least Jael had made it a point to make himself useful, whereas Kora...he hadn't yet proved he cared for anyone other than himself.

It made her wonder where Jael was and why he'd not made an appearance yet this morning.

Another chuckle rumbled from Kora, and her blush deepened. Again, he misinterpreted her expression and thought he was getting to her. Which he was, but not in the way he intended.

She needed to steer the conversation to safer grounds. "So what do you do here? Your brother is Runemaster, I believe he called it, but what are you?"

He sighed as if disappointed by the change of topic. "Unfortunately, I do nothing here, dear girl. I am to be the Minister of Goblinborn Affairs when my father decides I'm ready. For now, I am to assist the current Minister and learn the 'tools of the trade,' so to speak."

"Goblinborn Affairs?" She frowned and studied his profile. Kora's expression had grown guarded, closed off. It was, perhaps, the most honest side of him she had seen so far. She'd touched a nerve. "You mean, you're supposed to be taking care of the children?"

His expression flickered as she drove deeper into that nerve she'd exposed. "Yes. As you've seen, the goblinborn require more handling than normal younglings. It's

harder for them to learn, they struggle to stick to a task...and those abominable gifts of theirs. They're always setting things on fire and causing stuff to disappear and floating around the room like little devils."

She furrowed her brow and tried to absorb what he told her. "I guess I don't understand why they're born the way they are. Why are they different? Why don't they grow up? Why do they have magic that other children don't—"

"Stones, slow down. I can't keep up with that curious brain of yours." He cast a smile her way. "I can't answer all your questions—the why part, anyway. Some children are just born different. About one in three, by my calculation. And as to their gifts? They've speculated that the goblinborn are more in tune to the Bifrost than the rest of us. They make good runekeepers, actually, when you keep them on task. Many of them have a talent for finding things or knowing things. It can be helpful. But some of their gifts are just destructive. That's why we have the Ministry to help take care of them. They need more schooling and training than the other little dears."

The way he said little dears didn't seem complimentary.

"They can't help being born this way," she murmured. She watched Medda toddle by waving both arms around her head as she spun in lopsided circles. At any moment, the child was sure to fall or careen into someone.

"I'm not saying they're to blame."

"Then what are you saying?"

His mouth pulled down. He clearly found her questions annoying, but she truly wanted to understand. "I just don't want to be the one responsible for them. Children are exhausting, and I hate meetings. The Minister has to attend so many meetings." He gave an exaggerated shudder as if he couldn't think of anything worse in life than

meetings. “These little angels will one day be my responsibility, unless I can wheedle my way out.”

“You don’t like children?”

He must have heard the disapproval in her tone, for he shifted to face her head on, his eyes darkened in a way that made her uneasy. “It’s nothing to do with the goblinborn,” he said, his voice cool. “They’re darlings, I’m sure, but I don’t have the gift for that sort of thing. Look at me: do I seem the fatherly type to you?”

“No.” The answer came with a bite to it.

He smirked. “No indeed. I assure you; I am quite unmarried and childless and available.”

Her lips pulled into a deeper frown. “But you can learn as well as the next man. Just because we are not inclined to something does not mean we shouldn’t attempt to change, for the good of those around us.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He picked at a loose thread on the hem of his trousers. “That’s easy for you to say. Children are bread and butter to you, love.”

She bristled at the unwarranted familiarity, but something else had pricked her even deeper. “You don’t know anything about me or what I may wish for my future.”

The words escaped against her better judgment. Had she taken the time to consider, she wouldn’t have said anything. But it was too late to back out now that he was staring at her again. He arched an inquisitive eyebrow.

“I didn’t always want to be a governess.” She forced herself to maintain eye contact. “I wanted to marry and have children of my own. To grow old alongside my sister, and her husband, and her children. To have everyone I loved close around me. That dream is not to be, yet you do not see me shirking from my duty.”

No, let it never be said that Anrid Fray shirked her duties.

It was how she had gotten herself into this horrid mess, after all.

“Why? Why is that life not possible?”

She didn’t want to tell him. It wasn’t any of his business, but nor was it a secret, either. “I’m supposed to marry a dark elf—it’s part of the treaty between us and them. I wasn’t given a choice, but I did what my people needed me to do. I left my sister to marry him.”

“That’s why you’re here, then. You were on your way to get married.”

She studied the opposite wall with deliberate intensity. “Yes. So don’t think I do not understand you, Kora. Neither of us are where we may want to be.”

“Why not just return home? Now that you’ve been...derailed from your plans, what is keeping you from just going home to your sister?”

“I can’t do that. I’m still expected in Gelaira by him.”

Shades, she didn’t even know his name.

It made her stomach sour and twist into a painful knot. “Besides. They only take one girl per family. If I go home, if I don’t fulfill my duty...”

They could come for Dagmar.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a lengthy pause. “I see now that I’ve misjudged you. But perhaps the same can be said of you. You cannot claim to know me any better than I know you.”

But he hadn’t told her anything to change her opinion of him. She should tell him as much, but she’d grown weary and uncomfortable at the turn of their discussion.

“No,” she agreed as she rubbed the sudden ache in her forehead, “I can’t claim to know you either. I apologize if I came across as rude. It wasn’t my intention. Children are precious to me, and I tend to be overprotective where they’re concerned.”

His gaze narrowed. “I don’t think they aren’t precious. I just don’t think I’m the one to take care of them. They’d be better off in someone else’s care.”

Anrid stared down at her lap, her hands idle. “If fewer people thought like that,” she

began with aching slowness, “there wouldn’t be as many homeless orphans in the world.”

He stiffened beside her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his hand curl into a fist, his knuckles white. But then his fingers flexed and relaxed.

He chuckled and bumped her shoulder with his. “Well, love, it has been enlightening, this little chat of ours. And as much as I might long for you to reprimand me all day, I do have a few duties I must attend to.”

With that cool little speech, he rose and walked away without a backward glance. She watched him go, annoyed with herself for hurting his feelings.

But she didn’t regret anything she had said.

Sometimes the words that hurt were the things that people needed to hear the most.

Chapter 14

It had not been a good day, but what was one more bad day in a week full of bad days?

Jael dragged himself back to Imenborg, his sack empty of runestones. He’d used every last one from his satchel as well as most from Math’s. By the time the lad returned with reinforcements and another load of runestones, Jael was bone weary and more than a little alarmed. Two of the runestones he had replaced first had already started flickering, a sign they might be about to fail after only eight hours.

But he couldn’t do anything to problem solve other than replace runestones. He’d been too busy to think. Now, however, as he walked home with nothing to occupy his hands, his thoughts kept returning to the Bifrost. The why and how questions plagued

him. He had no answers, though.

He didn't understand what was wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Anrid crept into his thoughts, too. He found it disconcerting how thoughts of the Bifrost shifted to thoughts of the human girl. Naturally, he quickly forced his focus back to more logical things, but then she popped back up at odd intervals, demanding his attention.

He must be tired, was all, or just too concerned about her fiasco with the Bifrost and how he would fix it. Thinking about her was perfectly natural.

Imenborg greeted him in silence. It was late, and many of the staff were in bed or down in the workroom trying to prepare more runestones.

He would have liked to collapse into his own bed, but the hollow pit in his stomach warned him this would be unwise. He stopped by the kitchen first.

All the runestones had been extinguished and the only light came from the smoldering runestones in the fireplace. The stones flickered and glowed like embers but gave off no smoke, only light and warmth. Granger must have retired to his room. Jael made his way to the larder to see if the cook had left anything out for him.

“He left a plate on the sideboard,” a gentle voice called.

Jael spun and searched the shadows. It took him several moments to discover the shape in the rocking chair by the fire. Had he not been so tired, he would have noticed the gentle squeaking of wood against stone sooner. He collected his plate covered with a piece of cheesecloth and moved toward the fire.

Anrid sat in the rocker, wrapped in a knitted shawl. He pulled up a chair and sat down

across from her, eyeing her. Had she waited up for him or was this a chance encounter?

“Thank you,” he muttered as he uncovered his plate and discovered a single piece of bread, a pile of boiled roots and vegetables, and a woefully narrow slice of roast beef. He would need to restock Granger’s larder sooner rather than later, unless he wished to see more of this ilk on his plate in the future. It was barely enough to sate a child, let alone an adult male.

She let him eat in silence for a while before clearing her throat. “I had hoped to run into you before retiring for the night.”

So she had waited up for him. This made him almost happy, which was pure nonsense. He must be delirious with the need for sleep.

“Yes?” he prompted around a mouthful of food.

The hissing embers cast red angles of light on her face as she stilled the rocker and seemed to face herself toward him more squarely. “Yes. I wished to ask you about what is to happen to me. I mean, what needs to happen so that I can return to the surface?”

Oh. That.

He felt a little less happy then and let his focus return to his plate. She waited in silence as he finished his vegetables.

“I admit I don’t know,” he said. He plucked the bread from his plate and took a bite, chewing before allowing himself to study her. “This isn’t a good time. There are things going on that require my attention. I don’t know when I’ll have time to sort this out. It’s more complicated than you realize, and perhaps I’ll explain all that by

and by, but for now...don't worry about it. I promise to figure something out."

Her expression grew pensive and pained.

He winced. "I promise that I will get you back to your people. I'm not putting you off or trying to take advantage. Just being practical."

The furrow between her brows did not uncurl.

"I see." She leaned back and resumed rocking. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He let the plate settle onto his lap and studied her. "I doubt it. My tasks are not easily taught, and you have already proven that humans are susceptible to magic. I would not put you in danger just to lighten my workload."

"Ah." Her clouded expression cleared a bit. "Yes, of course. That's what is keeping you so busy? The magical stones?"

"Not exactly. It's the Bifrost. The runestones are not containing it like they should, and that puts our entire kingdom at risk. Something has upset the balance."

She grew very still. "Something to do with me?"

"I doubt it," he rushed to assure her, setting his plate on the floor and leaning forward with his elbows propped against his knees. "I suppose this all seems very foreign to you, coming from a place that doesn't rely on magic. The Bifrost is a natural force of nature. It's good and pure and useful when cared for. But it's possible for the Bifrost to be misused. There are dark things in the world that can taint even the purest of natural forces, spells born of blood and hatred and death. These bad things can twist the good ones."

Was he over-explaining? He didn't know how much she would understand.

“Something is infecting the Bifrost?” She spoke flatly, her soft voice hinged with question.

“Yes.” Her correct simplification of his concerns surprised him. “Yes, something has infected the magic.”

She exhaled. “Then, perhaps, this may have something to do with me after all.”

“What do you mean?” He pushed up so that his palms were now braced against his knees. At the same time, she drew her legs up onto the rocker and wrapped her arms around them. It was a defensive posture.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Twice now I have heard strange voices in my head or had a dream about these voices. First when the Bifrost attacked me. And, again, last night when I was sleeping.” Her voice tremored.

That hollow sensation in his stomach that food had sated began to ache again. “What did these voices say?”

She shuddered. “They are coming. The same thing, repeatedly. Like a warning.”

A chill crawled over him, as if a hatching of baby spiders were racing across bare flesh. He resisted the urge to scratch.

“The voices,” he managed at last, “what did they sound like? Human? Goblin? Elf?”

She frowned. “You mean, did they have an accent, or did I recognize them? It wasn’t like that. It was more like—” A pained expression twisted her face. “—it was more like that magic was talking to me.”

The spidery chill increased. “You think the Bifrost was talking to you.”

It wasn’t possible. In all his years as Runemaster, the magic had never spoken to a human before. He’d never heard of such a thing. It made no sense that the Bifrost would choose this human girl. It rankled, if he were to be honest about it, rankled his pride and self-esteem that the Bifrost might communicate with this girl after only a couple of days when he had worked his entire life to become Runemaster.

This was his world, not hers.

“I don’t think humans can talk to the Bifrost.”

She shrugged and met his incredulous stare with a determined one of her own. “I’m only telling you what I experienced. Perhaps I am wrong, and it isn’t your Bifrost...but then who is speaking to me? Hm? Answer me that. Whoever it is, someone is trying to warn us.”

“But why you and not me?” He leaned back in his seat and tilted his head back to stare up at the shadow-cloaked ceiling of the cavern. It wasn’t as if he would find any answers written on the stone up there.

The rock didn’t talk to him.

She didn’t answer his question, because she obviously didn’t have any more answers than he did. Silence wrapped around them. The shadows tightened like the coils of a great serpent pressing in to smother them.

“Too many moving pieces,” he muttered. “I can’t sort them out.” He was talking to himself, not to her.

All he could do was consider one problem at a time and put the others into their boxes. He needed to choose a problem, just one. He should start small and work up to the most complicated problem, so that his mind would be less hindered.

“What has Trap done with all the goblinborn?” he asked. This was probably one of the more immediate but least concerning problems.

“They’re bedded down in my room. I figured they would show up anyway, so might as well put them where I want them rather than letting them pile on top of me in the middle of the night.” Wry humor colored her tone.

“Did they cause much trouble today?”

“A bit. Nothing we couldn’t handle, though.” She coughed. “Your brother even helped for a while, if you can call what he does helping.”

Her frank assessment tugged a snort from his compressed lips. He shifted to shoot a wry look in her direction. “I’m surprised he offered help of any sort, to be honest.”

“He does appear rather uncertain about his role with the children.” She hesitated, searching his face in the darkness. “I’m afraid I may have sic’d them on him. I lost my temper a bit.”

It took him several breaths to absorb the impact of her confession. Then he barked a laugh as he imagined Kora disappearing beneath a mob of hungry, overly stimulated goblinborn.

Her eyebrows lifted toward the sweeping bangs brushed to one side. “You’re not mad?”

“Stones, no. He probably deserved it.”

She smiled and relaxed back into her rocker. “I thought he did. At the time, anyway. On reflection, I may have been a little hard on him.”

“I doubt that.” He said nothing else because it didn’t seem gracious to catalog his brother’s shortcomings when Kora wasn’t there to defend himself. He laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes, willing for a moment of peace.

“I should go check on the children and let you get your rest.” But she didn’t rise from the rocker, not yet.

He groaned softly. “You mean, we can’t just sleep here?”

The moment the words left his mouth, he froze. While he hadn’t meant anything suggestive or inappropriate, he realized his words might be misinterpreted. Of course, they couldn’t sleep here...together. He peeked at her through slitted lids to test out whether or not he had offended her. But she sat perfectly still, arms still wrapped around her knees.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“I, um, no,” she said without peering in his direction, her voice painfully tense. “No, we can’t do that.”

His cheeks burned hot, and he wondered if she thought him scandalous. “I didn’t mean—of course, we can’t sleep here. Of course. It’s just that the bedrooms are very far away right now. I’m tired.”

“Of course.” A little warmth crept back into her voice. She graced him with a tiny smile then. “Before we go, I wanted to thank you.” Her whisper carried across the narrow space between his chair and her rocker.

He straightened and dropped his hands against his thighs. “I’m sorry?”

“For trying to help me.” She stared at the embers as if mesmerized by their scarlet glow, stark against the blackened fireplace. “I realize I have made things difficult for you. I never intended to be here or to cause anyone grief. If I could go back and change what happened in the forest...” She didn’t finish the thought.

He released a tight breath, unaware he had been holding it during her brief speech. Why did it matter so much to him what this girl had to say? A strange tightness in his chest hinted that something wasn’t quite right with him, that this human girl held some sort of magic over him even when humans had no magic to wield. Whatever the cause, whatever the reason, Anrid Fray mattered.

To him. She mattered to him.

“I don’t know you well,” he answered at last, that tightness tugging more painfully.

He splayed a hand against his chest as if he might ease the discomfort. “But I suspect you would follow Rig into the forest all over again. It’s in your nature.”

Perhaps that was what drew him to her, her compassion.

She choked on a laugh and met his gaze then, her freckled cheeks rounding beneath eyes that glinted with runelight. “I believe you’re right. When I saw him crying on that stump...”

For the first time, Jael considered the notion that perhaps Rig had not bespelled Anrid and that she had come of her own accord. But, no, she had mentioned a lapse in memory. Rig had broken the rules and summoned her to him. Although he may not have needed to.

Anrid would have come anyway.

Perhaps it made the goblinborn’s actions not so heinous. Perhaps. Another problem for him to stew on later. For now, he filed it away and returned to the task at hand.

“I will walk you to your chamber,” he said around a yawn, one hand massaging the back of his neck as he clumsily found his feet. He hesitated and then offered his other hand to assist her from the rocker.

She studied his hand before raising her gaze to meet his. Then she put her narrow, warm hand into his large one and he realized the truth with shocking clarity.

He liked this human girl.

Chapter 15

The moment Jael’s hand closed over hers, Anrid froze in her rocker.

That had been a mistake, one she had not realized she was in danger of making. But the pressure of his callused palm against hers, the way his strong fingers curled around her chilled ones...

He held her shocked gaze with fierce intensity as if he too felt the power of the moment. The vulnerability of her situation washed over her. She was alone in the dark with a man—no, a goblin—no, with a stranger. And she had freely given him her hand.

That wasn't the worst of it though. The worst part occurred to her in a slow trickle of clarity.

She liked it.

Her brain whispered that she shouldn't, that the wise thing to do would be to pull away and put a respectable distance between them. But another voice also spoke to her, one from the secret place inside that longed for love and happiness and a home full of children. A part of her that dreamed of sitting in a room like this one and listening to the thunder of small feet on the floor above. Of holding a brawny hand while sitting beside a warm, intimate fire.

A girl like her shouldn't allow this moment to continue. Someone else waited for her, and a moment of weakness now could ruin her chances with him.

She wasn't supposed to be here; as pleasant as this moment was, it couldn't last. She had duties to perform.

Duties that didn't include indulging the secret whispers in her heart.

When his thumb rubbed across the back of her hand in a slow, feather-light motion, terror doused her in an icy flood. She yanked free of his gentle hold and scrambled

out of the rocker so quickly she almost knocked it over and sent herself tumbling into the fireplace. Had he not caught her, she might have set herself on fire. But he grabbed her by both elbows and spun her so that he stood between her and the smoldering runestones.

To her relief, he released her and stepped away, locking his hands behind his back. A cold, empty expression schooled his features. Something lifeless and aloof replaced the intensity from moments earlier.

“Perhaps,” he said, with forced coolness, “it would be better if we parted ways here. Goodnight, Anrid.” He dipped his head once, eased past without brushing against her, and strode from the kitchen.

Anrid pressed both hands to her flaming cheeks and wondered what in the world had just happened.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She woke from another restless night filled with dreams of voices screaming warnings, interspersed with visions of a certain goblin Runemaster and his piercing eyes and firm hands.

Giggles surrounded her on all sides. It took her a moment to emerge from the tense realm of sleep and recognize that she was now awake.

Suppressing a yawn and the lure of going back to sleep, she peeked through her lashes at the faces crowding above her.

“She’s awake!” someone whispered.

“Shh!”

More giggles erupted when Anrid stretched and faked a long yawn that transformed into a longer, real one. “Who is in my bed?” she asked, as if she didn’t know.

Medda bounced up and down beside Anrid’s head, leaning over to cup her cheeks in her baby hands. “You wake up now?”

Anrid smiled at her and covered a tiny hand with her own. “I suppose I must, if you are all awake.”

Cheers filled the chamber as more goblin children tried to pile onto her mattress. They needn’t have bothered, though, since they had transformed the entire room into one large mattress. Trap and the goblin maids must have found every spare mattress in Imenborg to fill Anrid’s room so that the children had more comfortable places to

sleep than the stone floor.

Although they hadn't minded the night before.

She disentangled herself from the pile with some difficulty.

Her own clothes hung on a hook by the door: she'd rather missed her woolen underdress and heavy apron. The children hopped around her as she gathered her things and headed for the bathing chamber. Despite her best efforts to convince them to wait outside, they insisted on joining her. She left them climbing in and out of empty copper tubs and locked herself in one of the small necessary chambers to change.

As she hooked her broaches to her apron and strung the strands of beads between them, a place deep inside her sighed with contentment. This was familiar, a small reminder of home and the places and people she loved.

They descended on the kitchen next. Granger was ready for them this time, armed in his canvas apron and soup ladle. He slung a cast-iron pot from his arm and plunked large helpings of porridge into bowls. Anrid followed behind him and dropped nuts and dried berries on top of the steaming porridge. She wondered where they came by their food supplies here in the underground.

Yet one more unanswered question she'd developed over the past couple of days.

Neither of the goblin brothers or Trap had yet made an appearance, so Anrid lined up her charges and marched them to the playroom. She thought about trying to organize a group game of some sort, but the children descended into chaos the moment they stepped through the door. She allowed them the freedom to do as they pleased.

Everyone needed that from time to time.

Her heart clenched at this turn of thought. Everyone may need it but not everyone had the luxury of experiencing it. Her thoughts drifted to last night's unfortunate encounter in the kitchen. Pushing the memory from her mind, she squared her shoulders and took up her post by the door to make sure no one escaped.

Fingers pinched the back of her arm. Startled, she twisted to see Kora looming in the doorway. "Little dears are already at it, are they?" His mouth quirked, but lines carved sharp angles in his face, hinting he was tired or carried a secret burden.

She sidestepped to put more respectable distance between them. "You missed breakfast."

He covered his mouth. "Oh no! I missed out on the gruel, did I? Crying shame, that."

Anrid couldn't help but grin at him, caught up by his wry but infectious sense of humor. "They didn't seem to mind. There wasn't a bowl on the table that hadn't been licked clean."

This warranted a more genuine smile from him. It didn't last long, though, and soon he was leaning a forearm against the doorjamb and watching her with that indolent look of his. She put her back to him and pretended to watch the children; he didn't need a whit of encouragement to misbehave.

Nor did she, apparently. She'd already found herself in one compromising situation, and she needed to make sure it never happened again.

"How shall you occupy yourself today?" she asked after a lengthy pause.

He exhaled, teasing the hairs around her neck that had worked free of her braid. "I haven't the foggiest. Jael made it clear I wasn't to bother him today. I suspect something's amiss, but he's as strait-laced as an old maid's corset."

Anrid choked and earned a hearty back slapping from Kora. Most of the women in Haldor didn't wear such things in the common circles, although they were popular enough among the upper class. Besides, it wasn't his reference to the undergarment she objected to but more his allusion to the poor old maid.

“Not coming down with something, are you?”

She frowned, but he posed an innocent expression that reminded her too much of the children when they wanted to wheedle their own way. Bless his stone-cold goblin heart, but he wasn't any better than the goblinborn he was supposed to be in charge of.

“Something is amiss,” she told him, steering the conversation to more appropriate topics. “The magic is acting up, you know.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He studied her while rubbing his jaw in a languid way that made her think of a cat stretching in the sunlight. “He mentioned something of the like. Said I was to keep an eye on you.”

“He did?” Her voice squeaked.

His fingers ran along his jaw as he studied her. “Yes, he did. I confess to some curiosity as to why, but he was vague on that point.” He beamed at her then. “But I can’t complain. Watching you isn’t a chore at all.”

She drew herself up a little straighter and gave him a warning frown. “Don’t.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know what I mean. Don’t talk to me like that. It isn’t appropriate.”

He had the audacity to look wounded and leaned away as if she’d struck a mortal blow. “I would never—”

“We both know you would,” she interrupted dryly. “Let’s just skip the playacting and move on to the part where you behave yourself. If we’re to be stuck with one another all day, it will make things easier.”

The wounded expression vanished, and he became catlike once again. “I like a girl who speaks plainly.”

“No, you don’t. You prefer a girl who will play your games and succumb to your

charms.” She turned her attention back to the children to hide her irritation. While he needed to understand her determination, she didn’t want to be rude and make her stay at Imenborg more uncomfortable than she had to.

Rather than expressing chagrin over his inappropriate behavior, however, he laughed. “Now it is you who misunderstands me, love. I like a girl who doesn’t succumb to my charms, as you so elegantly put it. It’s the chase that’s all the fun.”

Ten points to the naughty Minister of Goblinborn Affairs.

Heat flooded her cheeks. Shades, there wasn’t a way she could win a word war with this one. Perhaps it would be better to ignore him or distract him somehow.

“Attention, children!” she called, making up her mind. She clapped her hands until they huddled around the doorway. “I have good news: Master Kora wishes to play a game with us! Won’t that be fun?” She smiled at him and fluttered her eyes with exaggerated coyness. “What game shall we play?”

Raucous cheers and shouted suggestions reverberated off the stone walls. Anrid picked the game that sounded horrible, one called Fall Over, and smiled up at Kora.

He plastered on that expression again, the one that congratulated her on a hand well played.

“I propose an alternative,” Kora announced, rubbing his palms together animatedly. “I will stay here and count to infinity while you lot run off and hide. Then I shall come find you.”

He shot a smirk at Anrid that implied he had no intention of finding the goblin children, at least not any time soon.

Before she could put a stop to this dangerous activity, the children erupted into screams of excitement and tore from the chamber, leaving her alone with Kora.

Skadi's frost! How had he turned the tables on her so quickly?

"Fine," she ground between her teeth. "You win this round, you beast."

His face twisted with a self-satisfied smirk. "Shush, dear girl, I'm supposed to be counting."

"Yes, I know. To infinity." She didn't even try to hide her scowl. "I suppose that means I will be doing all the finding, won't I?"

He laughed, long and low. "Precisely what I had in mind."

Chapter 16

Jael's fingers throbbed from another full day replacing runestones out of their dwindling stores. His shoulders ached as if the tendons had pulled too hard against the muscle and bone.

His emotions felt as tightly drawn, frayed at the edges and in danger of snapping at the slightest provocation.

"This isn't going to work, is it?" Math murmured from his right. The lad had labored beside him all day without complaint. "When I filled our packs this morning, the storeroom was over half empty. What are we going to do when we run out of runestones?"

Jael shook his head, too weary to answer. As much as he hated to admit it, he didn't know. Their entire way of life depended on runestones. Without them...there would

be no light, no heat, no protection.

Behind them, their replacements were hard at work on the other side of the chamber. Jael didn't want to leave them until he was sure they would be able to keep up for the rest of their shift.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He just wanted to go home, but home meant he would have to face Kora and...

It would be necessary for him to face her.

He couldn't hope to avoid her forever. And after the way she recoiled from him the night before...his heart clenched, and his mouth pulled down hard at the corners.

He wouldn't put himself in such a vulnerable position again.

“Um, Jael?”

Something in Math's voice sounded wrong. Jael twisted from his work and followed the direction the lad was pointing.

The large crack down the middle of the floor glowed with renewed intensity. Flashing lights and tiny sparks sputtered from deep within the chasm. He darted across the chamber with Math at his heels.

An explosion sent them staggering backwards. Tiny shards of rock blew from the chasm, slicing his exposed skin and shredding his robes.

“The runestone blew!” he shouted as he dove toward the chasm. “Get me another one!”

Icy mist poured from the Bifrost, so cold it burned his hands as he scrabbled on all fours to get into position. Math shoved a fresh runestone at him to replace the temporary one that had blown.

But at the exact moment Jael pressed forward to shove the runestone into the chasm, a writhing shadow lashed out of the brightness and knocked the stone from his hand. Fiery pain raced through his fingers, and the stone clattered out of reach. Like a ribbon of pure darkness, the shadow launched at him again.

“What is that?” someone shouted.

Math hooked his arms under Jael’s shoulders and helped pull him away from the writhing shadow.

“Bind it! Bind the Bifrost!” Jael bellowed as he tore free of his apprentice and heaved himself across the ground to reclaim his runestone.

A piercing, horrible shriek all but shattered his eardrums. Even as the shadow struck him so hard on the left temple his vision blurred, he kept hold of his stone and crawled toward the chasm. His fingers shook as he traced the binding spell.

Math skidded across the ground and bellied his way alongside Jael. The shadow struck the lad, too, leaving a jagged red line on Math’s jaw that oozed blood.

Jael shoved his fist into the raging Bifrost and cried out from the icy pain that enveloped his arm. “Now!” he screamed. “Bind it, bind it!”

Math shoved his arm into the Bifrost too, his body spasming from the shock. Within moments, both the other workers had done the same; the younger one shrieked from the pain.

As one, they held fast. They mustn’t let go until the runestones were activated. Only a few moments more.

The shadow struck him again, and again, shrilling so loud Jael’s ears rang with the

horrible sound, and he could no longer tell what was real and what was an echo in his battered eardrums. Blissful relief mushroomed from the Bifrost the moment the runestones activated. The magic puffed around them in the form of misty fog. One last shriek tore from the shadow before it was sucked into the chasm, down into the light, down into the Bifrost.

The fog settled over several minutes, but still Jael gripped his runestone as it throbbed against his palm. At last, he dared to set it on the edge of the crack and release his tense hold. He eased onto his haunches, fingertips braced against the ground. Math wriggled backward but remained on his belly.

“What was that?” Math gasped. Tears leaked down the lad’s sickly pale cheeks.

Across from them, the other two rune workers were also trying to collect themselves. Scratches and blood covered them all.

Warm liquid dripped over Jael’s eyebrow and half-blinded his left eye.

“It’s not an infection,” he rasped and tried to collect his racing thoughts. The others gawped at him, their eyes round and frightened. “The Bifrost is being attacked. This isn’t an infection: it’s an invasion.”

The king’s voice echoed as crystal clear as if he’d been standing in the room rather than on the other side of the obelisk.

“That last aftershock took down a building in the North Quarter!” King Ereb shouted. “We lost three citizens, Jael. They’re dead. Buried beneath a mountain of rubble.”

Jael recoiled and winced at the accusation in his father’s tone. He hadn’t done it on purpose, but his stomach ached with regret; his failure to contain the Bifrost had cost them lives.

Three precious lives.

“And more will be dead if you don’t fix this right now.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“I’m trying!” Jael pressed the bloody cloth Trap had thrust against his throbbing temple, where the shadow had cut him deeply. He must look like death, his face and arms smeared with his own blood, blood that still seeped from the deeper wounds. “But the runestones are not holding. They’re going to fail, Father. It’s not a question of if but when. I have seen nothing like it—I don’t know what is attacking the Bifrost, so I can’t fight it.”

His own battered body should be a testament to this cruel fact.

Silence answered him.

“How long?” King Erebus rasped at last. He crossed his arms over his chest defensively, as if he might hold the news he didn’t want to hear at bay by brute force.

Jael’s shoulders sagged. “I don’t know, but our stores are running out. We won’t be able to keep up with the repairs if these attacks continue.”

“How long, Jael?” The king’s eyes pierced him through the vision of the Obelisk.

“Two days,” he finally offered, exhaustion tainting every word. “Three at most.”

“I can have more runestones brought to you, but it will take time.”

“Time we don’t have.” He massaged the back of his neck and tried to think of a solution—any solution—that didn’t involve the destruction of their world, of their people. But after what he’d seen today...he didn’t know how to fight this evil. “And it would be a temporary solution, anyway. We’d just be depleting your stores to find

ourselves right back where we are now. We need to find the root of the problem and cut it off at the source.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

He flinched at the desperation in his father’s voice. He didn’t have an answer, not one idea. Silence stretched long and tense between them.

At last, it was the king who shattered it. He sighed so loudly it almost sounded like a groan. “There is one thing that might work,” he said, each word faltering as if he didn’t want to speak them. “But it’s dangerous.”

“Would it give us some time to find another solution? I will take any risk, Father.”

King Ereb stared at him through the Obelisk, so tense he appeared to be carved of stone. “You will be taking every risk, my son. You need to understand that before you commit to this.”

“What will I be risking, then?”

His father flinched as if he’d been struck. “Your life,” he whispered. “Stones, I can’t believe I’m considering this.”

Jael couldn’t either, but he didn’t say as much. This was his job, his purpose. “Go on.”

The king’s nostrils flared, the stone-hard mask breaking for a flicker of time before he schooled his features. “There is a book in your library, in the forbidden section. I placed it there when I was Runemaster before your predecessor.”

When King Ereb hesitated, Jael moistened his lips and tried to encourage him.

“Which one?”

The king’s throat convulsed as he swallowed. “It’s one of the Nameless Volumes, Jael.”

His stomach knotted and heaved. The Nameless Volumes, tomes so dark and horrible they must not be named, where all the deepest and most horrible secrets in Rhuin were transcribed.

Few even knew these volumes existed. Opening them was forbidden, except in the direst of circumstances, and only by the consent of both king and Runemaster.

“Which—which one I am looking for?”

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

The tone in King Ereb’s voice sent a chill down his spine. “How so?” he croaked.

His father held his gaze, expression brittle, but something agonizing writhed within his eyes. “You’ll recognize it because it’s the one locked with my seal and covered in my blood.”

Jael’s stomach twisted and sank. His father had given his own blood to seal this book away, and here he was planning to reopen it? “And what will this book do? What am I looking for?”

King Ereb leaned closer to the obelisk, his face growing larger as he advanced. “You’ll be sharing your life force with the Bifrost.” His eyes clung to Jael’s, and for a moment Jael thought his father might recant. “If there is no other way...this may be our only option. But—stones, help us—be careful, Jael. Please.”

He walked the labyrinthine tunnels that made up Imenborg's library with a heavy heart. The forbidden books pulled at his thoughts as if they were a flesh and blood hand and not his own anxiety, quailing against what he may find in that never-used section of the library.

Rather than choosing a single chamber and filling it with wooden bookshelves for Imenborg's literature, his ancestors had utilized an intersecting array of tunnels to carve the shelves into the walls: wood was harder to come by in Agmon than stone.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

It created a mess of tunnels that wound about like worms in soil. The library at Imenborg was nothing impressive, but it contained some of the most dangerous books ever penned by goblin hands: even some that had been penned by elf hands. Jael didn't know how his people came into possession of those volumes—he was sure the dune elves would prefer them back. However they came into possession of them, the goblins had an entire shelf in the Forbidden Section where they kept a series of elvish books.

He hadn't told anyone where he was going, not even Math. He would have tried to stop him and would have been right. They didn't refer to the deepest corner of the library as the Forbidden Section for no reason.

But his orders had come from the king. He knew his father would not send him on this errand unless it was necessary.

And he knew better than anyone that it was necessary. His skin still bore the stinging lash of the shadow's attack, the cuts on his face and arms still raw. The one on his brow stung with particular ferocity. Fresh blood seeped over the older scabs encrusted over his eyebrow and down his cheek.

He lifted the bloody cloth to staunch the flow. The wound might need stitching, but he didn't have time for that yet. He needed to finish this task before he lost his nerve.

The tunnel he followed angled downward toward the forbidden vault. He had to remove a runestone from his pocket to light his way now because this section of the library wasn't lit, for obvious reasons.

No one should be down here, so no one should need any light.

The air grew staler and much dryer. He paused at the doorway to the vault and stretched out fingers coated in dried blood to stroke the stone. The blood-red gemstone contained a more potent layer of runes, to protect, to ward off, to keep in...

His fingers knew the shape of the necessary rune, the diamond with the long vertical slash down the middle. The stone recognized his command, his rune, the sign of the Runemaster. The protection stone thrummed as if accepting his presence.

It wouldn't hurl him from the chamber, at least.

Apprehension kept him frozen in the doorway all the same. The purplish-blue light from his runestone cast odd shadows and angles of light through the chamber beyond. Was it his imagination, or did the runestone struggle to pierce the heavy darkness within the vault?

It had been years since he entered this chamber, and he had only entered once with his father by his side. The day Jael accepted the post of Runemaster, King Ereb had led him down these very tunnels to this exact vault; showed him the dusty shelves, the horrible books, the tattered volumes, the monstrous grimoires. Books so vile they should never see the light of day.

"Protecting these books is one of your biggest tasks, my son," King Ereb had told him. "Very few even know this vault exists. And you need to keep it that way. Be sure you trust your staff implicitly before entrusting them with the knowledge of this chamber."

Jael had taken the warning to heart. He'd only told Math, although his apprentice had ferreted out the secret on his own from something he'd read in one of his books. Jael had seen to it the volume in question was removed from the General Shelves and put

under lock and key.

He shook himself. There was nothing for it; he couldn't procrastinate all day. His limbs felt wooden and awkward as he stepped into the forbidden vault carved from stone.

The protection stone at the entrance wasn't the only one. Every shelf within the vault had its own protection stone. These weren't normal runestones that needed to be replaced at intervals.

Carved from rare precious rock, these stones glowed as bright as gold glittering beneath the light of dragon fire and could hold for decades, perhaps centuries. As far as he knew, the stones in this room were the only ones in existence.

A crying shame, because he could use them for the Bifrost right now.

The air in the vault pressed down on him, tasting of decay and dust. He drew shallow breaths and tried to ignore the unpleasant smell, the taste, as he scanned the stone shelves for the book his father had sent him to fetch. The Nameless Volumes were somewhere in the back, he remembered that much.

He found them around a jutting boulder of rock, in a crevice. Six narrow cubbies carved inside the boulder held a dozen tomes, their spines coated in dust and mildew. Jael scanned them, noting the different colors and sizes and shapes, but not one word had been stamped onto the leather covers.

They were nameless.

He had no choice but to remove them one by one and search for his father's seal, the seal of the King, of the Daemon.

The first book on the top shelf felt cold and grimy to the touch, its leather cover a puke shade of amber that had been vibrant before years of neglect in the vault. The next book was dull brown, locked with an iron clasp that had no key, the third a light shade of tan wound with straps that burned when his fingers grazed them.

Jael found the one he wanted on the third shelf. The leather book felt icy cold against his fingers as he held it up to the light of his runestone. It was a light brown tome splattered with darker browns. The seal of his father clasped the flap shut.

A sense of dread stole over him. The inclination to toss the book back onto its forbidden shelf and race from the vault almost overcame him. Perhaps it was the protection stone warning him away, but more likely it was his own feelings of foreboding.

Jael took a stabilizing breath and hid the book in an inner pocket of his robe, where no one would ever know it was hiding. The protective runes in the Forbidden Section kept anyone from using magic within its walls. He would have to remove the book from its safe place in order to open it. Perhaps he could find a secluded section of the library that would shield him from prying eyes.

This time, when the whisper to run flooded his senses, Jael bolted for the door and left the forbidden chamber with its nameless books behind.

He could almost imagine they snarled at his escaping heels.

Chapter 17

The runestones cast mauve lights against the walls and ceiling of the tunnel Anrid wandered down. Twice now she had heard giggles close by, but she was yet to capture a single goblin child. They flitted just out of her reach, in the shadows, knowing where to hide so that her human eyes could not find them.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She told herself it was all in fun, but a part of her couldn't help worrying that this wasn't the safest game to play, not here in Imenborg.

This place wasn't meant for children, after all.

Kora should have known that. Maybe he did and didn't care. Whatever his intentions, she liked him even less after an hour of fruitless seeking.

The tunnel she followed opened up into a foyer of some sort with half a dozen new tunnels branching off. A stone slab sat in the center of the chamber, with a large book lying open and writing implements scattered around it.

She leaned over to examine the book and realized it was a log of some sort, a ledger. The page was filled with various handwriting scrawls and signatures.

The Goblins Guide to Healing Herbs with "Granger" neatly written beside it.

Then, on the next line, in a very untidy and firm hand, Whispers from the Bifrost with "Math Alderbye" scribbled beside it.

And below that, Trap's name, signed with elegant flourishes, was written beside what appeared to be The Matronly Art of Goblinfetch. It was written so hastily, however, she couldn't be sure about that particular title, and had no idea whatsoever what it meant.

For that's what they were, she realized: book titles. This was a library log.

Her eyes roamed to the corridors branching out from the main hub. What better place for goblin children to hide than a library with dusty stacks and lots of obscure corners for reading?

A faint giggle from down the rightmost tunnel confirmed her suspicion. Someone was down here, and she would find them out. But if she were to be beat the littles ones, who had the upper hand, she would need to up her game. Stealthily she slipped down the tunnel, keeping to the far side of the corridor as far from the light of the guiding runestones as she could.

Anrid emerged from this tunnel into another hub that branched in three directions. A stone bench covered the solid bit of wall to her right, and when she paused to listen, she heard the shuffling of footsteps down the passage nearest the bench. She followed the whisper of feet against stone into a dim passage lit only by occasional runestones.

It wound downward before leveling out and widening. She paused behind a jutting outcropping and peeked into the chamber beyond. A bulky form sat on the far side of the chamber, lit only by the runestone sitting on the floor beside him.

He didn't notice her, hiding in the shadows, but she could see him illuminated by the deep amethyst glow from his runestone.

It was Jael. He sat with elbows propped on folded legs, muttering to himself as he stared down at a book laid open on the ground in front of him.

Why would he be reading down here, in an unlit corner of the library? A quick scan of the chamber revealed it was a storage room. Boxes sat piled along the outskirts of the chamber, overflowing with books.

She should have retreated at once: it wasn't ladylike to spy. But she found herself unable to move. Why would the Runemaster of Imenborg find it necessary to hide in

a closet just to read a book? Who was he hiding from? Or, rather, what was he trying to hide?

“Rock and bone!” he growled. “He must be insane.”

He cradled his face in his hands, a dejected droop to his shoulders. For the longest time, he remained this way, a hunched and forsaken form in the shadows. A part of her heart ached for him against her control. But then something changed. His posture shifted, head lifting, shoulders squaring. She almost swore she saw determination flickering in his eyes like starlight, but not the normal kind of starlight that was white and cool. No, this was purple and violent, a dark kind of starlight.

Soon he was muttering to himself, his fingertips steeped on top of both pages of the book. He swept his fingers across his forehead, then he hesitated and stared at the dark substance coating them. Then he swiped his fingers across the book, tracing them in a circular pattern. With a heavy sigh, he rose, lifting the book with him, and held it out at arm’s-length.

A magical glow emanated from the volume clenched in his fingers. It wrapped around him, like a ring of hot white fire. A second ring began to form around the book itself. Jael’s body stiffened and spasmed as the book floated from his grasp and hovered in the air, suspended by nothing but invisible fingers.

A garbled cry tore from his throat. Anrid flinched and wanted to withdraw deeper into the shadows, to escape from whatever this horrible display meant. But she couldn’t move, her eyes frozen on the goblin in the shadows, his body quivering with unseen pain. The ring of fire surrounding the book began to move closer to Jael, closer to the ring of magic around him. The closer it came, the more his body trembled.

It struck her then, in a flash of clarity, that he was about to get himself killed trying to

perform whatever magical ceremony he had read in this book. She had two choices. She could stand and watch and do nothing. Or she could try to save him from himself.

She was moving before the thought had finished edging itself across her mind. She scrambled across the storage room, her focus on the book. Perhaps if she grabbed it and threw it to the wall or to the floor, it would break whatever spell it held over him. But as she neared and stretched out her hand for the book, Jael's eyes flew open. They blazed with frightening intensity, with purple starlight, and filled with horror when he saw her standing there.

She only had to stretch out her fingers and touch the book. For some reason, however, she faltered, mesmerized by the light and shadow carving sharp planes across his face. He had a strong, square face with thick eyebrows and deep-set eyes, a broad strong nose above a firm mouth. And surrounding it all, a halo of long dark hair. But perhaps it was the expression those planes twisted into, the look of horror they created.

She knew she should run away, but how could she leave him here alone to suffer whatever fate he had planned for himself? It wasn't who she was.

"No," he rasped just as she snatched at the book to hurl it to the floor.

Time seemed to turn backward. Once again, she stood in the tunnels between Imenborg and the Shadewood Forest, surrounded by the hot icy white light from the Bifrost. Pain and light combined until nothing else existed, only this horrible magical moment.

Chapter 18

Rock and bone, what was she doing here?

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

The power of the awakening runes held him frozen in place as the magic sought to complete the pattern, to finish carving the spell of fire and light. The circular rune wrapped around his body grew tighter as the bonding intensified. And then the unthinkable happened: a new fiery rune appeared and wrapped around Anrid's body. She shrieked as it pulled her in, spacing her between Jael and the book.

Now there were three runes, one around him, one around her, and another around that stone-forsaken book. She gaped at him as the runes drew them in closer until barely an inch of space divided them.

Jael struggled to yank himself free, to break the spell before the magic finished carving the rune. But no matter how hard he strived, no matter how hard he fought to break from the magic constricting around him, he could not escape the magical bonds. It was as if iron chains held him in place.

The three individual runes converged with a hiss, intersecting to create a triune bonding spell.

Jael could do nothing but wait and watch as light and pain and blood and furious magic combined.

His thoughts grew murky as the will to escape faded. The moment became almost comfortable, familiar somehow. The unending light surrounding him and Anrid and the book began to cloud with shadows that took shape and color. Scintillating hues of crimson, aquamarine, amethyst and amber surrounded them on all sides, as if they stood in a place made of pure color and nothing else. There was no pain, there was no fear, only this place in this moment and this feeling of belonging.

They were in the heart of the Bifrost.

He knew he had been binding himself to the Bifrost, but he didn't expect it to be...like this.

Cold fingers caught hold of his hand and squeezed. "Where are we?" Anrid whispered.

His lips parted, but it took him a moment to summon the words to speak. "I think this is the Bifrost."

A flicker of aquamarine light caressed the side of his cheek as if it liked his answer. He held himself still although part of him wanted to pull away from the unknowns. This place felt intimate and familiar, as if he were standing not just within the Bifrost but within its very soul.

"Why are we here?" The fool girl had no idea what she had done.

"We are here," he ground between his teeth, "because you inserted yourself into my binding spell. You are now as much a part of this as I am, and I don't think I can do anything about it." But then he became aware of her fingers wrapped around his hand, and his fingers flexed involuntarily before closing around hers. It felt right somehow, as if her hand belonged there, her palm against his, their fates intertwined.

Could she feel it too?

He doubted it. Not after the way she had recoiled from him in the darkened kitchen, as if he repulsed or frightened her. No, this human girl wanted nothing to do with him. She merely wanted him to fulfill his end of their bargain and return her to her people, to her dark elf husband.

He dropped his hand from hers and took a step away.

“I thought you were in trouble.” Her gaze lifted and held his.

This place gave her an ethereal quality. The light toyed with her auburn hair and wafted it around her shoulders as if she were floating underwater. The colors reflecting in her eyes made them brighter and deeper, sharpening the facets in her irises until they resembled gemstones.

He shifted, testing how much control he had over his own body. For now, it appeared, he could move about with ease.

“I am in trouble,” he admitted, “but not in the way you think. I chose this fate for myself. At least I went into it knowing what I was risking. What I was sacrificing.” He stared back at her and willed her to understand the gravity of her situation.

Anrid sucked on her lower lip and appeared more perplexed than enlightened. “What exactly are you risking?” She seemed to be asking more than the words implied.

“What we are risking,” he clarified. “You are now part of this binding. I bound myself to the Bifrost, offering my soul to protect her. The fate of the Bifrost is now bound to me. And to you.”

Her jeweled eyes rounded. “To me?”

He had to give her credit that her voice did not shake. “And you. And I don’t know how to undo it. This is deep magic, and far beyond my understanding.”

“Then why on earth did you attempt this?” Her words grew sharp, almost angry. She raked him with a disapproving look, like the one she might give to the goblinborn when they were misbehaving and yanking at her skirts. Or throwing food at one

another in the kitchen.

The Bifrost grumbled around them.

“Because,” he said despite the exhaustion tugging at his bones, “my people needed me to do it. The Bifrost is under attack, the runestones are failing...and I’m trying to buy us time to figure it all out. I bound myself to the Bifrost to offer her my strength. To share my strength with her. To let her use me like...well, like a runestone, I suppose. I had to do this, Anrid, to protect Agmon.”

She flinched and looked away. She, of all people, would understand this, the girl who had left her home to marry a stranger because her people needed her to do it.

A rose ribbon of magic curled around behind him and nudged him forward. He faltered and tried to stand his ground, but the magic pushed him closer to Anrid before spiraling around her with a dramatic flourish. Heat filled his cheeks.

“I don’t think she likes it when we argue,” Anrid murmured as she lifted a hand, and the ribbon danced around it before flitting off into the brightness.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He suspected there was a whole lot more to it than that but had no intention of voicing his suspicions out loud.

“Well, you are good and truly stuck with me now.” Her voice held a melancholy quality that tugged at his heartstrings in a way he didn’t like. She made it sound like he was the one being inconvenienced when they both knew she was the one who had no desire to be stuck.

It wouldn’t be helpful to point that out, however, so he cleared his throat and managed an awkward, “It would seem so.”

Her sun-kissed face twisted before she smoothed her expression and produced something bright and cheerful. “Truce, then? You and I?”

She stuck out her hand to seal the deal. The Bifrost shivered with delight and sent a rainbow of colors and sparks of light whirling around them like pixies in celebration. He hesitated before he reached to accept her offered hand.

Her delicate fingers felt so right in his, but he told himself it meant nothing. She didn’t care for him and intended to leave the moment he figured out a way to break this binding.

That thought twisted his insides. He didn’t want to break the binding, not with her. Standing in this magical place alone with her...he had never wanted something for himself like he wanted this—whatever this was.

He didn’t wish to break the binding.

“What if—what if I can’t undo this?” He stared down at their clasped hands and couldn’t summon the courage to study her face.

Her fingers twitched in his palm before falling still again. “Oh. I—I don’t know. It would mean—I wouldn’t be able to—would I have to stay forever?”

Yes, his traitorous heart whispered, but his lips proved more obedient. “I can’t say for certain, but I suspect that distance might strain the binding. Runestones require close contact with the Bifrost to be most effective. I don’t know what this means for...souls...for...us.”

“I see.”

The pain in her voice drew his focus to her tense mouth and then up to her guarded eyes. He searched for condemnation, for anger, but he only found confusion and fear.

He gripped her hand a little tighter and told himself it was to comfort her. “I would set you free this moment if I could.”

Her mouth softened at the corners although the cornered expression remained. “Thank you for that. It—it means a great deal. I don’t blame you, you know. For any of this.”

He allowed himself a wry smile. “Rig is more to blame than anyone.”

“Hardly. He’s just a child.”

Jael hesitated a moment. “Still,” he conceded, “he knew using his magic on you was wrong.”

She shrugged one shoulder and seemed a little annoyed. “If anyone is to blame, it’s

me. I'm the one who walked into the forest to begin with. I'm the one who threw myself into your storage room and got myself..." Her cheeks darkened with embarrassment. "...entangled."

He liked the sound of that word when it applied to her. She wasn't like most complications. If anything, she was more complicated, but that only made her more intriguing.

Stones help him, but he was in danger of losing far more than his soul.

Chapter 19

The Bifrost brushed against her and thrummed, much the way a purring cat might rub against her ankles. Anrid shivered and laughed. "I think she's happy."

Jael blushed and dropped her hand as if she'd scalded him. Strange how cold her fingers felt now, as if she'd lost something she didn't even know she had possessed.

"Indeed." He shot a warning look at the magic prancing around them, but it did no good. The Bifrost continued to frolic and purr and kiss their exposed skin.

She rubbed her arms and glanced about. "So how do we get out of here?"

Jael exhaled and shifted a quarter turn. "I suppose when the binding's complete, the Bifrost will send us back. I hope."

Her heart stuttered and restarted much faster. "You don't think we will be stuck here, do you?" She hated the panic in her own voice. When he peered at her more intently, she tried to smooth her expression into a weak smile but failed miserably.

"I don't think so. We wouldn't be able to eat or sleep and our physical bodies would

waste away. That wouldn't benefit the Bifrost, so why would she allow it to happen? She needs us alive to draw on our strength."

But his brow twisted as if he didn't quite believe his own words. There was something he wasn't telling her. A part of her longed to press him for complete honesty, but she wasn't sure she wanted the whole truth right now.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Her brain didn't want to work, filled with fuzzy thoughts that danced about the peripheral of her awareness and mucked up clear reasoning. It was far too easy to be emotional and swept away here, too easy to forget she had a physical body waiting for her beyond this place.

She tried to cling to that thought—that she didn't belong here—but her thoughts scattered more rapidly. She staggered. “Jael,” she began, not recognizing her own voice, “I think something's wrong.”

But shadows closed in on her and he shrank away from her until he was a tiny silhouette in a pinpoint of light against blue-black darkness.

Then even that tiny bit of starlight disappeared and left her floating in an empty night sky.

She woke with a groan. Judging by the pain coursing through her, she'd been returned to her reality, and it didn't feel good at all. She blinked and tried to gather the frayed thoughts and memories to make sense of where she was and why she hurt so much.

She remembered light and color and safety, but this place of hard stone and deep darkness possessed none of those things.

Her fingers grazed the cold stone floor as her brain recalled where she was and how she had gotten there.

“Ow,” she whispered.

A form stirred beside her, warm fingers brushing the back of her hand in a feather-light touch. “Are you hurt?”

The husky murmur sent a shiver through her, and she pulled her hand tight against her skirt. “I’m a little sore. Did we lose consciousness?”

He stirred again and exhaled a heavy breath. “I suspect so.”

Her fingers tingled, as if she’d been out in the cold for too long. She dug them deeper into her skirt, hoping the pain would soon subside.

It didn’t.

Jael shifted beside her, his breathing shallow and rough. Moments later, his runestone sprang back to life, filling the storage room with comforting color and light. “I think we were out for over an hour.”

She groaned and tried to sit up. He still crouched on the ground and reached to help her. Anrid tensed beneath his touch, but he withdrew as soon as she was perched on her sitting bones.

“Thank you.” She ran a hand through her tangled bangs and loosening braid. “It didn’t seem like we were unconscious for that long.”

His features remained impassive. “Light runes expire if I don’t repeat them every hour.”

Oh.

He wasn’t just guessing, then.

“I suppose magic doesn’t have to abide by rules,” she laughed as she wrapped her arms around her knees and hugged them to her chest. She didn’t trust herself to stand yet.

“It has its own rules, for sure.” He propped his forearm on his bent knee and appeared in no hurry to leave. Perhaps his muscles were feeling as limp as her own. She rather feared she would fall flat on her face if she tried to use them.

The seconds ticked by with aching slowness, while neither of them spoke or made eye contact. A painful awkwardness wrapped around them. She suspected, under other circumstances, she and Jael could have been very good friends. The best sort of friends.

He certainly didn’t seem opposed to that.

She sneaked a look at him from under her lashes. He sat still, other than a repetitive clench, release, and flex of the fingers on the hand draped closest to her. She found the movement mesmerizing. Clench, release, flex. Clench, release, flex.

What was he thinking about?

She pretended to busy herself with straightening the beads on the front of her apron. Shades, she didn’t want to know what he was thinking. What a foolish thing for her to be thinking.

She needed to get out of here before she started thinking other things that would be even more foolish.

“What were you doing in the library?”

His question halted her escape plans to a stuttering halt.

“In the library? Oh, yes, of course.” She laughed weakly. “I was looking for the children. Your brother decided we should play Hide and Seek.”

“Hide and Seek?”

“You know, the children hide, and the adult finds them. In this case, the adult in question didn’t plan to look for them at all.”

He snorted and fingered through his hair. “That’s Kora, for you. I apologize. I wish I could say he means well, but...”

For some reason, she felt inclined to come to Kora’s defense. But what could she say? He didn’t paint a very good picture of himself and didn’t act like he cared what anyone thought of him. No, this was probably a matter to be left between brothers.

“Well, I should be checking on the children,” she announced with forced levity. “They must be wondering where I am.”

“Yes.” But he made no indication he intended to rise.

She bit her lip, hesitated a moment longer, and then clambered to her feet. “I’ll be seeing you around then.” She turned to flee from the storage room.

“Anrid.”

His quiet voice halted her before she’d taken three steps. She didn’t dare turn around but tilted an ear to hear him, hiding behind her own hunched shoulder.

“We will need to discuss this some more. If you notice any strange...side effects. Please inform me immediately, no matter the time of day or night.”

The implication that these side effects warranted arousing the keep in the wee hours of the night made her skin shiver and stomach clench into a knotted fist.

“I see.” She cleared her throat and forced a calmness she did not possess. “I will keep that in mind, but I am sure it won’t be necessary. I’m fine.”

She fled for the doorway. She couldn’t tell from his silence whether or not he believed her.

For crying out loud, she didn’t believe herself.

Her heart thundered as she retraced her steps up the dim corridor to the antechamber with the stone bench. Once there, she took a moment to press her palm against the wall and collect her battered thoughts. Her emotions felt frayed and pulled too taut all at once. Why had everything become so convoluted? It had been simple to begin with: get out of these confining tunnels and back to the open skies and the life she’d expected to live. Perhaps it wasn’t the life she wanted, but it was the planned life, the safe life, and the right life.

But the more time she spent in Imenborg with the children—with Jael—the less appealing her planned life began to appear.

Giggles echoed from the other tunnel.

Anrid narrowed her eyes in that direction. Were the scoundrels still hiding in the library, then? They had extraordinary patience for such wild little things. She marched toward the voices. This tunnel twisted at a sharp, ninety-degree angle and led up to a large rectangular chamber. Her shoe bumped against something on the ground.

A book left open on the floor, the pages crumpled and curled as if...

Oh, no.

She scanned the chamber and noticed other books strewn across the stone floor. Piles of books. The shelves appeared to be empty, with their contents chucked across the room. Rig, Crag and little Gorge stood at the center of the chaos, blinking at her, the proof of their crimes still clutched in their hands. The rock monkey reared its head from a stone shelf where bits of paper had been erupting in wild bursts. The creature spit out a mouthful of parchment and blinked at her.

Angry words leaped to her tongue, but she swallowed them back. She mustn't lose her temper. Now wasn't the time for that. First, she needed to get them out of the library, and when she had calmed down, she would discuss the destruction they'd caused.

"Put those books down." Her voice held a deadly calm that brooked no disobedience. The child gawked at her. Then, to Anrid's horror, Crag's ears exploded with fire. Smoke curled around his head and made odd swirls in the air around him. She shrieked and darted toward him. "Fire! You're on fire!"

Rig roared with laughter as Anrid tried to swat at the flames with her bare hands. The heat singed her fingers but didn't burn her. Confused, she took a step back as Crag giggled too. Even little Gorge let out a chorus of hoots at her shock and distress.

She planted her hands on her hips as Crag's ears put themselves out with a pop. "That's your gift, isn't it, you naughty boy. You nearly stopped my heart! I thought you were on fire!"

Rather than feel bad, the goblin boys found this more amusing and jumped about, flapping their hands in an unflattering imitation of her. Even the stupid monkey joined them, shrieking at the top of its lungs and cantering about their feet.

“That will do.” A bit of heat crept into her voice, against her will. “Stop it at once, please.”

Muffling their giggles, the children responded and lined up in front of her with penitent expressions. She made eye contact with each of them: Rig in his tattered clothes and shocking white hair, Crag with his broad shoulders but round boyish cheeks and smoking ears, and Gorge—bless him—wearing only his enormous trousers which hung precariously low on his narrow little bottom. “I want you all to go to our bedroom and stay there until I come for you. Do you understand?”

They nodded as one.

“Yes, ma’am?” she coached.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Their nods grew more vigorous. “Yes, mem,” they chorused.

She pointed a stern finger toward the tunnel leading back to the front of the library. “Go now, then.”

Rig, at the head of the line and most likely the ringleader, paused to give her a hug. “I love you, Uh-NEE,” he breathed before breaking into a run.

Before she could respond, Crag also threw his arms around her waist. “Love you!” His words muffled against her shoulder. Then he too took off. Gorge, at the end of the line, offered a winsome smile and lifted his puckered lips for a kiss.

She pursed her lips to suppress a smile and took his dirty face in her hands. Brushing his hair out of the way, she tipped his head to the side and placed a kiss on his cheek instead.

“I love you, Uh-NEE.” He smiled adoringly at Anrid beneath shaggy, brown bangs before pelting after the others, bellowing, “Wait for me, you two! Wait for me!”

Anrid leaned against the wall and buried her face in her hands. They were so darling and so naughty it was indecent. No child should be allowed to be that cute.

No wonder Kora didn’t want the responsibility of the children. How on earth did one keep them in line when they made you want to give them the world even as they tore yours apart?

“Eh, you lot! I found you!”

Speak of the devil.

Kora's voice echoed down the tunnel the children had disappeared up.

"Uh-NEE found us first!" Rig yelled.

"We were good. Yes, we were!" That came from Gorge.

Anrid rolled her eyes. Good, my foot!

She was tempted to march up there and set the record straight, but she wasn't in any mood to deal with Kora. Instead, she stooped to collect an armful of books. Should she re-shelve them? It seemed the proper thing to do, but she didn't know how to organize them. After glancing at the volume in her hand, she realized she couldn't even read the title.

Maybe she should sort them into piles, separating out the damaged ones, and then offer to help the librarian put them back later. To her dismay, an appalling number of books would need to be put into the "damaged" pile -- the spines wrenched open and the pages manhandled by little fingers. She bent to grab another book.

"Is this your handiwork?" A voice drawled behind her.

She bolted upright and spun, embarrassed to be caught with her rump in the air.

It was Kora, no surprise there. He smiled at her, expression hooded and unperturbed.

"This is your doing." She all but snarled the words at him. The icy pain in her fingers returned with a vengeance, and she curled them into tight fists. "If you hadn't set the children loose and left them to their own devices, this wouldn't have happened." As soon as the words left her mouth, she gaped at him in horror.

She hadn't meant to say any of those things. They just sort of...leaped out of her.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, as tears of dismay and humiliation pricked at her eyes. "I didn't mean that."

To her surprise, a genuine grin split his face. He shrugged as if it didn't matter and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yes, you did. Don't apologize for it."

She blinked. "I-I suppose I did mean it a little, but I shouldn't have said it the way I did."

"No harm done. I've endured much worse scolding."

Anrid couldn't stop the low laugh that escaped her. "I'm sure you have," she answered with a meaningful look his way.

Kora winked and then turned his attention to the mess his little game had caused. "This is a disaster. I suggest we leave it for the librarians and sneak out of here before anyone notices."

He sounded so genuine she couldn't help but gawp at him, appalled. "I could never!" she gasped out. "That wouldn't be right. You really shouldn't say such things."

"Why not? It's what I think." A wrinkle twisted his eyebrows. "Or would you rather I lie and say only what people want to hear?"

She didn't like that he had a point. The line between truth and lies, honesty and tact, were rather blurry. "No," she answered. "But perhaps you should keep some thoughts to yourself. People might misunderstand you."

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He crossed his arms and frowned. “Did you misunderstand me? Wasn’t I clear enough for you?”

Irritation heated her cheeks. She would never win a battle of words with him. That much had become clear in the short time she’d known him. “Quite clear,” she conceded. She pressed two fingers to her temple and almost wished to take his advice and slip away to her bed for a nap.

But she couldn’t do that. She had a mess to clean up and goblins to discipline and reform. There would be no time for naps as long as she lived here in Imenborg.

And why did she have the sinking sensation her stay here at Imenborg was only just beginning? The mountain of rock and earth above her pressed in a little harder, and she wondered if would fall at any moment and bury her beneath the weight of worlds.

Chapter 20

Had he not been the son of a king and mindful of his reputation and duties, Jael might have cursed himself with every foul word he could think up.

How had he dragged Anrid even further into his problems? He could still see her pale face masked with a thin veneer of calm to hide the fear lurking beneath. He’d intended to extract her from this mess and send her home, but now he feared that would never be possible. He didn’t know enough about soul bindings, nor about this blasted book his father had sent him to fetch.

It hadn’t been sealed in blood and hidden in the Nameless stacks for no reason.

Stones, he should have consulted Math before he attempted this. A second opinion and more careful planning might have kept this disaster from happening. He knew he should put the book back under lock and key, but he needed to talk to his apprentice first. If anyone knew about the history of this book, Math would.

Books were bread and butter to him.

A weariness unlike anything Jael'd ever known pulled at him as he made his way to the workroom. He hoped he would find Math there, preparing another load of runestones for transport.

If anyone knew about forbidden books, it would be his curious and insatiable apprentice. And as loathe as he was to bring anyone else into this mess, Jael needed help.

He wasn't fool enough to think otherwise.

The Runemaster of Imenborg was sorely out of his league.

The Bifrost leaned on him, even now when he had full collection of his senses. The magic lurked around the edges of his mind, wrapped around his bones like a second skin. They were one now, in ways he couldn't fathom. And Anrid...

He paused mid-step and braced a palm against the tunnel wall. Was she there too? He calmed his breathing and searched for her inside himself. It was hard to see beyond his own thoughts, even harder to peer beyond the icy, fluttering presence of the Bifrost. But there, beyond the confusion and the light and the wordless whispers, he sensed her.

A quiet but steady presence in the very back of his mind. When he poured all his concentration into focus, he almost grasped her emotions. She was frustrated, he

realized, but that frustration intertwined with deep sorrow.

It made his heart ache.

He pulled himself out of her potent emotions, embarrassed to be meddling in her mind without permission. Such an invasion of privacy was beneath him. She would hate him for spying on her. If the roles were reversed, he would feel violated by the intrusion.

A chill tingled down his spine as he continued on his way. What if this sensing went both ways? Was she privy to his emotions as well? The thought made him uncomfortable.

Like it or not, they were both stuck in this together.

He found Math in the workroom, up to his elbows in half a dozen bags of runestones. The lad folded over the flap on the last bag and secured the buckle with a firm tug. Math's eyes lifted and watched as Jael stalked toward him.

"I need your help," he said without preamble. He hated that he sounded pinched and exhausted and tried to force a bit of enthusiasm into his voice. "If you're done here."

Math nodded and set the bag on the floor with the other satchels. "This sounds serious," he said with a quirking smile. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Jael scanned the chamber to make sure they were alone before he reached into his hidden pocket and pulled out the Nameless tome. He held it out with both hands, startled to see they were shaking.

Math stared down at the book suspended between them but did not reach to take it. "Is that blood?"

“Yes.”

The lad cupped the back of his neck. “I don’t see a title. Is that from the—”

“Yes.”

Math interlaced both hands behind his neck while he studied the ceiling. He groaned.

“I was right: I don’t like this.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Jael winced and wished he could turn around and walk away. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't involve you in this if it wasn't necessary. I was trying to help, but...I think I made things worse, and now I don't know what to do."

Math shifted to reach for the book with one hand, his fingers pale in the flickering light of the runestone above his workbench. "I'm not surprised, if you were meddling with a book like this."

As soon as the book left his fingers, a sense of relief washed over Jael. A weight he hadn't realized he'd been carrying seemed to be bound to that book.

"It's heavy," Math commented, surprised as he noticed what Jael had only just now discovered. "The king's seal." He let his finger trace over the mark of the Daemon and whistled under his breath.

"My father sent me to collect the book." It was important to him that his apprentice understood he hadn't undertaken this without his father's consent. "It was a desperate move to help restore balance to the Bifrost."

"Did it work?" Math flicked startled eyes to his face.

Jael hesitated, shoulders tense with uncertainty. "I don't know. The binding worked. I can sense the Bifrost in ways I couldn't before. But whether or not it will help...I'm not sure what to expect."

"I suppose if we continue to experience earthquakes, we'll know if it worked," Math said with a wry smile. He sat down at the table and leafed through the tome, his smile

fading to a frown as he flipped through the pages faster and faster.

Jael dropped onto the bench beside him and buried his face in his hands. “It worked,” he growled behind the safety of his fingers, not caring how cross he sounded. “But will it be enough?”

Math hummed to himself, as if only half listening.

“There is more.” The necessary words scraped from his throat as he drummed his fingers on the table.

Math’s eyes flickered closed, but then he opened them and paid attention.

“When I was performing the binding, Anrid interfered. She touched the book and...”

To his credit, the apprentice remained calm, although the crease between his eyebrows furrowed more deeply. “Anrid performed the binding with you?”

Jael nodded, unable to tear his eyes away from Math’s. He suspected the answer to what he must ask next. “Is there any way to reverse this? To release her from the binding?”

It was Math who looked away first, a dejected set to his thin shoulders. Jael’s dwindling hopes evaporated.

“None that I’m aware of,” the lad whispered. “Soul bindings are serious business, Jael. I don’t think this can be undone. Had it been any rune spell...but, this? I don’t think it can be reversed.”

He blew a shaky breath between his dry lips. “I suspected as much but needed to be sure. For her sake.”

A pained silence fell between them, charged but somehow companionable. The trust between them saw to that. Neither of them carried this horrible truth alone now. It was a weight they both must bear, regardless of who held the book in his hands.

“Are you going to tell her?” Math wanted to know.

Something inside Jael’s chest tightened, and he had to swallow back the urge to vomit onto the floor right there.

How could he? How would he tell this innocent young woman that her life was over? There was no going back. There was no leaving Agmon, no returning to a land beneath the sky. She was trapped beneath rock and stone.

Forever.

Forever bound to Agmon. To the Bifrost. To this despicable book and all its secrets. Forever bound to him.

How could he tell her that?

But another part of him, the more rational part, countered with a stern whisper.

How can you keep this from her?

Something whispered on the far side of the room. Jael’s head shot up, and he scanned the shadows obscuring the tunnel on the other end of the chamber. His heartbeat quickened as he searched for danger in the lifeless darkness.

He was looking for trouble when it wasn’t to be found. No one was there; it was just him, and Math, and the terrible secret they both carried.

“I’ll tell her.” He breathed out at last as he ran a hand across his face. “But not today. Tomorrow. I’ll tell her tomorrow.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Math's expression bordered on reproachful. But he said nothing as he handed Jael the vile book. The weight of it in his hands made him tired, so very tired. He slipped the book into his pocket and heaved to his feet.

“Bring the report from the lads when they get back. I'd like to know if there has been any change with the Bifrost. I'm going to get some rest.”

Math nodded without speaking.

It seemed like a lie, claiming he wanted a report on the Bifrost. What he wanted to know was if his sacrifice—and Anrid's—would make any difference at all, or if they'd doomed themselves to a lost cause.

When had he become such a pessimist?

Chapter 21

When Anrid returned to her room, she found Rig sitting on the floor outside the door. Giggling emanated from inside, where his partners in crime were getting up to more mischief. But, for his part, Rig made a pathetic figure, with his knobby knees drawn to his chest and arms clutched around them.

He watched her approach with large, soulful eyes.

Anrid sank down beside him and leaned her head back against the stone wall. Shades, she didn't want to scold him.

“I’m sorry about the books!” he burst out. “Please, don’t be mad.” He succumbed to tears and pressed his face against the top of his knees.

“Oh, Rig,” she murmured as she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He leaned into her side, sobbing all the harder. Had she been too harsh earlier in the library? She scolded the children often, and he’d never taken it to heart like this before. She stroked his back, leaning over to press a kiss against the top of his frowsy locks. “Whatever possessed you to damage all those books in the first place?”

His body shook with sobs. “I don’t know.”

“You must have been thinking something, pet. Why would you want to throw the books on the floor and make a mess out of the library when everyone here has been so good to care for us?”

He snuffled and eased back to wipe his nose on his sleeve. “Because—because they want to send you away.” His lower lip trembled, and then he burst into a fresh round of wails.

“Oh, Rig.” She tugged him closer again, her heart twisting as she rubbed his arm with gentle strokes. “Rig, you need to understand that I don’t belong here. I belong with my people, up above. And you and the children don’t belong here either. This isn’t a place for us, for you or for me.”

“But where will we go? Who will take care of us if you go away? Don’t you like us, Uh-NEE? Don’t you want to stay with us?”

She tightened her arms around him. “Of course I do, pet. But it isn’t that simple. Sometimes we don’t get to decide what we want to do.” Her voice grew softer yet. “Sometimes it is decided for us.”

“If they send you away,” he mumbled against the front of her apron, his thin arms tightening as he clung to her tighter, “I’ll hate them forever.”

She gasped. “Rig, don’t say such things. Of course, you won’t hate them. Hate is a powerful word, a bad word. It’s a big emotion and not one we should ever allow to take root in our hearts. It can grow into something bad and scary if you let it.”

“I don’t care,” he muttered.

She pursed her lips and stroked his hair. “Well, I do care. I care too much to let you say such things. Whatever happens, it isn’t anyone’s fault. Sometimes things just have to happen, and there is no use trying to throw blame at people. Or using bad words like hate.”

He pulled back and frowned at her in a fierce and dangerous way. “That isn’t fair. If bad things can happen, then I should get to be bad too. Bad things always happen, and they tell me, ‘don’t feel bad,’ but I do feel bad. I feel really bad.”

She hesitated, wondering what hidden pain was causing the root of his anger. He hadn’t known her long enough to be so attached to her. He might think he was, but there was something else going on.

A part of her wanted to press him for answers, to peel back the layers of his troubled life and make sense of the broken pieces. But another part of her feared what she might find. She chose her next words with exquisite care, but before she could speak, footsteps echoed up the stairs. Kora appeared at the end of the corridor.

“What are you two up to?” he asked as he approached, hands tucked lazily into his pockets. He took in the situation with a quick flick of his eyes, his expression hawk-like and speculative. “Feeling a little blue, are we, chap?”

Rig shot him a less than pleasant look and wiped his nose on his sleeve again. “What do you know about it?” he snapped.

Kora pursed his lips and shrugged. “I don’t know anything about why you feel blue. Other than I saw your handiwork in the library. That was bad form, even by my standards. But I do know what I do when I feel down in the mouth.”

For the first time, Rig showed a glimmer of curiosity. “Yeah?”

Kora winked at him and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “Yes,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper. “I go to the kitchen and ask Cook to feed me dessert.”

“And he gives it to you?” Rig asked, as if shocked.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Cooks love to feed people who’re blue,” Kora said with a careless wave of one hand. “Shall we go put it to the test? I’m feeling a bit peckish myself.”

Rig bounded to his feet, but then whirled around to give Anrid a quick hug. Kora gave her a You’re Welcome wink before leading the bouncing youngster toward the kitchen.

Anrid wasn’t sure what she had to be thankful for, exactly: what Rig needed was love and boundaries...not trips to the kitchen to raid the pantry. But maybe some one-on-one time with a big brother figure would do him some good.

Although, now that she thought about it, Kora was probably the last person in the world she would choose to set an example for any child.

She remained seated for several minutes, allowing herself a blissful moment of peace. The rock felt solid behind her, friendly and supportive somehow. But, no, that wasn’t it. She could sense something within the rock, and that presence offered the feeling of comfort.

Was this the Bifrost? The magic that wound through Agmon?

Her heart skipped a beat, excited at the prospect of having access to magic, even if it only meant she could feel it. But this elation quickly clouded with uncertainty. What business did she, a human girl, have meddling with magic?

A surge of despair flooded her senses. It came out of nowhere and brought the prick of tears to her eyes. She hadn’t been thinking about anything that should have made

her feel so...so...

The emotion had an alien feel, she realized, something not her. She focused on the despair to understand where it had come from or who it belonged to. Was it the Bifrost? No, the magic had a sharper, brighter feel. This was something else, something warmer and more solid. She probed at the emotion that had taken root inside her thoughts. While the Bifrost's presence had a feminine quality to it, this felt more masculine, she realized. A stone table and paper sprang into her mind. No, not just paper, but books. She could almost see where he was...

Oh.

Heat flooded her face as she withdrew from her introspection as if she'd been bit. This wasn't the magic or strange voices or anything like that.

It was Jael.

Wrestling the children into bed took much longer than she would have liked. They were hyper from the rock candy drops Kora had pilfered from the kitchen.

Bless his stone-cold heart.

She should send the children to sleep in his bedroom for the night. It had taken her and Trap half an hour to scrub all the sticky faces and fingers and even longer to wrestle the little dears into the spare tunics that served as their nightclothes.

But at last, she had them all spread across the floor and collapsed into her own bed with little Medda tucked against her chest, who caught a fistful of Anrid's braid and sucked on the end.

"Thig thog," Medda whispered around the braid between her lips.

Anrid twisted her neck to see the girl's face, wondering if this was a goblin expression of some sort. "What was that?"

Medda tugged the hair from her mouth with a giggle. "Silly! Sing song! Uh-NEE sing song!"

The other children joined the clamor, so Anrid shushed them with a laugh and sorted through her nursery repertoire for the perfect song. She loved that most nursery lullabies were not only soft and beautiful but also deeply haunting. After a little thought, she chose her sister's favorite lullaby, the one Anrid used to sing to her after their parents died.

As soon as she started singing, the children tumbled from their beds on the floor and crowded around hers, leaning over one another to get as close as they could.

When winter's blade blows through the trees,

When the sky-fire sets on a crimson breeze,

Close your eyes and hear the song

Of sweet twilight, soft and long.

When the ship of night glitters bright

In the darkness of Skadi's night,

Close your eyes and snuggle close

For winter comes, and Skadi knows.

She knows the shadows and the cold,

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Knows the uncut threads you hold,

So close your eyes and hold me tight,

For I am with you in the night.

A collective sigh swept through the goblin children. They beamed at her, eyes glittering in the faint aquamarine glow from the runestone Trap always left lit for them beside the door.

“That was so pretty,” one of the girls whispered. “But what does it mean?”

Anrid paused, taken aback, but then she remembered where she was and who she was talking to. These children had probably never seen the snow, experienced a winter, or watched the sun set behind the mountains as the shadows of nightfall crept over them.

It filled her with a strange sort of melancholy.

“It’s about bedtime,” she said at length. “When the runestones are turned down and the blankets pulled close, you can go to sleep in peace because you aren’t alone. Skadi sees you.”

“But who is that?” Rig asked, his elbows propped on the edge of the bed and face cupped in his hands.

She smiled at him. “Skadi is the immortal fairy of winter—of the cold. Above ground, there are seasons that change. Winter, spring, summer, autumn...and Skadi is

the keeper of the winter. Here in the tunnels where you live, everything stays the same. But above ground, where I live, everything changes. It's a cycle of living and dying and growing."

Half the children blurted out questions all at the same time. She realized, belatedly, that this sort of discussion would be better served during the day because it required a lot of explanation.

It hurt her heart that these children lived such secluded lives they didn't understand anything about the outside world. Other than Rig, had any of them ever even seen the sky?

"Enough for tonight!" she shouted over them. "Back to bed, children. One, two, three—I don't want to see!"

Amidst squeals, they plowed one another over to get back to their assigned places and dive beneath their blankets before she finished the little rhyme. She smiled at the wiggling lumps hidden beneath the warm blankets strewn across the floor.

"Goodnight, children," she called.

Giggles and more wiggling filled the room. "Goodnight, Uh-NEE," they chorused back to her.

She snuggled into her own bed with little Medda against her chest, and for one blissful moment, she had everything she needed in life.

Conflicting scenes punctuated her dreams. The dreamworld felt familiar and soothing at first, as she sat in a warm chamber beside a flickering fire with small bodies pressed close on every side. She could almost hear her own voice singing Skadi's Song. But soon the images of her holding the children cut to dark chambers shattered

by ribbons of hot, white light.

A sense of loss stole over her, not sharp like the stab of a knife but slow and sinister like the deadly fever that had stolen her parents.

The children were in danger.

Anrid ran through whispering shadows and searched for her goblin charges, shouting their names as she tried to find them before the Bad Thing happened.

There was always a Bad Thing in her dreams. Sometimes it was vague like an oncoming storm, while at other times she ran from a great beast with fangs as jagged as sharpened blades.

This time the shadows nipped at her heels, lashing out at her exposed ankles and drawing blood. She could feel it dripping over her jutting ankle bones and bare feet. She thought she heard one child screaming and raced around a bend in the tunnel, only to run face first into a solid rock wall. Blood spurted from her nose as she fell backward.

Hot, white pain exploded in her head and blinded her.

They are coming.

The familiar whisper sent shivers of fear down her spine, and she pushed up to her hands and knees and then to her feet, her desperation to find the children drowning out all other thoughts.

Run. They are coming. Run.

“Uh-NEE!” Rig screamed her name.

She raced down the sloping tunnel, but the grade grew steeper and steeper, almost as if the corridor wanted to tip and dump her loose. “I’m coming, Rig!” she shouted as she scrambled for purchase on the ever-tilting floor.

They are coming!

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

The Bifrost slammed into her thoughts with such force Anrid lost purchase on the ground and slid deeper into the bowels of the earth, deeper into the shadows. The darkness snarled and snatched at her, at the hem of her clothes, at her exposed skin.

If she didn't know better, she would think it was trying to devour her. But darkness couldn't devour, it only existed. It wasn't real, only an absence of light.

A horrible cackle reverberated from deep within the yawning pit that opened up before her.

We are very real, mortal.

The words invaded her mind unbidden. She snatched at loose rocks to try to stop her tumbling descent. Her fingers caught hold of a stalagmite jutting from the ground at the precipice of the tunnel. Her body hung free over the void, her fingers pulsing with pain as she clutched the stalagmite as hard as she could.

Set us free and we will show you how real we are.

She cried out and knew she would die if she fell. She could feel it, the knowing, the certainty that death waited for her in the endless pit of blackness that wasn't real, that couldn't be real.

Her arms shook from the effort of supporting her weight. Her fingers grew numb, and she feared she didn't have much strength left. She was going to fall, and if she fell into that dark abyss...

Horror clawed at her throat, and she screamed as her stinging fingers lost their grip and plunged her into shadow.

But a hand caught her wrist at the last possible second, and she swung in a wild arc. Instead of disappearing into the darkness, she rose upward, back toward the light. Someone grabbed her other hand and hauled her up over the precipice and back to solid ground.

Arms pulled her to safety, away from the chortling darkness that shouted for her to stay and play.

Jael's arms felt real, impossibly solid. It must be him, for who else would it be? A brief respite from the terror bolstered her courage.

"We need to get out of here," he said in her ear.

"The children," she gasped.

He tugged her to her feet. "They're not here."

"But I can hear them—"

"Don't listen. It's the shadows. They lie."

She didn't understand how or why he thought this, nor did she want to believe him. To leave the children behind and save herself? Absolutely not!

"Uh-NEE!"

She struggled to go back for Rig, for sobbing little Medda. But Jael—curse him, why did he have to be so strong? Jael caught her around the waist and hauled her off, away

from her goblin children. She screamed their names as he spirited her away against her will.

Chapter 22

Anrid was surprisingly strong, even in this half-dream state. Jael struggled to keep hold of her waist and not drop her into an undignified heap on the ground. She kicked and clawed at him to get free. He pinned her tighter against his chest and raced back up the tunnel as darkness lashed at his back and shredded his tunic to ribbons. He could sense her fear, not a vague presence but a battering ram at the forefront of his thoughts. Her fear threatened to become his own. Focus. It's not real. It's not real. It's not...real...

She was losing her mind, trying to save children that didn't exist, not here in this place. Whatever voices called to her were not the voices of the children.

He only heard the voice of the darkness. Why couldn't she see it wasn't real?

A coil of black shadow caught him around the ankle and yanked him off his bare feet. He hit the ground, rolling at the last minute to land on his own shoulder instead of Anrid. She tumbled out of his arms and came up hard against the tunnel wall.

For a fraction of a moment, they stared at one another, but then her eyes moved to something behind him.

“Jael—”

Whatever else she intended to say cut off in a scream as the shadows yanked him back down the tunnel with abrupt ferocity. He clawed for purchase but found nothing to grasp on the hard stone floor. The pads of his fingers shredded against rocky shards and sharp cracks in the ground.

He lashed out with his free foot in one last desperate attempt to free himself. The coil around his ankle dissipated with an angry hiss. He found his footing and barreled back up the tunnel. Anrid smacked into him, obviously thinking she should come to his rescue, but he caught her by the elbow and dragged her alongside him.

“This isn’t a dream!” she gasped as she pelted her bare feet against the floor and tried to keep up with him. “We can’t—we have to go back for the children! Jael! The children!” Her voice ended in a wail that threatened to undo him.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“There are no children!” he yelled without slowing his pace. They rounded a bend in the tunnel and pounded up the incline toward a wide, open hall braced with stone pillars that made him think of the grand corridors in Elysium, not of the narrow tunnels here at Imenborg.

Behind them, the shadows pursued, snarling like rabid dogs, ravenous and relentless.

We are coming for you. We are coming for you. We. Are. Coming.

The corridor stretched on forever, nothing ahead of them except pillar after pillar after pillar. He despaired that there would never be an end to this nightmare.

This living nightmare.

“There!” Anrid gasped and tugged him off balance as she tried to redirect him.

He followed her lead and darted between two of the pillars and toward a sliver of icy white light coming from beneath a closed door. He released Anrid as he skidded to a halt and pushed hard against the door to force it open. It groaned and resisted, but he pushed the heavy stone door inward enough for them to squeeze through.

The shadows snarled right behind them.

“Help me close it!” He heaved against the stone, but it caught on something. Anrid leaned her shoulder against the rough surface to help him.

The door eased closed one inch, and then two. Anrid screamed as black tentacles of

shadows wedged themselves through the narrowing opening. But Jael continued to push with every fiber of his being. The door eased another couple of inches.

With an infuriated howl, the shadows disappeared beneath the slamming of stone upon stone.

Jael hit his knees, hard, and pressed his forehead against the door as he gasped for breath. Anrid sank down beside him, her back to the door. Her fingers splayed across the floor to brace herself, only a hair's breadth from his left knee.

Her chest rose and fell with erratic breaths as she twisted her neck to peer up at him. Questions swirled in the depths of her eyes, but she said nothing. They stared at one another, nothing between them but ragged breaths.

He blinked, and they were back in his room.

No, in her room. He glanced around at three dozen gawking faces huddled around the edges of the room. Half of them were crammed onto the beds as if trying to get away from something. Little Medda's blood-curdling screams echoed through the too small chamber.

Rock and bone, he needed to find them a bigger room.

He eased back onto his heels and braced his hands against his thighs. Anrid sat beside him in a tangle of blankets and lumpy pillows, her hair torn from her braid and spilling around her nightgown.

Heat filled his cheeks as this fact registered. He glanced down at himself, appalled to see he wore only his loose-fitting tunic and knickers that fell just below his knees.

At least he had gone to bed with a shirt on. Thank the runes for small mercies.

“Uh-NEE?” Rig choked out from the bed where he clung to his screaming sister.

Anrid’s head snapped up and focused on the children for the first time. “Oh, my darlings. You’re all right. Is everyone all right? Everyone is here?”

Relief—not his own—flooded Jael’s senses.

The children took this as permission of some sort and tumbled off the beds and over one another in their haste to get to Anrid. When her lap filled, the children turned on Jael. He caught a little fellow in his arms and fell backward, bracing himself with an awkward hand behind him. He repositioned so that he sat securely as two more goblins swathed in much-too-large tunics dove into his lap.

The door to the bedroom swung open and hit the wall with a bang as Kora staggered in, his white hair tangled and standing up in places. He wore nothing but a pair of loose trousers tied at his waist. “By the stones, what’s all the yelling—” He broke off when he saw them huddled on the floor. His mouth hung open.

Jael met Anrid’s gaze as they sat together on the floor with weeping goblinborn huddled as close to them as possible. Hands touched him from all sides, on his shoulders, arms and thighs. Little Medda even had a hold of his bare foot, hugging it to her chest as if it were a treasured doll she feared she might lose.

Anrid broke eye contact first and hugged Rig tighter against her side, her other arm trying to stretch around two more children without displacing a third that wouldn’t fit onto her legs.

“Hush, children, hush,” she called out. “Please, hush.”

The crying grew quieter but didn’t cease. She licked her tongue across her lips, appeared momentarily helpless, and then cleared her throat. She began to sing.

Anrid had a lovely voice, it was low and gentle, and the melody that spilled out of her haunted him with breathless beauty. She sang about winter, and nighttime, and other things he didn't understand, her world so far above his.

So far above him.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She sang and held the goblinborn close—held his goblinborn, children that she had no responsibility to love and yet loved with abandon. Every bit of his heart's resistance exploded outward like displaced stone during an earthquake. Emotions flooded through him unchecked. Staring at this human girl with her freckled cheeks, sun-kissed skin, and wild auburn hair, he didn't care that they came from different worlds. He didn't care that she was betrothed and that she didn't want to be there.

He loved her.

Loved her more than he had ever loved another living soul.

Anrid broke off mid-word when Trap and Math appeared behind Kora.

The housekeeper hastily belted a robe around herself.

Kora shook himself out of his surprised stupor. "What exactly is going on in here? Do you know it's the middle of the night?" He had the gall to sound peeved, but then when he stared at Jael, there seemed to be a sliver of concern in his sharp eyes.

"Of course we know," Jael ground out. He studied Anrid for an awkward minute, wondering what he should say in front of the children. "The children needed calming is all. I was—I was—"

He knew he should say something to explain why he was in Anrid's bedroom in the middle of the night. He didn't even remember barging in...was that what sleep walking was like?

When he couldn't finish the thought, Anrid cleared her throat and answered on his behalf. "He was trying to help," she murmured. "We were having bad dreams, weren't we, children? But it wasn't real. Just a bad dream."

Her eyes swept to Jael, however, and held.

They both knew what had happened was anything but a dream.

"Yeah, a bad dream," Rig confirmed with a sage nod of his head. "There were these mean shadow snakes, and they were trying to get to us, but Uh-NEE and the prince wouldn't let them."

"Yeah," Crag chimed in, pretending to slash the air with an invisible blade. "They fought them off and locked the door!" The rock monkey clinging to his shoulder shrieked and shook a fist at them as if trying to reinforce Crag's tale.

Something inside Jael stuttered and twisted. How did they know all this? They hadn't been in the dream at all! They'd been safely in their beds...

Hadn't they?

He saw his own horror mirrored in Anrid's face as she tried to hold the children closer. Neither of them spoke, but the children continued to discuss the dream. The details were too specific to be a coincidence.

They'd been there. Somehow. The children had been a part of the dream.

"Trap," he called out, his voice hoarse and weak. He cleared his throat and tried to shuffle children off to the side. "I need you to put the children back to bed." He fended off protests as the goblinborn tried to hug his legs and waist to keep him from leaving.

“I need to talk to Uh-NEE,” he explained to them with a patience he didn’t feel.

Anrid startled.

“Trap will stay with you,” he added. He flicked his gaze to his younger brother. “And so will he.”

Kora appeared horrified before he swiped his face clean of expression. “Oh, and a jolly time we’ll have too,” he said dryly. “I love a ruckus in the middle of the night.”

Jael waded through the piles of children to get to the door, where he clasped Math by the shoulder and leaned against him, almost too weary to stand. His apprentice sought his face for answers.

Jael shook his head. Not now. Not here.

He turned to wait for Anrid, but she still sat on the floor with the goblinborn. As if sensing his impatience, she lifted her chin. “I shouldn’t leave them—”

“Please,” he interrupted her, more sharply than he intended. “Please. I...I need you.”

For an agonizing moment, he feared she would refuse, her arms too full of children to care what he wanted or needed. But then she nodded and began to slide them off her lap. Trap dove in to help her, clucking as she tried to direct the littles ones back to their beds.

Anrid paused beside Kora and stretched out a shaking hand to grip his forearm. “Don’t leave them until I return?” she whispered, almost anxiously.

Kora stared for a fraction too long before quirking a smile at her. He splayed a hand against his bare chest. “I wouldn’t dream of it, love. I’ll take care of the wee darlings,

don't you worry now." He shot a smirk toward Jael, whose skin suddenly felt as if it were on fire. Hot, white jealousy coursed through him.

He wanted nothing more than to lay his brother out cold on the floor for being half naked and looking so good while doing it.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

But then Anrid released him and stepped toward Jael, a disturbed and inquisitive expression on her face. She said nothing, however, until he and Math led the way from the bedroom and closed the door behind them.

“What in the world is going on?” Math hissed. “You all were screaming like banshees had invaded Imenborg. I heard it way down in the workroom.”

Which explained why it had taken the apprentice so much longer to get to the room than it had Kora and his rock-eaten naked torso.

The least he could have done was put on a shirt.

Chapter 23

Anrid snagged a blanket on her way out the door and slung it around her shoulders. Jael and his apprentice whispered as she stood off to one side and waited. Every part of her ached to be back in her room, in her bed, with her children.

She wasn't sure when she had become so attached to them: was it as Jael had said, that they'd bespelled her? She didn't think so.

But nothing about this place made any sense. And it was filled with magic. She could feel it now that she was connected to the Bifrost, pulsing around her like a warm fog kissing her exposed cheeks. And then there was this new and terrifying connection to a certain goblin prince.

Waves of worry and discontent wafted from him. How strange to feel another

person's emotions! She worried she would begin to confuse her own feelings with his: was there a way to put up boundaries, she wondered, to keep him out?

A chill raised goosebumps on her arms. If she could feel him like this...was he also reading her?

"We should go someplace else," Jael said at last with a glance in her direction. Had he sensed her horrified question in his mind? Of course, not. She hadn't been able to read his thoughts, so surely he wasn't reading hers.

"The workroom?" Math suggested with a wave of a hand.

But Jael still stared at Anrid. She wasn't sure she liked the way his deep-set eyes clung to hers. His searching expression, mingled with the dark circles beneath his eyes, made him appear vulnerable.

Looking like that, it would be far too easy for her to add him to her collection of goblin children and take him under her wing. He was so big and strong—she had noticed that fact, to her humiliation—but how could she not have noticed when he had his arms around her to carry her away from danger? But now, with that lost and worried expression on his face, he appeared young and defenseless and that made her want to take care of him, to be the strong one for a change.

She became deeply aware that his eyes still fused to hers. What was he searching for? She shivered and hugged the blanket closer and tried to clamp down on her emotions. She didn't want him to know what she was thinking and feeling right now. That would be...awful.

"Are you all right?"

She found she couldn't answer, not truthfully. How could she tell him that she wasn't

all right at all without sounding like a complainer? Without sounding ungrateful for what he had tried to do to make her comfortable?

He shifted to stand closer, dipping his chin to peer down at her. She avoided catching his eye and pretended to readjust her blanket. "What is it? You can tell me."

She didn't want to tell him that his world was smothering her, that his problems were too big for her. She was only human and wasn't meant for shadows and magic and deep, dark places. She didn't want to be soul bound, her privacy at risk of invasion in the most secret places of her mind.

"I fear I am going mad in this place," she rasped. "How do you stand the weight of the world on top of you?"

When he did not answer, she risked a peek at him from below her lashes. She could almost see his thoughts churning as his expression shifted into varying moods. At last, he cleared his throat. "No, not the workroom," he said to Math and not to her. "We'll go to the greenhouse."

Math seemed surprised but didn't comment.

Greenhouse? Anrid wondered. Did that word mean something different to goblins than it meant to humans? How could they have a greenhouse under the ground?

She followed them without comment. It wasn't until they were too far from her room to go back that she realized she should have grabbed a pair of shoes. Her bare feet felt icy cold. But she took comfort in the fact she wasn't alone in this miserable and awkward state.

Jael, too, wore no shoes. In fact, she had never seen him in such a state of undress, wearing only a pair of knickers and a sleeveless tunic that showed off his broad

shoulders and well-defined arms.

Her cheeks blazed, and she returned her focus to her feet, determined not to study him again. It would be safer not to look when he, well, when he looked like that. All mussed and adorable and complicated. No fellow had the right to look like that in the presence of a woman destined to marry someone else.

Her heart tightened a bit as she thought of this dark elf husband she'd never met and the elusive future that was beginning to drift further away.

She didn't know what she wanted anymore.

They walked for about ten minutes before reaching a winding set of stairs. She followed at the back, the walls of the windowless stairwell pressing in on her. It was dark, unpleasantly so, with only the faint glow from the runestone Math held high to light their way. But he was at the wrong end of the line and always around the next spiral so that she felt as if she were being left behind.

Left to the mercy of the shadows.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She shivered and struggled to increase her pace, her bare feet slapping against the stone steps and echoing off the walls that seemed to be growing ever closer. Her breath began to tighten in her chest to the point it hurt to breathe, and the icy cold in her fingers burned like fire.

At last purple light flooded the stairwell ahead of her. She burst from the last step and staggered into blissful expansiveness.

A jagged breath tore from her lungs as humid air that smelled floral and earthy, like compost, enveloped her.

Her world shattered. Rather, her understanding of how it worked crumpled into confusion. They stood on a wide terrace that stretched into raised stone beds with growing things. Plants and trees and flowers spilled out of the stone beds. The entire area was flooded with warm, purple light. Blissful heat caressed her chilled skin.

Oh, how she had missed the kiss of the sun. She shed her blanket and stretched her arms away from her body to inhale the delicious heat, to let it soak into her bones and soothe her wounded spirit.

When she turned to the others, Math watched her with a cocked eyebrow and Jael with concern.

“How is this possible?” she managed.

The furrow between Jael’s brows eased. “The runestones mimic your sun,” he explained as he motioned to the massive stones in the ceiling above them.

Her heart trilled with the wonder of all the things she had never imagined to be possible. How could there be sunlight without the sun? A garden in the belly of a mountain?

She pressed fingers to her mouth and turned in a slow arc to try to take it all in. If it weren't for the strange lighting, she could almost believe she stood on real earth with a wide-open sky above her. Something even zipped over her head. With a squeak of surprise, she shaded her eyes and watched the jagged flight of a small creature that was shaped like a bird but moved like a bat. "What is that?"

"A dragonet." Jael's voice held a hint of laughter. "They're harmless, don't worry. They like to nest where it's warm and humid."

The dragonet swooped closer to her. It was about the size of a full-grown hawk, with a sleek, scaled body and two powerful back legs. Its smaller front limbs tucked close to its rose-hued body. As it soared above her, it flicked a thin tail behind itself that feathered at the end. A trilling sound erupted from its throat, reminding her more of birdsong than dragon roar. Several other dragonets answered the call, emerging from crevices in the walls and ceiling to dart above the garden in graceful circles.

Anrid watched the dragonets until they disappeared from her line of sight. Curious, she headed in that direction, wandering between two long flowerbeds. The boxes overflowed with unfamiliar leaves and blooms, with dark-leafed and aromatic plants that reminded her of herbs. Tall stems crowned with pink and purple and orange petals around a prominent center made her think of wildflowers.

The dragonets now forgotten, she wandered deeper into the garden and discovered the stone beds held more than flowers, but also vegetables and vines sporting dark red berries. It made sense now, how the goblins kept the kitchen stocked.

She found her way into a circular clearing. The path she walked on consisted of

bricks inlaid with carvings, winding in a circular pattern toward a fountain at the center of the space. A stone goblin child holding a pitcher sprang from the center of the pool. Fresh mountain spring water poured from the mouth of the pitcher and splashed into the pool.

She trailed her fingers through the cold water and found herself grinning.

“You like the garden?”

His deep, quiet voice suited this place, this lovely and magical place. She smiled again and walked around the fountain, letting her fingers trail through the cold spring water.

“It’s magnificent,” she admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like it in all my life.” When she caught his eye, she startled to notice he appeared rather pleased. It mattered to him that she like his greenhouse, although she couldn’t fathom why.

“You should see the gardens in Elysium,” he said as he came to walk beside her, hands locked behind the small of his back as if it were normal to stroll through a garden in one’s nightclothes.

She decided not to dwell on that and ruin the moment.

“I would like that,” she confessed, but a sinking tug at her heart whispered she would never get the chance to see them. “Although, I doubt I will be in Agmon long enough for sightseeing, not if I am to make it back to Gelaira in time for my wedding.” She shot him a wry, half smile.

His expression grew pensive and guarded. “Ah, yes, the famous dark elf husband. Was your wedding date set, then?”

“I hardly know.” She shrugged her shoulders and tried to ignore the anxiety building in her stomach. “I assume it is, but I’ve not been informed of the plans. And now...” She laughed to hide her discomfort. “I can’t help wondering if he will even wait for me or if they’ll find him another girl.”

He grunted and took his time answering as they circled the fountain again. “Would you mind much? If he didn’t wait for you?”

No, the traitorous voice inside her whispered. But she cleared her throat and answered firmly. “Yes, I would be disappointed.”

Now he looked disappointed.

She suspected that didn’t have anything to do with her, however. He was probably thinking about how he needed her help to sort out this magical dilemma with the Bifrost and keeping the children out of mischief until Kora and the Ministry found them a place to go.

Anrid paused and stared down at the pool of water, determined not to look at him. It was difficult when he stood so close and took up so much space. It wasn’t that he was such a big person—although he was taller and broader in the shoulders than most of the men she’d known back home. No, there was something all-encompassing about his presence. She couldn’t have put it into words if her life depended on it.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, the words quiet and resigned. “I never meant to drag you into this.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She risked a sad smile in his direction. "I know that. You don't need to keep apologizing. I do believe you, Jael."

His name fell so naturally from her lips, she wondered why she hadn't used it more often.

Something gleamed in his eyes that she couldn't quite interpret, but it vanished and left him looking haggard and pensive. "We should talk about what happened."

The gardens grew a little colder. She rubbed her arms to ward off the unease. "Yes."

"The problem is: I'm not sure what happened." He fingered his untidy hair before locking his hands behind his back again. He stared down one of the garden paths with an intent, brooding air.

She drew a careful breath and considered her words. "The children," she said with a slight hesitation, "were they actually in our dream? Was it even a dream? It wasn't. Was it?"

He didn't have to answer because she knew it wasn't just a dream. At least, it was more than a normal nightmare. They had both been in it, both been aware of it, and when they woke up...

They had been together. At some point, she had gotten out of her bed, and he left his own room and found his way to her and the children.

He exhaled. "It felt real. But the goblinborn...I don't see how they could have been

with us. They aren't bonded to the Bifrost. They shouldn't have been a part of our dream."

"But I could hear them," she whispered. She clenched her chilly fingers together and wished she hadn't left them in the water so long. "I couldn't see them, but I knew they were there."

"I never saw them." He shifted to cross his arms over his bulky chest. "I thought it was the shadows trying to deceive us."

"I don't think so." She sucked on her lower lip for a moment before continuing. "At least, not entirely. The children had some awareness of what happened. Rig knew about us closing the door. And I've never discussed my nightmares with them. How could they know about any of the details if they weren't a part of it?"

He faced her squarely and studied her with a frown. "Have you had many dreams like this?" He sounded stern, almost angry.

She wanted to come to her defense: it wasn't like she asked to have horrible nightmares that may or may not be real. Instead, she only nodded. "They started when I touched the Bifrost. They're getting worse, though. The first time it felt like a normal nightmare, but now..."

"They're becoming reality." He held her gaze and maintained that severe frown. "But is it because of our bond to the Bifrost, or because the shadows are getting stronger? Or have they somehow found a way to use the Bifrost to cross from wherever they are to our world?"

"Can the Bifrost do that?"

"I don't know. It's not impossible. I mean, the Bifrost is a bridge between the mortal

world and the unseen world. It would not be unreasonable that it might also bridge to other unseen worlds.”

“Like a world filled with evil shadows?” she asked, a little wryly.

He inclined his head. “Unfortunately, so, it would seem.”

“So, what do we do about it? How do we ‘close the door’ on them permanently? Keep them from using the Bifrost to get to us and the children?”

Jael’s lips parted, but no sound came out. They stood there in the middle of the garden, facing one another with only two feet of space between them. Her skin crawled with the awareness of his presence, of him. She couldn’t deny the pull he had on her. For some reason, her spirit wanted to like him, to be near him.

Dare she even admit her heart wanted this as well? Was it the pull of the Bifrost? That must be it, of course. She was sensing the pull of the magic binding them together.

He took a step closer and dropped his arms to his sides. She hitched her breath but held herself still, caught in the spell he wrapped around her. Somewhere nearby, a dragonet trilled its sweet song.

“The children,” she whispered, “how do we protect the children?”

Jael tipped his head to one side, but rather than appear deflected by her blatant attempt to shift the focus from herself, he grew more interested.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said at last as he lifted one hand and trailed his fingers from her elbow down her arm. His inquisitive touch brushed down her forearm and over the back of her hand before pulling away. “I will do anything to protect you and the

children.”

Her heart stuttered and dropped. Skadi’s breath!

This was the first time she had ever heard him refer to the goblinborn as children, and the way he tenderly said it, as if he sincerely meant to protect them, that he wanted to, that he cared about them, about her...

She could love him for that.

Skadi help her, she could love him so much.

Chapter 24

A volatile reaction to his touch, to his words, twisted Anrid's features. Her eyes widened and her lips parted. Were those tears he glimpsed shimmering on the precipice of her eyelids? Shifting to rest on her lashes?

Was it possible she didn't despise him for the trouble he had brought into her life? He wanted to press her, to ask all the questions and peel back the reserved and friendly layers she kept wrapped around her heart.

But, stones help him, he was a coward. He didn't want to frighten and drive her away.

His fingers itched to reach for hers, to hold her hand the way he had in their shared dream. But, no, not quite like that. That had been a holding of need and fear. What he wanted to do now was fueled by a different sort of desperation and a different sort of terror. He longed to reach out and tease her emotions, to catch a glimpse of what she was feeling, but he didn't dare. It would be so easy to let down the guard he'd been trying to keep between them to allow her the privacy she deserved.

He flexed his fingers and forced them to remain at his sides.

"Say something?" He meant it to sound like a gentle order, but it came out as a breathless question.

She snapped her mouth closed but didn't turn away. "What—what should I say?"

Anything at all, his heart whispered back. Say you'll stay here forever. Say you'll

stay with me forever.

But of course, he couldn't say any of those things. To speak them out loud would be to bare his soul and make himself vulnerable before her. It would be too easy for her to take his heart in her hands and cast it aside in favor of that dark elf groom he was beginning to hate with every fiber of his being.

He recalled how he burned when Anrid laid her hand on Kora's arm, that searing sting of jealousy. When he thought of her touching her dark elf groom, even in such an innocent and simple way...

That monster didn't deserve her. Any man who would force a woman to marry him didn't deserve her.

"It's good of you to take care of us," she said at last, breaking through his mental barrage. He'd been just about to imagine himself punching a certain faceless dark elf on his haughty dark elf nose. "We shouldn't be your responsibility, but you're being good to take us on."

Good. He considered several other words he would rather her use to describe him. Good wasn't a powerful enough response from her. He wanted so much more.

"Yes," he said tiredly, woundedly, "I suppose it is rather good of me."

She choked and pressed a hand over her face. He gaped at her, wondering what he had said to upset her. But then her fingers slid over her chin to rest at the base of her throat. Her freckled cheeks curved beneath her eyes, narrowing them to sparkling slits, and he realized she was laughing.

He'd made her laugh. He managed a confused smile in return, allowing his pride to feel a bit mollified even as embarrassment warmed his face. The heat crawled up to

the tips of his ears.

She smoothed her nightdress with both hands and schooled her features. The expression she now wore reminded him of the one she used on the children when they were getting out of hand and needed to be get back on task.

“So.” She clipped the word, all business. “How are we going to protect the children?”

He knew they needed to discuss this, but he didn’t want to change the subject. He wanted to hear her laugh again.

Instead, he followed her lead. “I don’t think they should sleep in your room anymore.”

She flinched, pained. “Any of them?”

“Any of them,” he confirmed. Before she objected, he lifted a hand to stall her arguments. “It’s possible that putting a little distance between you and them while you’re sleeping—while you might be dreaming—could keep them safe.”

She worried her lower lip with her teeth, her eyebrows tugged together. She was probably trying to come up with another solution, but the pained look on her face suggested she wasn’t having any success.

“I’m sorry. I know you like to stay close,” he said as he watched her to catch every flicker of emotion. “It will be hard on them, yes, but until we understand this better...it’s safer to keep them away. Just while you’re sleeping.”

Footsteps scuffed against the stone walkway. She nodded to him but still looked pained as Math appeared, his nose in a book.

“I found that chapter I told you about,” he mumbled, riffling through the pages. “It’s not as detailed as I had remembered...I mean...when I first read it, I didn’t have this in mind.” He stopped talking abruptly when he saw them standing so close together beside the fountain.

Anrid took a hurried step back and folded her hands in front of her, a picture of demure innocence.

Jael wasn’t feeling at all demure or innocent and would have preferred to tuck her under his arm and dare Math to say anything about it.

Obviously, he didn’t do either of those things.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Should I come back?” Math inquired, still looking between them with a speculative, almost knowing expression on his youthful face.

“Of course not,” Jael grumbled. He waved his hand toward the book Math held up. “Does it say anything useful about joint dreaming?”

Math nodded, brightening. “Oh, yes. There’s a great deal about the benefits and also some cautionary bits. For example, it’s said that joint dreaming can be very helpful for couples experiencing difficulties in their relationship...” He trailed off when Jael lowered his eyebrows at him. “Ahem. Not important. Yes, well, there is another bit that said it can help uncover lost memories. That might be helpful.”

“If I had forgotten something.”

Math’s cheeks reddened, and Anrid coughed. “Erm. Yes. I see your point.” He hunched over the book and flipped pages as quickly as he could, running his finger down the lines of tidy, hand-written text. “Ah, here is something! Joint dreaming can be a side-effect of magical influence—”

“Which we already know. We both bonded with the Bifrost.”

Math’s expression twisted in frustration. “Perhaps you should read the book yourself.” He held it out and waved it at Jael, as if daring him to take it.

He snatched the book from his apprentice’s hand and flipped through the crisp, yellowed pages, but he wasn’t seeing anything. The lines of text scrawled on to eternity, and he couldn’t focus on the thoughts they portrayed.

He feared no book in Rhuin held the answers he sought.

“Perhaps we’re looking at this the wrong way.” Anrid’s voice cut into his despairing thoughts. She cleared her throat and motioned toward the book in Jael’s hands. “I mean, the shared dreams aren’t really the problem, are they? They’re the most immediate problem. Shouldn’t we be trying to figure out the root of the problem?”

Jael exchanged a mildly embarrassed look with his apprentice.

Math cupped the back of his neck with one hand. “Well, we are trying to do that,” he hedged. “Naturally.”

“The root of the problem, as you describe it,” Jael began, closing the book with a snap, “is that something is invading the Bifrost.”

She nodded in encouragement. “Precisely, and that’s what is causing the joint dreaming to be dangerous.”

“But we don’t know anything about the shadows.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say,” Anrid interrupted him. “Maybe we don’t need to learn more about them. Maybe we just need to learn where they come from. Where they got into the Bifrost. Where does it go? The Bifrost, I mean? I know it is all throughout Agmon, but where does it start? Where could the shadows have gotten access to it?”

Jael met Math’s gaze, both of them frowning. “The lines run throughout all of Rhuin,” Math began to explain.

Anrid swept a hand at him, getting frustrated. “Not all of the lines. Just the one I touched. The one where all this started. Where does that line come from?”

Jael's breath hitched. Now he understood what she was driving them toward. "That particular line follows the curve of the river Acheron deep into the heart of Gelaira," he whispered.

Math's mouth formed a large O.

Anrid crossed her arms over her chest as though pleased with her efforts. "So maybe you need to ask them about the shadows."

Jael nodded, but his thoughts were shaking their little heads. He couldn't talk to the dark elves. That would mean leaving Agmon, taking Anrid to the surface, to the one place she wanted to be...

And letting her slip out of his fingers forever.

His chest squeezed until he feared his ribs might break.

"So let's just go ask them!" she continued with a bright smile, as if she'd single-handedly solved all their problems. And simultaneously ruined all his hopes.

"You can't go!" The words barreled out of him, almost a shout.

Anrid and Math both flinched and took a step away from him. He drew a staggering breath and tempered his tone. "It—it wouldn't be safe or wise for you to leave. You should stay here."

Disappointment shadowed her features. Her dark eyes clung to his as if searching for answers to the things he hadn't yet told her. How could he tell her now that she would never leave Agmon? That she needed to stay close to the Bifrost, to him? That this magical binding couldn't be undone?

He opened his mouth to tell her, but the words wouldn't come.

"I'll go," Math murmured. "Nestra is close to the border. I could be there and back in just a couple of days."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Jael studied him hard, not sure the lad was up to the task. “It might be dangerous. They may not be pleased to see you.”

Math pursed his lips. “Kora might come with me.”

“Stones, no.” Jael shuddered at the thought. “I don’t think he’s ready for responsibility on this level.”

Anrid stirred and drew his attention. “You never know what people are capable of unless you trust them with something. Perhaps he would surprise you.”

He wanted to believe that, truly he did. And what choice did he have? He couldn’t go. Trap was too busy, and the other staff...they were needed to handle the runestones.

“Very well.” He rasped the words through dry lips and hoped he wouldn’t regret this decision. “I’ll send Kora with you.”

“We will be fine,” Math said, with a bright smile. “Besides, we’ve had dealings with Lord Talos before.”

“Strained dealings.”

Math shot him a reproachful look. “Why don’t you go, then? If you’re so against this plan.”

And leave Anrid and the children alone with the shadows? Leave Anrid alone with Kora? He shuddered to think what might happen in his absence.

“No,” he muttered, shoulders hunched against the impossible choices he couldn’t avoid. “You and Kora are the best ones for it, I fear. I don’t dare leave.”

The young apprentice exhaled, his eyes searching Jael’s as if he still had unanswered questions.

“Perhaps,” he hedged, “your father may have some...insights...that we haven’t considered yet.” He flicked a look toward Anrid. “About things.”

Jael tried not to flinch and betray his guilt, but he feared his thoughts were written plainly across his face. “Yes, of course. I plan to update him.”

Math offered him a curt nod. Then, casting Anrid a friendly smile, he tucked his book under his arm and threaded his way through the garden beds and disappeared from sight behind a tall row of shrubs. Jael stretched his neck side to side to ease the tension; he felt weary to his very bones.

“You need to trust people more.” Anrid’s reproachful words brought him round to face her. “You’re overprotective. I could have handled going to speak with the elves, you know. I’m stronger than I appear.”

The displeasure on her face robbed him of words. “That—that wasn’t at all what I was thinking,” he stammered. “Until we know more about what’s going on, it didn’t seem prudent for you to—for us to be—that is to say, I didn’t think you should be too far away. From the children.”

She squinted at him, dubious. “From the children,” she echoed dryly, her tone colored with disbelief.

Heat blossomed in his face yet again. How did she make him always feel so stone-eaten uncomfortable and yet long to be near her at all times? It wasn’t very nice of

her. At all. No girl should have that sort of power over a man.

“Of course I’m thinking about the children. You want me to keep their interests in mind, don’t you?”

Her mouth twisted. “You know I do. But I don’t want you using them as a cover for whatever it is you’re not saying. I know when I’m being lied to. I work with children.”

The heat in his cheeks faded to an icy chill. “I’m not lying to you,” he argued, but his words sounded weak even to his own ears.

“Maybe not,” she said as she crossed her arms over her chest. “But there is something you and Math don’t want me to know.”

The urge to come clean and tell her everything overwhelmed him. It would be so easy to fall prey to her commanding, rune-lit eyes and tell her everything—about the Bifrost, the binding, how he felt... Should he tell Anrid the truth and risk her hating him forever? If she thought he were the cause of her hopes and plans crumbling around her, she wouldn’t thank him for it. Even if she stayed in Agmon, it wouldn’t be willingly.

No, he couldn’t tell her. Not yet.

He resisted the pull and searched for something to say that might mollify her and buy him more time. Just a little more time.

Nothing came to him.

After an unpleasant pause, Anrid sighed and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Well then. I’m going to go check on the children,” she said. “I’m going to need you to

show me the way back.”

With that cool remark, she stormed toward the hedge of shrubs and vanished from sight.

Jael returned to his room after escorting a silent and rather sullen Anrid back to the children. They'd been overjoyed to see her, abandoning the beds Trap had just wrestled them into.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Kora was nowhere to be found, the blackguard.

Jael should have stayed to help, but he closed the door on the tumult and stalked back to his room.

He didn't like being made to feel as if he were in the wrong when all he was doing was trying to save everyone. He just wanted to solve this problem: save the Bifrost, save Agmon, save her. And she blamed him for it. Sure, he hadn't told her everything, but who told other people everything, anyway? She acted as if he was doing something disreputable by not spilling all his dirty little secrets.

At the other end of the hall, he found the door to his personal chambers ajar. He must have left it open when he somehow made his way to Anrid while he was asleep. He pushed it open so he could slip inside and let it slam behind him. The sight of the familiar comforted him: his stone nook in the corner, piled high with blankets and a pile of clean clothes he hadn't gotten around to putting away yet. They kept his feet warm during the night, anyway, so he rarely bothered unless Trap caused a fuss.

He took a stabilizing breath as he lit the runestone on the wall and extinguished the one he carried. Silence enveloped him, the familiar sort of emptiness that welcomed after a hectic day. Once he had calmed his breathing and shuffled to his bed to sink onto his blankets, he realized he felt lighter somehow. It was as if a weight didn't press down on him so heavily.

And that seemed wrong. It took his exhausted brain a moment to understand what he was feeling, why this absence of weight shouldn't be acceptable. He wanted to embrace it and collapse back onto his bunk. But that inner voice whispered that he

mustn't.

He roamed his eyes over his room and noticed his robes from the day before lying in a rumpled heap on the ground. That wouldn't have been so odd, except he usually hung them on the wall.

A sinking emotion tugged at his stomach as he rose to retrieve his robes. They, too, felt lighter than they should. Jael's heart began to beat faster as he searched the inner pocket for what he knew was missing.

His fingers found nothing but fabric.

The book was gone.

Chapter 25

Anrid didn't dare sleep, not after what had happened. Jael might think he was protecting her and the children by keeping his mysteries, but she had never been one to trust in the power of secrets.

They were dangerous, volatile things. More often than not, a withheld truth only created more drama. It didn't alleviate anything, but rather exasperated it.

Jael wasn't sleeping either. She could feel his anxiety pulsing through the steady presence of the Bifrost.

She rubbed her weary eyes that burned behind her eyelids from lack of sleep. The children snoozed around her, the room filled with gentle snores and whistles. Medda curled into Anrid's side, her white hair splayed across Anrid's lap. She lowered her hand to stroke the child's tangled locks.

She hated secrets.

Clearly, Jael's mother had never taught him about such things. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. Any group of people who secluded themselves away in tunnels, far away from prying eyes, must value privacy.

Or—her heart hammered at the thought, her fingers stilling over Medda's curls—was it less about protecting and more about hiding? What didn't they want her and the world above to know?

The bed shifted as a shadowy form crawled onto the lumpy mattress. Rig waited for permission. She lifted her arm to allow him to crawl up against her other side. He sighed as he rested his cheek against her ribs, huddled into a ball with her arm draped over him.

"Are you all right?" She spoke in a hushed whisper so she wouldn't wake the others. She stroked his back.

He sniffed but nodded, his sharp cheekbones rubbing against her side. "I feel...bad," he whispered, the words muffled against her nightgown.

She hugged him a little tighter. "You're safe now, Rig. I'm watching over you all. Nothing is going to happen to any of you, I promise."

He shuddered but did not respond. "Not that kind of bad," he muttered.

He shifted, to make himself more comfortable and rested his cheek on her lap. His fingers moved to entangle in his little sister's hair. She watched as he rubbed Medda's locks between the pads of his fingers in a rhythmic motion that must be soothing.

“Can you explain what you mean?” she asked at last. “Is this about the books in the library?”

He flinched as if she’d struck a chord. “No,” he said, sounding tired. “No, not about that.”

He didn’t elaborate, and she wondered if she should press him harder, but she imagined he didn’t want to dwell on the library fiasco any more than she did.

The things that happened in the library yesterday had not brought out the best in any of them. Herself included. She flushed with shame when she recalled how she’d dashed into the storage room to help where help was not wanted or needed.

She’d made such a mess of things.

Jael must think her an idiot. No wonder he didn’t want to trust her with his secrets. Her stomach twisted when she remembered how sharply she’d spoken to him in the greenhouse, how disapproving and superior she must have sounded.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

When they had been in the Bifrost, she'd felt a strange sort of connection to him. She couldn't quite put her finger on the sensation, but it best resembled a sort of companionship and comradery. She wanted to trust him. But afterwards, in the nightmares and in the gardens, she hadn't felt that at all. Everything had become awkward and strained between them.

Perhaps it was because he didn't trust her.

The Bifrost stirred in the back of her mind. It caused her to jolt and elicited mutters of protest from Rig and Medda. She would never get used to that presence inside her. It wasn't like something was inside her mind, but more an awareness of something just outside herself, something so close it could almost be inside her own mind.

She compressed her lips to keep them from trembling. She refused to give into the temptation to cry. This wasn't the time or place, not in front of the children. She couldn't fall apart, she needed to stay strong. The children needed her to have a plan: to not just act like she knew what to do, but to actually have a plan to follow. A direction to lead them.

She needed to understand what was going on with the Bifrost and between her and Jael and the book, if she were to have such a plan.

And if he wouldn't tell her what she needed to know...

Her eyes flew open as she set her mouth in a firmer line, this time not to suppress trembling but to express her determination. If he wouldn't help her?

Well then, she would just have to figure it out on her own.

Jael didn't give her an opportunity to question him further.

He must have worked very hard not to cross her path for the entire next day. In fact, he still hadn't made an appearance at bedtime when Trap announced that the children's new bedroom had been prepared.

A general outcry of dismay erupted from all sides.

Anrid suppressed potent feelings of irritation and focused on the children. Medda wrapped her arms and legs around Anrid's calf and wailed at the top of her magnificent lungs. Half a dozen of the others jumped around and grabbed at her arms and clothes as they begged to be rescued from their fate.

"Now, children," she called over their combined voices. "This is for the best. Everyone will be perfectly fine. We will all sleep in our own rooms, and I will see you first thing in the morning."

This didn't console anyone.

Anrid exchanged a look with the housekeeper. Trap's hair tumbled loose under her mobcap, and she had a ferocious expression on her face like she wanted to paddle someone.

But, to her credit, the housekeeper braced a smile and called out, "A cookie to everyone who goes to bed without a fuss! First one there gets the big one!"

A stampede of feet raced for the door. Only Medda remained, because it took her a moment to untangle herself, stumble to her feet, and totter after the older children. As she went, the little goblin hollered, "Me! Me! ME!" at the top of her lungs.

Anrid straightened her apron and touched Trap on the arm. “That was a stroke of brilliance,” she muttered.

The housekeeper smiled smugly. “Desperate times call for lots of cookies.”

“Indeed.” Anrid couldn’t help but laugh, despite her weariness.

The room prepared for the children was two doors down. The largest of the bedchambers, it would prove much more suitable if the children would only decide to use it. Anrid helped tuck the youngest into their beds, kissing smeared cheeks that hadn’t quite been scrubbed clean, and ruffling untidy curls not quite brushed. They tried though. That’s what mattered.

“I was here first!” someone bellowed over loud giggles, thumping feet and the rustle of blankets being pulled up and immediately tossed back down.

“No, you weren’t!” Rig’s outraged voice rose above the others. “I was first.”

“That isn’t so! It was me!” This came from one of the older goblin girls sitting in her bedroll in the back corner.

Anrid and Trap exchanged exasperated looks as Medda sat back up in her bedroll for the third time and screamed, “Me! Me! Me!”

Footsteps approached the open doorway as the maid with the cookies arrived. The poor thing lurked just out of sight, peering around the doorframe with jerky, nervous peeks. Anrid couldn’t blame her.

“Anyone who is under their blankets by the time I count to three will get a cookie.” Anrid raised her voice to make sure everyone heard her. Predictably, three dozen wriggling goblin children dove for their bedrolls. Squabbling ensued as blankets were

torn from neighbors and multiple children tried to climb into the same bed.

Soon, however, she had everyone situated and took the large bowl of hard cookies from the maid, who grinned at her and raced away as quickly as she could to avoid being caught up in the uproar. Little faces beamed and happy voices called, “Thank you, Uh-NEE!” as she passed out the cookies, said her goodnights, and followed Trap to the door. The housekeeper closed it behind her and leaned her back against the solidness for a moment. Exhaustion lined her pale cheeks.

“You should go to bed, too.” Anrid tucked the cookie bowl under one arm and patted Trap’s arm with her free hand. “You’ve been overworking yourself.”

Trap peeked at her from one slitted eye. “Haven’t we all?” But her mouth quirked in a smile as she shook herself and peeled away from the door. “I’ll set one of the maids to guard the door and make sure no one escapes.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Wise,” Anrid agreed as she headed toward her own room. She didn’t even bother returning the bowl to the kitchen.

Hopefully Cook wouldn’t mind. Her bed called to her with sweet, compelling tones.

But when she entered the chamber, a hollowness bloomed inside her. The emptiness of the room, usually so crowded, filled her with sadness. She missed her children.

Her children.

She’d gotten so attached to them, to each one of them, although Rig and Medda in particular had wormed their way deepest into her heart. And Gorge and Ember and big but huggable Crag and his ferocious little monkey. They were so naughty and so sweet and so needing of love and attention...she couldn’t imagine ever leaving them. A stone sank into the pit of her stomach as she acknowledged she would indeed be leaving them one day. She couldn’t be in two places at once.

No magic in the world did that. At least, no magic she had ever heard about.

No, she decided as she slipped off her apron and dress and into her nightgown that she would have to prepare the children to continue on without her. She slid beneath the thick blankets on her bed. They felt cold against her exposed skin, the narrow bunk too spacious without Medda taking up more than her fair share. The little ones like Medda would be the hardest to leave behind, and equally hard to prepare for the days to come. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to think about her empty bed, but it made her think all the more fervently about the children, and Jael, and her sister so very far away.

And those weren't the only thoughts plaguing her as she tried to let sleep take. The stone in her stomach seemed to roll over and fill her with a nauseated uneasiness. What if she dreamed again when she fell asleep? Would the children be safe in the other room? What if Jael didn't come for her if she needed him? They'd left things on very bad terms, and he hadn't been to see her since. Maybe he would expect her to handle her nightmares alone.

How was it that she could be surrounded by so many people, most of them sleeping only one or two rooms away, and yet feel so inexplicably lonely?

She didn't even know when she stepped from uneasy tossing and turning into an imaginary tunnel somewhere in her dreams. Waking and sleeping blurred together in a way that made neither true, yet the anxiety twisting her stomach was all too real.

She was dreaming.

She glanced up and down the empty tunnel. The silence cut against her skin like the sharp blade of a knife, pricking her just hard enough to remind her that danger approached, that the dark and terrible thing lurked right around the bend. She backed away to escape it, but unyielding stone met her back. There was no escape.

The shadows shifted, gently at first, like threadbare curtains in a stale breeze. Soon they rolled closer to her, whispering words just low enough she couldn't make them out, even though she strained with all her might to decipher the words.

They were coming.

For her. They were coming for her.

A choked cry escaped her mouth, and she spun to race in the opposite direction, but the shadows were there too. They pressed in on her from all sides, narrowing the

circle of light around her. She didn't see where the light came from, but something inside her knew that when the light was gone, she would be gone too. It was the only thing keeping her safe.

At least she was alone.

So, so alone.

It was a bitter sort of comfort, but she clung to the knowledge the children would be safe. That Jael wouldn't come to harm. If he hadn't fallen asleep, he wouldn't be here to get caught up in the danger she faced by herself.

Wake up, she whispered, but the dream clung to her like a second skin.

Icy fingers wrapped around her hand. She screamed as a small body solidified next to hers, messy white hair tickling her arm. "Uh-NEE," Rig whispered with tears in his voice, "I think there is something bad hiding in the dark."

Chapter 26

Jael's hands shook as he rummaged through Math's desk in the workroom, searching for the missing tome. He'd looked everywhere else. Perhaps Math had taken it to study and forgotten to return it before he left. It wasn't like him to take something so important without asking, but who else knew about the book? Besides Anrid?

As he dug through piles of books and loose-leaf pages of parchment, darkness pricked the edges of his vision. He paused in his frantic search and closed his eyes, breathing past the wave of dizziness. In a lifetime of long days and even longer nights...he'd never known exhaustion like this.

He braced himself and ground his teeth together as he finished searching the desk.

Nothing.

No sign of the nameless book.

Frustrated, he swept a pile of restacked papers off the table. They fluttered to the floor, some of them landing in a box of runestones waiting to be cleaned. Where else could he possibly look?

A gentle popping noise erupted from the other side of the room. Jael twisted but saw only the empty chamber, tables strewn with books and runestones, with chisels and brushes and rags. Even the darkened doorway stood vacant.

Just when he thought he might have imagined it, something rustled. He studied the far recesses of the room. The rustling escalated, except it wasn't quite the sound of rodents gnawing through paper or scavenging for crumbs in debris. This more resembled the faintest of whispers.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

You're not alone. The thought impressed on his mind as surely as if it had been spoken out loud. He curled his hands into fists and searched the still shadows around the edges of the room.

Cannot hide.

He edged away from the table and into the center of the room, turning in a cautious circle.

No escape.

The voice continued to twist unbidden thoughts into his mind. A gnawing fear grew in his gut, clenching his insides and pulsing through his veins. Heat and ice swept through him simultaneously. He sensed a presence lurking around him, but nothing moved. No ripple of unseen movement. No churning in the shadows. No flickering of runelight. And yet the sense that he wasn't alone only intensified. He peered into shadows, and shadows stared back at him.

A low rumble of cruel laughter invaded his mind. You need me, it rasped as Jael cringed away from the intimate voice in his head. You need me to keep her. To save her.

Anrid. Horror curled in his belly, mingling with the fear. He was moving before he realized it. His legs wove around the cluttered tables and drove through the doorway at the other end of the chamber.

You can't save her. The voice prowled after him, relentless and inescapable.

“Get out of my head!” He snarled the words as he tore down the corridor and up the stone flight of steps at the far end. More laughter battered against him. It felt louder now, almost real, as if the voice had grown stronger and begun to slip into the real world from whatever place it called home.

Prison, the voice corrected him. Imprisoned. Set us free and we will save her. Let me out, and she can be yours.

He reeled against the wall, physically knocked sideways by the unseen presence. “She isn’t mine to keep!”

A staggering sense of need washed over him. Saying the words out loud made him admit how badly he wanted Anrid to stay, how much he wanted her to want to stay.

But she can be.

The promise filled him with a desperate sense of hope, of longing, but disgust and self-loathing followed on its heels. What the shadows promised wasn’t right. They couldn’t barter Anrid’s future as if she were an object to be traded. They had no right to make decisions for her, to alter the course of her destiny.

You’ll be alone, the shadows warned. They pressed against him, teasing his skin with the invisible authenticity of the wind. Forever, forever, forever...

That word boomed and echoed down the corridor, as real as his own voice.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Set us free, and you can everything you want, everything you long for.

He staggered onward. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t force the voices from his head. They grew stronger, and louder, banging against the inside of his head even as

they echoed around him, like they were both inside and without. Panic began to override reason. How were they accomplishing this? Had they already escaped the Bifrost somehow?

He searched his connection to the magic for answers but received no response. Nothing at all. That familiar hum in the back of his mind...where had it gone? He let down all barriers to search for Anrid, to make sure she was okay. At first, he sensed nothing, nothing at all. But then, as if he'd flung open a door, terror cascaded over him and drew chills across his flesh.

He'd reached the stairs leading up to the sleeping corridor when a high-pitched scream reverberated against the walls of the tunnel. The shadows bucked with laughter and began to move in the real shadows of the stairwell. He stared up into endless, churning darkness, the runestones either broken or obscured by the shadows.

Anrid screamed again, louder this time. He felt the fear behind her scream.

Jael bolted up the stairs. They'd been trying to distract him, he realized, as panic drove him onward against all caution and reason. The cruel laughter only confirmed this suspicion. The Bifrost blazed into awareness, fueling his panic with terror of its own. Anrid's emotions grasped for him through the bond of magic, terror and despair and protectiveness all rolled into one.

Protectiveness? Who was she trying to protect?

Jael threw open her bedroom door and stumbled into deeper darkness. Only then did reason return to him. He snatched a runestone from his pocket and traced a light rune, holding it up as light feebly burst into existence. The shadows growled in frustration and tried to push back, but Jael drove onward into the bedroom. Where was Anrid? Where was—

They cowered in the corner in a narrow circle of runelight cast by the runestone embedded on the wall above their heads. Anrid clung to Rig, his face pressed into her torso, arms clasped around her waist.

“Anrid!” he shouted, but she didn’t respond to his call. Couldn’t she hear him? He was right there.

He struggled to reach her, but the shadows curled around his ankles and bogged down his movements. Jael swung the runestone down at them, and they hissed and recoiled from the light. He reached out to the faint thrumming of the Bifrost and begged it for help. Desperation reached back at him, but then there was the faintest buzz of energy. It zipped through his veins like fire and tore down his arm and into the flickering runestone in his numb fingers.

The light blazed more brightly.

The shadows screamed and fled from him, only to converge on the others with renewed violence. Jael bellowed in horror and plunged after them, but they moved much quicker than he could. He watched as shadowy tendrils snatched at Rig and tore him from Anrid’s arms. They both screamed, Anrid clinging to his wrist with both hands while Rig kicked and flailed in midair. But the shadows tore him loose and flung him across the room.

Rig hit the opposite wall with a sickening smack and plummeted to the ground in a heap.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Jael hesitated, torn in two different directions. Rig lay helpless on the floor while Anrid struggled to push through the darkness narrowing the band of light from her runestone. His heart longed to go to her, but he turned away and staggered to Rig. The boy didn't move as Jael dropped to one knee and grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him up with one hand while he held the other high with the runestone. It took him a moment to position the child against his chest and regain his footing, but then he plunged back across the room to Anrid.

Shadows tore at his ankles and nearly yanked him off his feet, but he managed to keep going. He plunged into the circle of light near Anrid and called her name.

But she didn't look at him. Her eyes swept from side to side as she swung at the shadows, seeing only them.

"Anrid!" he bellowed and twisted out of the icy grasp of a shadow trying to pull his arm back, but she didn't hear him.

She was still asleep, caught in the nightmare that wasn't a nightmare at all.

Chapter 27

Anrid's heart skipped a beat as the shadows yanked Rig out of her grasp. He vanished into the shadows, still reaching toward her, terror in his eyes, in his screams.

"No!" she howled and tried to dive after him, but the shadows crashed in to fill the void of his presence, lashing out and stinging with the power of their attacks. "Rig! Rig, I'm coming! Rig!"

She struggled to force her way into the darkness, but it was like trying to worm into a snarled thicket of brambles.

“Anrid!” Someone called her name, but she couldn’t see anything beyond the shadows pummeling her from all sides.

An especially powerful shadow grabbed her by the arm and yanked her forward. She shouted and lashed out with her other hand, slapping against it and desperately trying to free herself as the shadow dragged her closer, deeper into the darkness. It wrapped around her like an arm and tugged her closer. She clawed and tried to free herself, terrified she would be smothered or torn apart before she found Rig. She had to find him. She had to save him.

The shadow shook her so hard her teeth knocked together. She clawed with one hand and met with a solid presence, a creature of flesh and bone. Her nails raked over tender flesh. The shadow yanked her even closer, so its warm breath touched her face. Before she had a chance to scream, the shadow caved in on her and pressed against her mouth. Her cry muffled against warmth and gentle pressure, against lips, she realized. A mouth with flesh and blood lips that tasted of sweat and tears. Were those her tears?

The shadow pulled back. Wake up, it whispered. Please wake up.

She stared into the void, at the shadow that wasn’t a shadow. Something else had her pinned in place, not a shadow but...reason fled as he leaned forward again and kissed her harder, more anxiously. She pressed one hand against a solid chest, against a woolen tunic stretched across a broad set of ribs. With the other hand, she threaded her fingers through tangled hair at the nape of his neck and inhaled the scent of goblin sweat. It had a spicier, sweeter scent than human musk, but his mouth felt very human and real indeed.

She felt...love. Belonging. Hope. Despair. Desperation.

But were these her emotions or his?

She hadn't realized how much she had been wanting to be this close to him until now. This screamed rightness, so much rightness. Goblin arms around her felt as normal as breathing, his mouth against hers as true as the truest thing she'd ever known. Nothing else mattered, not here, not with him.

As she kissed the goblin prince back, hot white light exploded around them and drove the shadows screaming into the blinding glow.

Time stood still.

She opened her eyes and stared up at Jael. His lips remained parted as ragged breaths tore out of him. He still held her pinned against his chest with one arm, his clenched fist hot against the back of her spine. Something feathery tickled the tender place on her throat just below her jaw. A smaller body squirmed against them, and Rig tilted his head back to squint up at her, sheltered between her and Jael.

"Uh-NEE?" he whimpered.

Anrid dipped her head toward Rig's with a strangled cry and kissed his forehead. "Oh, my darling. Are you okay?"

He wiggled to free one hand and wrapped it around her neck. Jael adjusted his grip to allow the child to slide into her arms, but he still kept his wrapped around them both. It was the most comforting and safe feeling she'd ever known.

He had come for them after all.

She blinked through the tears hovering on lashes to stare at him. His eyes held hers with an intensity that both thrilled and frightened.

“Thank you,” she managed, unsure what else she should say. Should she say something about what had just happened? About how he had kissed her, and she had kissed him back?

The heat against the back of spine began to grow in intensity.

“Ow!” she whispered at the same time Jael growled a pained, “Rock and bone!” He dropped the runestone he’d been clutching with a hiss. The stone shattered against the floor into a thousand glittering, glowing shards. They tinkled as they cascaded in all directions, and even as they lay still, the tiny pieces continued to glow.

Jael gaped as if he’d never seen anything like it, but Anrid couldn’t manage to tear her gaze away from him.

Her legs buckled. A weariness unlike anything she’d ever known brought her to the ground. Jael swung back to them and managed to adjust his stance, so she didn’t fall spread eagle on the floor. She landed in an awkward heap with Rig on her lap and her back against the wall, while Jael half crouched over them. He dropped to his knees; one thigh pressed against hers as he braced a hand against the wall behind her.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Rig snuggled closer as Anrid and Jael studied one another. The rune shards cast very little light, just enough to highlight his strong cheekbones and put a glint in his eyes. He seemed other-worldly, a creature of another place and time made of light and shadows rather than flesh and bone. She found herself unable to look away, unable to think of anything but the goblin prince leaning over her. She'd never been this close to a man before. Shades, she'd never kissed a man before.

As if he read her thoughts, Jael's focus drifted to her mouth and lingered.

She yanked her head back with a startled gasp and smashed into the wall behind her. "Oh, ow," she cried as confusion barreled through her.

His expression shuttered as if she'd slapped him. Through a sting of fresh tears, she couldn't miss the pained expression on his face before he masked it away. But what did he expect? He couldn't just kiss her again. She couldn't let him, not when she was supposed to marry someone else. Whatever had just happened, whatever weakness or desperation had caused them to let down their guard, it must never, never happen again.

Surely he knew that.

Rig snuggled closer, and she turned her focus to him. It was cowardly, but she couldn't look at Jael without feeling confused. Betrayed, even. What had possessed him to kiss her in the first place?

"Are either of you injured?" Jael's voice became dry with a slight edge to it.

She couldn't blame him. She felt rather edgy herself. "I'm all right." She tilted her head to try to catch Rig's eye. "Are you hurt?"

He moaned. "I hurt all over."

Jael shifted once again and reached for the goblin boy. Rig resisted as the goblin prince slid him off Anrid's lap and proceeded to examine him from head to toe, running his large hands over the boy's arms and legs as if searching for broken bones.

"He isn't bleeding, is he?" Anrid whispered, her voice breathless.

Jael grunted in response. "No. Nothing broken, either. I expect you'll live." He ruffled Rig's hair and quirked a shadowed smile with, dare she say, fondness?

Her heart warmed and twisted in turn.

Men who loved children were terribly attractive. She'd always thought so. Dagmar used to joke that Anrid was doomed to marry a widower with half a dozen children.

What about a goblin prince with three dozen orphans?

The thought sprang unbidden to her mind. A slow, burning heat filled her cheeks and caused uneasiness to roil in her belly. She mustn't think such things. She mustn't.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner," Jael said, breaking through her mortified musings. "I was downstairs when this...started..."

"It didn't work!" She blurted the words as she rested a hand on Rig's knee. She flicked her eyes toward the goblin boy, hoping Jael would understand her meaning without her having to spell it out in front of Rig.

Jael let his gaze drift between them both before he offered a pained nod. “Still. The event appeared to be contained to...your room.” He cleared his throat. “You and I are still the epicenter, but we still haven’t quite resolved the—aftershocks.” His eyes roamed over Rig, to indicate he was one of those unavoidable ripples.

Rig leaned to scoop up one of the glowing runestone shards. “Why is it still glowing?” he asked, oblivious to the true meaning in their conversation.

He held the splintered bit of rock up to examine it. The light reflected in his eyes and made him appear so much younger.

Jael also reached for a shard and rolled it between his fingers, causing light to refract across them at erratic intervals. “I don’t know. It shouldn’t be.”

“Do you think it has something to do with the Bifrost?” Anrid searched his face, light and shadow flickering as he tumbled the shard around in his fingers.

He studied the splintered rock more closely, but when he lifted his heated gaze to meet hers, she suspected he’d been doing that to avoid looking at her. Her breath caught in her throat as she sank beneath the weight of everything he didn’t say. How could a man say so much just by looking at a girl? But what did it mean? What was he saying that he wasn’t saying?

“I think,” he began at length, as Rig crawled across the floor on hands and knees to collect more shards, “it had more to do with us.”

“Us?” Shades, why was her voice squeaking? She cleared her throat and blinked furiously to maintain her composure.

She hadn’t thought it possible that his expression could grow even more heated. He moistened his lower lip with his tongue, brow twisted as if he were considering his

next words with infinite care. At that exact moment, however, footsteps approached in the tunnel outside her room. Someone cleared their throat.

Anrid gasped and squinted at Trap in the doorway. The housekeeper crossed her arms over her chest and eyed them with a disapproving frown.

“This does not look like sleeping. You should all be resting,” she scolded. Then she glared at Rig. “And you should be in your own room, you little scamp.”

Rig grinned at her and held up his shimmering trove of runestone shards. “Aren’t they pretty?”

“Very,” she answered dryly. “Bed. Now.”

His smile faded, and he shot Anrid a look of pleading. She shook her head with an apologetic smile and dipped her head toward the doorway. He moaned and fussed as if they’d asked him to climb a mountain but shuffled his reluctant feet across the room.

Trap’s attention shifted back to them. “You two, as well. To bed.” Her mouth pulled down a bit more severely. “To your own beds.”

Anrid burst into a violent fit of coughing and Jael staggered to his feet and bolted for the door as if someone had set the rear of his trousers on fire.

“Don’t eat your toe,” Anrid scolded Medda as she circled the kitchen table for the dozenth time, trying to keep everyone in their own seats and their hands in their own bowls.

Medda grinned a toothy smile and sucked more animatedly on her big toe. Anrid rolled her eyes and moved on.

Sometimes, you had to pick your battles, she told herself. But she was just too tired to fight this particular one. Asking Medda not to do something was the equivalent of an irresistible dare the child couldn’t refuse.

The little goblin girl sneezed and blew ickies across the table. Anrid sighed and grabbed a kerchief from her apron pocket to mop up the mess before anyone got into it and spread the icks around.

Jael stood on the opposite side of the table, trying to scrub gruel out of a goblin boy's shoulder length hair. Anrid didn't even want to know how that had happened. Excited chatter mingled with the occasional sneeze and cough. The children appeared to be coming down with something, half of them in mild states of nasal unpleasantness and the rest of them glassy-eyed and rosy-cheeked as if their body temperatures were elevated.

She avoided looking at Jael, but she almost sensed his cautious glances from time to time from the other side of the table. They'd barely said two words to one another all day, as if they had mutually decided not to discuss anything that had happened in the middle of the night. Logic dictated that getting the misunderstanding out in the open would be the prudent thing to do...but she didn't have the nerve to admit out loud what had happened between them. She wiped Medda's nose one last time, for good measure, before moving down the table.

"I'm still hungry," one child complained as she walked past him.

"You've had two bowls, Blue." She patted him on the shoulder. "We'll ask Cook to make us a snack later, shall we?"

Blue's hopeful eyes narrowed as his mouth screwed up in the preparations for a tantrum. "But I'm hungry now!" he placed his head right down on the table and cried.

"Now, none of that," she scolded as she dug in her pocket for a clean kerchief—there wasn't one—and handed him a mildly used one. She caught a horrified look from Jael and blushed.

But he schooled his expression. "I suppose I should add handkerchiefs to the ever-growing list of supplies we are running out of," he said with a weary sigh.

Blue sneezed and blew into his kerchief.

“Make sure to get extra ones,” Anrid suggested and studied the rosy cheeks and runny noses surrounding the table. “I think we’re going to need them.”

“I’d like to know what they got into.” He all but growled the words as he yanked his tunic out of a pair of small hands searching for something to wipe off on. “They were fine yesterday, but now the whole pack of them seems to be sick.”

Anrid worried her lower lip and gathered up a couple of empty bowls. “Groups of children are always more susceptible to sharing sickness,” she said. “It only takes a single sick one to infect the lot.”

Her stomach plummeted. What if she had unknowingly brought a human disease into Imenborg? One the children weren’t accustomed to?

“I hope it isn’t me.”

Jael turned sharply toward her. “Why would it be you?”

“Human illnesses are different than goblin ones, I’m sure. And you’re probably more sheltered from disease down here. Yes?”

His mouth pulled down as he yanked his tunic out of Glade’s fumbling fingers for the third time. “I don’t know about all that: we have more than our fair share of coughs and fevers, I’m sure. But even if you did bring something with you, it’s not your fault. Sickness is just a part of life.”

A flurry of coughing went around the table. He was right, of course, but it didn’t make her feel any better. What if their little bodies couldn’t fight human sicknesses? What if they got really sick? Or, dare she even think the thought, what if they couldn’t survive it?

She'd never forgive herself.

Rapid footsteps echoed around the kitchen moments before Trap poked her head through the doorway, her mobcap so askew it looked about to bounce off her unruly curls. "I've got good news!" she announced as she entered with a large woven basket of laundry. "Math and Prince Kora have returned: they're in the meeting hall."

A burst of air exploded from Jael. "Thank the stones. They're back sooner than I expected."

Trap made a humming sound. "Yes, and they're not alone."

Something in her tone caused Anrid to freeze with the tall stack of bowls that had been licked clean by their owners.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“The elves came with them?” Jael’s voice held a quiet, almost surprised tone.

Trap offered a solemn nod. “Lord Talos himself is here.”

“Well then.” Jael stood a moment longer, as if uncertain what he should do. Then he turned to look at Anrid, face void of all emotion. “I supposed we should go greet our guests.”

Anrid swallowed a lump in the back of her throat and set the stack of bowls down on a side table before wiping her hands on her apron. Trap also offloaded her laundry basket, hands on her hips.

“I’ll watch the younglings,” she declared as she roamed her eagle eye over the two rows of expectant faces. “We’re going to be good little goblins, aren’t we?”

They nodded with enthusiastic smiles. “Yes, Trap!” they chorused.

Anrid lingered in the doorway a few seconds longer, loathe to leave them when they were ill...and loathe to leave Trap without any back up. But the housekeeper waved her away and shut the kitchen door behind her, probably to keep any of her charges from escaping.

She followed a pace behind Jael, careful to keep a safe distance between them. He allowed her the awkward silence as they traversed the tunnels and wound their way through sitting rooms until they reached a wide flank of stone steps leading up to a vaulted doorway. Anrid smoothed back her hair and wished she’d been given time to freshen up before meeting their guests. This would be her first introduction to the

dark elves, and she didn't want to make a poor impression.

Jael waited at the top of the stairs, one eyebrow cocked. She flushed, grabbed fistfuls of her dress and trotted up the steps. He must think her very scatterbrained, the way she always bumbled around a step behind whatever was going on. They walked through the archway side by side. A few stone benches lined a wall cloaked in heavy tapestries to her right. A brown runner ran down the center of the room and disappeared beneath a large stone table with no chairs. It was a tall table, much too tall to sit at, and appeared to be meant for standing. She scanned the group of people off to the left. Math and Kora she recognized right away, among half a dozen men with blue-gray skin.

Eight pairs of eyes turned to watch them approach.

She curled her fingers into her dress as she followed Jael, heart thundering in her ears. Her blood pulsed through her veins. Tha-thump. Tha-thump. Tha—

“You must be the human girl.” The speaker stood at the front of the group, a thin and severe looking dark elf with a sour expression that could curdle milk. He raked his eyes over her, from head to foot. The way he stared at her made her feel as if she were being undressed and cataloged down to each freckle and strand of hair. A chill slid down her spine. “I’ve been searching for you. You’re a fool to think you could run from your duty.”

That chill turned to ice as she realized this dark elf knew who she was. Was it possible...was this...?

“I won’t have you speaking to her like that, Lord Talos.” Jael’s cold voice bit out.

The dark elf flicked his gaze between Jael and Anrid, as if assessing them both. “What’s it to you?” he said at last, his tone bored and cool. “Why do you care how I

“speak to my flame-eaten wife?”

Jael took a faltering step toward him, hands curling into fists at his sides. “Don’t.”

How could one single word hold so much? Anrid heard the warning in Jael’s tone, and the dark elf must have heard it as well. Her heart raced as she studied them each in turn and wondered who would back down first.

“I’ll speak to her as I please.” The elf also took a step forward. It sounded like a challenge somehow. “What’s it to you how I speak to a human whore?”

She gasped, stunned by the horrific insult. Why would he say such a thing?

But before she had a chance to come to her own defense, Jael launched himself between them and swung a clenched fist straight at the elf’s face.

Chapter 28

Lord Talos recoiled from the blow and staggered against one of his fellows. Jael saw only red as he moved in for a follow-up blow, but his opponent came back with a jab of his own. Jael managed to throw up his forearm to block just in time. Pain exploded in his arm, but he didn’t have time to register the shock before a second blow from the elf hurled his face sideways.

He staggered, pain speckling his vision. Instinct began to take over, his body reacting to the threat without him even thinking about it. Jael swung a fist toward the dark elf’s face, but Talos caught his wrist in an iron grip and yanked Jael off balance. With a powerful swing, one mighty enough to impress the strongest of goblins, Talos threw Jael to the ground.

“Apologize!” Jael snarled the words as he rolled back to his feet.

Talos wrinkled his lips, defiant. “Who are you to command me about how I should speak to my own wife, goblin?”

Jael lunged again. “She isn’t your wife!”

This time he caught Talos around the waist and took them both to the ground. Shouts echoed in the chamber, but Jael had eyes only for the dark elf who grappled at his tunic. Talos managed to catch a hand under Jael’s jaw and wrenched his head backward at the same time he delivered a brutal blow to Jael’s ribs. Talos pressed the advantage and rolled them so that he had the upper ground. Another blow to the face almost knocked him senseless. Something warm and wet trickled over his upper lip. He fought, his vision starred with lights and shadows. The weight of the elf pressed down on him.

That heaviness peeled away abruptly. Jael blinked to clear his sight and saw two dark elves yanking their leader backwards several paces. They whispered into his ear, as if trying to calm him or remind him to see reason. Jael rolled to his side and spat blood against the stone floor. Hands caught hold of his arms and tugged him to his feet, but Jael shook Kora and Math off, swiping a hand under his bleeding nose.

He stared at the elf who had come to take Anrid away. The scuffle had made him rumped and irritated, with a ruddy mark high on his cheekbone where Jael had caught a lucky blow.

“Apologize,” Jael repeated as he stalked forward. “She isn’t your wife.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

They were mere feet apart now. Jael could see the whites of Talos's eyes, even the intricate and jagged facets of his murky blue irises. Something in the elf's expression shifted, from cold anger to something cruel and knowing.

"Not yet," he breathed, the words soft and for Jael alone. "But she's promised to me. She will be mine."

The words only kindled the angry despair Jael had been battling for several days. The wanting of the thing he could never have. Of the person who didn't want him back. It made him ache and burn in all the wrong ways. This monster didn't deserve Anrid, and the thought consumed him as he moved to beat the brute senseless. Hands caught hold of his arm to stop him, but Jael drove his elbow back hard to free himself. An oof and a feminine cry of pain revealed his aim had been true, but Jael realized too late it hadn't been Kora who tried to stop him this time.

He whipped his head to the side as Anrid recoiled, one arm pressed against her stomach where his elbow must have impacted.

"Uh-NEE!" a frightened voice cried out in alarm.

Jael barely had time to register the sight of little Medda behind Anrid, toddling toward them, when white hot rage exploded in his head. But this time it didn't originate within him. The Bifrost heaved and snarled, lashing back as if in Anrid's defense. Before Jael concocted any sort of apology to clamp down on the rising tide of magic, the ground began to ripple beneath them. Cries echoed around the chamber as the shockwave shook the room. Bits of limestone plunged from the ceiling and shattered against the stone floor.

Behind him, Anrid went down on one knee, an arm wrapped around her stomach and the palm of her other hand pressed against the rumbling floor in an attempt to stabilize herself. Jael stepped to come to her aid. However, Medda crashed hard to the floor and screamed. For one awful moment he hesitated, torn between who needed him most in that moment.

The decision was made for him when the ground beneath their feet groaned and shrieked, stone shifting against stone. The ground split apart with a scream, as if it were a living and breathing thing. Anrid slipped downward, toward the crevice yawning open in the earth. Jael shook off the indecision and dove toward Anrid at the same time Kora scrambled toward her from the other direction. More limestone pelted them from above. The floor wrenched again, this time splitting open mere feet from Jael. He slid sideways, his foot plunging into a jagged crack in the stone.

He yanked his foot free just as a huge chunk of limestone shook loose from the ceiling and plummeted downward.

Chapter 29

Anrid slid toward a crack in the floor created by shifting slabs of stone. She flung out her hands, fingers trying to find purchase in the uneven rock. She managed to dig them into a flaw in the rock and halt her descent. She scrabbled to get her knees under her, to find stability, balance. A horrifying crash slammed her back to her stomach. Something nicked her neck. She wrapped an arm around her head as more bits of flying rock sliced at her.

The floor shifted again with an inhumane scream. She skidded to the side and cried out as the crack in the floor widened like a giant mouth opening to devour her whole.

She slid straight for it.

A hundred thoughts crashed through her mind, a thousand regrets. She thought of her sister. Of the goblin children. As she tumbled over the edge of the hole in the floor, she thought of Jael. His panic lashed out at her.

A hand snatched at her wrist at the last possible second. Her body swung and smashed hard against the rock floor. She screamed and kicked for purchase, but the sheered rock was too smooth. Her shoulder ached as the weight of her body pulled against it. She managed to reach up and grasp the wrist clutching her arm.

He'd saved her yet again. The thought flooded her with gnawing certainty. But when she twisted her head back, it wasn't Jael holding her. Kora stared down at her, jaw set in grim determination as he fought to keep himself stabilized on the edge of the chasm with one hand while reaching down to hold on to her. He bared his teeth and lifted her upward. She released her hold on his wrist to grab for the floor's edge. Kora caught hold of the back of her dress and dragged her unceremoniously to safety.

A moan filled her head, but it didn't come from her own lips. It didn't come from anything human. She lost focus of all around her as the emotion swelled inside, lit by flashes of familiar white light and icy hot stabs of regret. The Bifrost, she realized, as she battled to catch her breath.

The magic felt...bad.

She peeled her eyelids apart as Kora tugged her into a seated position away from the jagged hole in the floor. An eerie silence reigned after the growling of moving rock faded away. Where were the others? Had anyone been hurt? She swept the chamber, skimming over and away from the dark elves hunched along the far wall. Away from Math, still on his hands and knees and blinking around as if in a daze. Now that she began to settle her breathing, she noticed the stings on her neck and arms where flying bits of rock had left shallow cuts in her skin. She wiped away a couple mild streaks of blood but didn't see anything too serious.

“By the flames!” One of the elves swore soundly, tugging her attention back.

Math staggered to his feet. “Is anyone injured?” He addressed this to the elves and hurried in their direction, palms held toward them almost as if he hoped to placate them and salvage this situation.

“Injured?” Her elf husband shoved away from the wall and stalked toward the young apprentice. “That—that—” He said a word Anrid had never heard before, but it must be an awful word indeed. “—attacked me!”

“You asked for it.” Kora moved to put himself alongside Math, in a show of solidarity.

“Please,” Math was saying as Anrid’s attention began to drift.

She honestly didn’t care what he had to say right now. She searched until she found Jael’s stooped form huddled on the ground halfway between her and the doorway. He was alive. Relief flooded her body, but a new sort of terror snapped in its wake when she realized he cradled a tiny limp body in his arms. He lifted his head and stared straight at her, eyes red rimmed and horrified.

“Medda.” She gasped the child’s name, the choked sound of her voice somewhere between a cry and a plea. She scrambled across the ground on all fours, scuttling like an animal to get to them as quickly as she could. She collapsed beside Jael and reached for the goblin child.

Then she saw the blood smeared all over Medda’s ghostly white face.

“There’s so much blood.” Jael sounded dazed. “I don’t know where it’s coming from. I—I—”

His emotions flooded through her, bare and unguarded. She didn't know if he meant her to see—to feel—but nothing stood between them, his soul as exposed and unprotected as hers.

“Lay her on the floor.” Anrid barked the words. When Jael only stared at her as if confused or hesitant, she bared her teeth. “Now!”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

This time he obeyed and laid the tiny form on the cold, hard ground. Anrid arranged her arms and legs gently, squeezing the limbs to check for broken bones. She moved along the girl's rail-thin torso and up to her neck and chin. She tilted her head and noticed the profusion of blood along Medda's hairline. Using her apron, she tried to wipe it away, but more blood oozed from the jagged gash on the girl's head. She ripped her apron free of her body and balled it into a wad to press hard against the wound. She needed to stop the bleeding.

A hand pressed down on her shoulder. "Is she—she's not—" Kora broke off and reached out his other hand to press against Medda's throat. A puff of air from his mouth suggested he'd found a pulse.

Perhaps the injury wasn't as bad as it appeared. "Head wounds always bleed a lot," she said, to convince herself as much as them. "It probably looks worse than it is."

A strangled sound tore free of Jael, but she didn't have time just then to try to comfort or console him. "Pull yourself together." She snapped the words at him.

Jael gawked at her, eyes so red and watery she thought he might be on the verge of crying.

"This is your fault," she continued, her voice high and strained.

"My—my fault?"

"Yes. If you hadn't lost your temper...if you hadn't started that fight..."

He seemed at a loss for words, which was fine by her, because for once she knew what she wanted to say. “I didn’t ask you to come to my defense like that, to fight for me. Why couldn’t you have just let the matter go? This isn’t the first time I’ve been insulted, nor will it be the last. I’m a grown woman: I can take it. I don’t need you to fight my battles for me.”

Still, he said nothing, only stared at her as a haunting sort of understanding seeped over his expression. Horror, guilt, pain...they all battled for possession of his expression. Under other circumstances, she would have tempered her tone and tried to console him, to find a way to salvage the situation. But right now...anger overran reason. He had done this.

“Perhaps—” Kora coughed softly from behind them, where he stood with Math and the elves, who had fallen silent. “Perhaps we should get her to the housekeeper. That gash is going to need stitching.”

Anrid shot a look over her shoulder. “Do you think it’s safe to move her?”

The goblin’s expression twisted as he considered. “I’ll fetch her to us.”

“This is ridiculous!” Lord Talos snarled. He spun away and cupped one hand on the back of his neck, almost as if he’d reached the end of what little patience he possessed.

Hot, angry tears pricked at Anrid’s eyes, but she focused on Kora. She nodded that she approved of this plan and returned her efforts to staunching the flow of blood. If she couldn’t stop it...she shuddered to think how quickly a child this small might bleed out. The thought made her want to wretch all over the floor.

It felt like an eternity until heavy footsteps entered the meeting hall. Anrid didn’t bother to look up. She recognized Trap’s heavy breathing. The housekeeper dropped

down beside her and performed a hurried examination of the goblin child.

When Anrid didn't move to get out of the way, Trap took her wrist in a firm grip and dipped her head to catch Anrid's eye. "I've got her now, lass. Let me have a peek."

Anrid hesitated before she released her hold on the wadded apron.

The minutes stretched by as Trap continued her ministrations. Anrid's hands shook in her lap while she tried to wait, but her arms ached to reach for Medda, to scoop the little one onto her lap and hug her tight until all this blackness faded away. How could she have let this happen? How had none of them noticed that Medda had sneaked out of the kitchen and followed them?

Kora returned with Trap's medical basket. It was filled with neatly rolled bandages, corked amber vials filled with liquids, sachets of dried herbs and flowers, as well as more unpleasant tools such as scissors, needles and thread.

In all this, not one of the dark elves had offered to help. Most of them watched in stony silence while her husband and one of the older elves whispered furtively between themselves.

Perhaps plotting and scheming how to use Jael's unfortunate display of temper to their own advantage.

What had he been thinking?

Anrid avoided acknowledging the elves. There would be time to deal with them—with him—later, but right now Medda needed her full attention. She held the girl's hand while Trap cleaned and stitched up the ugly gash on her skull. She worked with skilled ease, as if she'd done these tasks many times before.

In all this, Medda didn't so much as blink. Her chest rose and fell with shallow breathing, but she exhibited no other signs of life. It was as if...as if she were caught in a moment between living and dying and hadn't decided which direction she would go.

Tears trailed down her cheeks at last.

Trap sat back on her heels, bloody hands falling idle in her lap. Her mobcap lay cast aside on the ground, revealing the housekeeper's unruly head of curls in their full glory. Two spots of color warmed the goblin woman's cheeks as she caught Anrid's eye.

"I've done all I can." Her voice held a wobble, but she cleared her throat and steeled herself.

How quickly this tiny, feral creature had wormed her way into all their hearts.

"When will she wake up?" Anrid forced the question past trembling lips. She wished she had an iota of the goblin woman's strength.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Trap's demeanor cracked at last. "That...I don't know. I've done what I can. What I physically know how to do. But as for waking up? She'll have to do that on her own."

"And if she doesn't?" Jael's soft voice cut between them like a knife through butter. A chill shivered all the way down Anrid's spine as she considered what he was asking.

Trap drew an unsteady breath. "Then I can't help her," she said, with no attempt to soften the blow. "That sort of healing requires more than what I can give."

I can't help her. The words echoed in Anrid's head like wicked laughter, rolling over and over. She drew her knees to her chest and buried in her face against her skirt. The tears had their way with her.

Chapter 30

Her tears cut like a knife.

Jael clenched his teeth and battled the desire to cry himself. It's her emotions, not yours, he reminded himself and wondered what he should do to comfort her. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and hold her tight until the tears went away, to kiss her cheeks and whisper that everything would be okay, that Medda would wake up any moment and wouldn't even remember what had happened. That she wouldn't be in any pain and wouldn't suffer.

But those were not promises he could make. They were fanciful thoughts—dreams—and he didn't know how to make them a reality, because he

didn't have any more knowledge of healing than Trap did. He didn't know of any runes that could wake those who slept the dark sleep, the one that hung between life and death.

He drew a stabilizing breath. "It will be okay," he said with a conviction he did not feel.

Anrid's head reared back, and she stared at him through glittering eyes. "You can't say that!" Fire ignited her voice. Her freckled cheeks blazed with heat, every inch of her poised with temper. "The only way you can make a promise like that is if you made sure this didn't happen in the first place. If you hadn't lost your temper, this wouldn't have happened."

"You don't know that," he protested, but his defense sounded weak even to his own ears.

She swiped at both her cheeks with a jerky hand. "Oh, I do know that. If you hadn't been throwing fists around like a child and instead acted like an adult..." Her voice trailed off. He could tell by the expression on her face that she meant what she said: she blamed him for this whole thing.

And she should.

"I didn't intend for any of this to happen." His hands trembled when he raised them to cradle his face in his hands.

His thoughts pounded so hard against his head he thought his skull might explode. Medda—he'd done this to Medda because he'd lost his temper. He'd been trying to help Anrid, he assured himself, trying to protect her...and yet even while trying to do that noble thing, he'd ended up doing the wrong thing.

A worse thing.

It was a pattern he'd noticed developing the last few days.

No matter what he did, his efforts always fell so, so short.

"You should have thought of that sooner!" she snapped. "Why couldn't you have minded your own business and just left this alone? It didn't matter what he said. You didn't have to react like that."

He jerked his head back and let his hands slide from his cheeks. "Didn't have to—Anrid! He insulted you in the worst way!"

"But you didn't have to punch him! What were you thinking?" Anger flashed in eyes that were normally so open and gentle.

He braced his palms against his knees, but his heart raced with the need to explain, with the need to re-earn her trust and good opinion. But he didn't say that, the part about wanting her to think well of him. No, he had to open his mouth and make an idiot of himself. "I was thinking that he shouldn't be allowed to speak to you like that! Under my roof! I couldn't allow that."

Her cheeks flushed even darker. "Yes, you could!" She pursed her lips. "Next time, please mind your own business: I don't need you to protect me from my own husband." Her words were scathing. He'd never seen her in such a mood.

This stung more than anything at all. In spite of what the elf had done, in spite of who and what he was, Anrid intended to go through with her plans, to bind herself to someone who would never love or respect her. The very idea of that—that person—touching Anrid, laying his hands on her... it was almost more than he could handle.

Kora cleared his throat. Until that moment, Jael had forgotten that they were not alone, but they were arguing in front of a whole room full of people. He could feel the eyes of the dark elves on his back, as if they were tangible. He didn't care what they thought, his heart only cared for Medda where she lay sprawled on the floor with her snarled and bloodstained hair cascading across the stone.

“As riveting as this argument is,” Kora said with a wry smile for Jael's benefit, “I don't think this is helping the little one any. Perhaps we should move her to a bed, and then you two can duke this out to your hearts' content. I would love to see the conclusion.”

“Shut up,” Jael said at the exact same time that Anrid exclaimed, “Oh, do be quiet!” They exchanged unpleasant glances.

Kora held up placating hands but did not appear inclined to back down. “You've both made a fine spectacle of yourself, no need for a more enthralling display.”

“While I am loathe to agree with a goblin about anything,” a cold voice interjected from the corner where the dark elves lingered, “I second the motion that this unpleasant spectacle serves no purpose.”

Jael was on his feet before he knew what he was doing. He spun to face the dark elf lord. “You have not earned the right to speak in this place.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Have I not?” Talos laughed, but it didn’t hold a modicum of humor. “I came here to help, only to discover from your brother that you have had possession of my missing bride for days without returning her.”

Math took a step forward, as if he might step between them but then changed his mind at the last second. Instead, he held up one finger, as if asking permission to interject a thought. “In our, um, defense, we didn’t know that she was your wife until you arrived.”

Jael hated the way the elf stared down at his apprentice as if he were dirt beneath his boots. It was clear what he thought of goblins—and humans, for that matter. “Now that you do, I demand you give her to me immediately.”

Angry words raced to Jael’s lips, but he’d lost control of himself once and wasn’t about to allow it to happen again. “She isn’t ours to give,” he said instead. He hadn’t been ignoring her when she dressed him down moments ago. He’d overstepped—and he knew it. As much as he may wish otherwise, he needed to let her fight this battle. “She will speak for herself.”

“Then it is settled,” Talos said, sounding smug. “We’ll leave at once.”

Jael’s mouth fell open. “But you haven’t even asked her what she wants! And I thought you came here to help us!”

“That was before you attacked me.” He looked meaningfully at Jael. “I might have been convinced to offer aid, since you’re incapable of handling your own affairs. But now, the only thing I wish to do is collect my bride and leave. You can handle your

own problems.”

“Lord Talos,” one of the older elves murmured as he laid a cautionary hand on his leader’s forearm. But Anrid’s husband shook him off with a frown. “Perhaps you will reconsider...” the old one suggested, sounding bleak, as if he knew his attempt would be fruitless.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Anrid’s determined voice echoed through the chamber as clearly as if she had shouted. She sat beside Medda, her head bent as she focused on the little girl. But when she spoke, it was for the benefit of the entire room. “I am not going anywhere until Medda is out of danger.”

Talos chuffed disagreeably. “The goblin child is of no concern of yours. Your duty is to come with me.”

Anrid’s head shot back, and she gawked at her betrothed as if he’d sprouted horns. “I will not leave.”

In that moment, Jael had never loved her more. But he couldn’t say such things in front of her beastly prospective husband. Indeed, he said nothing at all as Anrid and Talos engaged in a silent battle of wills. He held his breath and waited to see how it would fall out. He knew better than to come to her defense without her permission.

At last, the dark elf’s mouth turned downward, his hands flexing and clenching in turn. “Very well. I may know of someone who can help the child. There is a healer in Nestra who is known to fix impossible problems. I can take the child with me.” When Anrid opened her mouth to speak, the dark elf halted her by holding up a palm. “I will take her if you come with me at once.”

“Absolutely not.” The words were out of his mouth before Jael even realized he had spoken.

Anrid swept to her feet and shook out her skirts, stalking toward him. “Do not speak for me. Of course I will go with him to get help for Medda.”

“It’s not that simple.”

His gut twisted as he realized this had to be the worst time to tell Anrid the truth about the binding and the Bifrost. If he told her the truth now, if he told her that he’d been concealing this from her with Medda lying on the floor between them...she’d never forgive him. If she stayed, he risked losing the child and Anrid’s respect. If he let her go, he might save one goblin life, but what of all the other lives in Agmon? What about the Bifrost? What about her?

There was no right choice. Whatever decision he made, he’d never be able to forgive himself.

They stood two feet apart. She’d never appeared more beautiful than she did in this moment, with her bleary eyes and nose red from crying. With her hair tumbling around her shoulders and her mouth set in a grim line.

Fierce and beautiful and fragile all rolled together.

“Please,” he began, faltering over the word. “Please don’t go.”

It seemed so weak in light of everything he felt and all he wanted to say. But he’d never excelled at saying things, not like Kora who could convince a girl to jump off a cliff with him. Or like Eris who could talk the girl off the cliff when she was dead set on learning how to fly.

He willed her to understand all these things with a look, one look, because that’s all he could give her right now. Don’t go, don’t go, don’t go...

She stared into his eyes, the anger fading like distant thunder. Conflicting emotions pulsed at random as the storm in her gaze ebbed and receded. Without the anger wrapping her like armor, the human girl who'd taken his heart by storm appeared small and fragile, and he hated that he brought her to this place of vulnerability.

She wet her lips with her tongue and whispered, "Why? Why should I stay?"

Chapter 31

Her heart cried the words, but her voice had more self-control.

She waited for him to answer, for him to say the words she both longed for and dreaded; words that would bind them both in ways neither of them were prepared for—not with her bound to another and his world hanging in the balance.

Anger still coursed through her veins, but so did something else. She didn't want them to part like this. She wanted Medda to somehow make a magical recovery and for her and Jael to mend the rift her angry words had created between them. Now that she had taken a few calming breaths, she regretted how harshly she'd spoken to him. Yes, he'd lost his temper, but had it truly been his fault that Medda got hurt? The Bifrost was more to blame, for it had reacted just as childishly as Jael and caused the quake.

And Lord Talos—her heart shuddered just thinking about his cruel tone and words.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

So she waited, and her traitorous heart hoped Jael would give her a reason to stay, a way to mend all that had gone wrong and a reason to forsake the life she was bound to live.

The life she no longer wanted.

Perhaps it would be easier to live that life if she had a memory, a whisper of something better to look back on.

Jael waited too, but she didn't know what for. Was he expecting her to say something else? And when his head dipped ever closer, as if he might whisper something into her ear, and her ear alone, was he hoping she might encourage him in some way?

The seconds trickled by like grains of sand through an hourglass, inevitably dragging her closer to the moment when she realized he was not going to answer her at all. Her heart sank, buried beneath those tumbling grains of a missed opportunity, of a lost moment.

Fresh tears prickled in her eyes, but she blinked them away and lifted her chin with determination. It didn't matter.

It wasn't like she could have stayed no matter what he said. Her fate had been decided. If she didn't go with Talos now, who knew what trouble he would cause—for Jael, for her, for her people.

Even for Dagmar.

If Anrid didn't do what she was supposed to, then Dagmar could find herself in Anrid's shoes, torn from her life and forced to marry a despicable husband.

Despicable.

The thought reverberated in her head as Anrid tried to wrap her thoughts around the fact her future husband was worse than she'd ever imagined.

Instead, she brushed past Jael without a word and fled for the doorway. Footsteps trailed after her. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed the tears away before casting an angry look over her shoulder to tell him to leave her alone.

But the goblin trailing fast on her heels wasn't the one with the dark hair and haunted gaze, rather his fair brother with the sardonic smiles. Right now, however, Kora appeared rather grim and quite unlike himself.

"Please, leave me alone," she said as she turned forward once again and continued her flight. "I don't want to be teased right now."

"I'm not going to tease you." He sounded sincere. "Although, alas, it shall be a temptation most difficult to resist."

She rolled her eyes and pursed her lips into a tight frown. If he were her own brother, she'd probably smack him just then. "Then why are you following me? Don't you have anything more important to do?"

He came alongside her and matched her pace with careless ease. "Not particularly, no. And I'm following you because I want to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"You're a fine one to talk." She muttered the words out the side of her mouth as they

hurried around a bend in the tunnel that led to the main stairway.

“What is that supposed to mean?” His voice lost a bit of its lightness.

She wished she hadn’t said anything and didn’t answer him. Picking on him to vent her frustrations about everything else that was wrong in the world wouldn’t make either of them feel any better.

Anrid took the stairs two at a time, out of breath by the time she reached the first landing and with a stitch in her side when she arrived at the upper hallway that led to the dormitory stairwell. She pressed a hand against her ribs as she climbed the last flight of stairs. She wheezed as she stormed into her bedroom, but Kora seemed unaffected as he boldly followed her inside. She shot him an annoyed look, but he grinned at her and leaned against the doorway with his typical casual ease. He crooked one ankle over the other and looked annoyingly good and aware of it.

She put her back to him and began to collect her few belongings. She didn’t have much other than a few painted rocks the children had given her. She would need to pack blankets and things for Medda, however, as well as food. She didn’t know what the elves would provide or if they’d have anything appropriate for a child. Better to be prepared. Laden with several blankets and her prized stash of rocks, Anrid swept past Kora and headed for the bathroom to look for bandages in the closet.

This time, Kora waited outside for her—thank goodness for that, since she needed to relieve herself anyway.

When she emerged, he matched her pace as they descended the stairs they’d trotted up just moments earlier.

“He’s doing the best he can, you know.” Kora’s words cut the silence between them.

“It isn’t much, granted, but he doesn’t know a thing about women.”

At her sharp look, he shrugged. “It’s the truth. I’m not being mean. We all have our strengths, and the art of feminine interaction is not his.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m not mad at him.” No, she was mad at herself for getting into this situation in the first place. “It would just make things easier if he was more forthcoming.”

He snorted, nostrils flaring. “You’re not wrong there. I can’t speak to his reasons, but I can tell you there’s a lot he hasn’t told you. About that little soul-binding fiasco you two got yourselves tangled up in.”

Anrid missed the last step on the stairs, and he caught her elbow to steady her. “You know about that?”

He raked her with a condescending look. “I know about everything, dear girl. Which is more than you can say.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Something unpleasant rolled over in her stomach. “What are you saying?”

Kora didn’t answer, but was he debating what to tell her or choosing how to tell her? At length, he scratched at the hollow place below his right ear. “That soul binding? The one keeping you bound to Agmon?”

“Yes?”

“It’s unbreakable.”

Unbreakable. The word swirled in her head, heavy with implications she didn’t understand or want to consider. “What—what does that mean?” She pressed her back against the stone wall to steady the shaking in her knees.

Kora leaned closer and lowered his voice. “It means you’re always going to be bound to us. To the Bifrost.” He held her gaze, all levity and playfulness abruptly gone. “You’ll always be bound to him.”

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. Chills skittered across her skin, as if a thousand spiders crawled all over her. Always was a very long time. The word held such finality, such permanence. “But what does that mean? For me?”

A flicker of a wince contorted his expression. “I don’t know that. Sorry. I know I said I knew everything, but perhaps I exaggerated. What I can tell you is that whatever side effects you’re experiencing are not going to go away. In fact, they may get worse if you try to leave.”

The nightmares. The shadows breaking into waking moments. The children.

A low moan escaped her mouth. “But—but I can’t stay. Medda might die if I don’t get her help. And I’m supposed to be married, Kora.”

“Yes, yes, we all know about that wretched fellow you fancy yourself engaged to. I wouldn’t worry about that. There are ways to be rid of unwanted beaus, you know.” He waved a hand as if to suggest she might swat the dark elf away and be rid of him. “As for Medda...”

She waited for him to continue, but he floundered for words. “Yes?”

Kora cleared his throat and moved to rest his palm against the tunnel wall. “Well, you’re going to have to weigh the scales, my dear. More than one life hangs in the balance. On the one hand, you have a child that might be in danger. On the other, an entire kingdom filled with people who are in danger.”

The words held a cruel sort of finality. His opinion was clear. He didn’t think she should go, that the risk to Agmon and the Bifrost was too great. But to sacrifice Medda...to throw her chances to the wind when she couldn’t fight for herself or voice her own opinion?

“No,” she rasped with a shake of her head. “Someone has to fight for Medda. Someone needs to give her a voice in all this.”

His eyebrows lowered over his eyes. “Do you know what you’re risking, Anrid?”

“I do.” She shivered but lifted her chin. “And I’m trusting you to hold things together until I get back.”

To hold him together.

“You’re coming back?” His body grew very still, as if every inch of him waited to hear her response.

Her tongue pasted itself to the roof of her mouth. She peeled it away with effort. “I will bring Medda back,” she said slowly. “Until then, can you keep everything from falling to pieces?”

Kora flinched and crossed his arms. “You do realize you’re putting me in a tight spot.” But she didn’t see accusation in his expression, rather a strange sort of resignation, as if he’d known all along they would both come to this exact place. “There is something else you should know before you do this.”

Her heart skipped a beat. What else should she know?

Kora worked his jaw side to side before continuing, “The elves know about the binding, too. And about the risk you’re taking. And yet they’re still demanding you leave with them.”

She wrinkled her brow. What was he implying? That Talos wanted her to come to harm? Or that he didn’t care if Agmon was in danger, or wanted them to come to harm? But why? She knew little of politics and grand schemes. She knew relations with the dark elves were strained on all fronts...but were they all as terrible as Talos, or was he an exception to the rule?

“I’m sure they mean well.” But her own tone lacked conviction.

A smile quirked his mouth, but it wasn’t a nice sort of smile, especially when paired with one arched eyebrow. “Don’t be a fool, Anrid. You’ve met him. Your husband. He doesn’t mean well, and yet he came to offer his help. Makes one pause, doesn’t it, dear girl? Definitely makes one pause.”

She shook off the fear his words invoked. “You’re being cautious, is all. I have to go. You do see that, don’t you?”

Kora didn’t answer right away, the smirk sliding off his face like melting ice down a warm windowpane. “It isn’t me you need to convince, you know. You’re going to have to live with the consequences of your choice. As will we all.”

Frustrated tears pricked at her eyes. “I don’t have a choice. I can’t risk Medda’s life over a ‘maybe,’ over something that may not even happen. She needs me now, and that’s all I can do. I can only do this one thing and hope that everything else doesn’t fall apart. Kora, I’m counting on you to take care of Rig until I get back. To take care of all the children. Then when I return, well, we’ll figure out a way to work around the binding so that no one is at risk when I leave again.”

He withdrew into himself then, eyebrows lowering. When he spoke, he sounded tired and resigned and older than she’d ever heard him sound before. “You do what you need to do, Anrid.” He worked his jaw side to side and straightened his spine, as if preparing himself to walk into battle. “And I will do the same.”

Chapter 32

She was leaving.

She was really leaving.

He'd felt it the moment she made the decision, a raw feeling of resignation and determination. A despairing sense of doom overshadowed him as he forced his attention away from Anrid in the corner of the Hall, where she and Trap oversaw the preparations to transport Medda. Instead, he fought to keep his focus on the dark elf delegation gathered around him and Math in a half circle, like a murder of crows.

Talos glowered at him, as if he knew that Jael's attention lay elsewhere.

"You've come all this way to help us," Math said in a coaxing sort of way, as if he were speaking to one of the goblinborn who didn't want to do as he was told, "and you're to immediately leave? Why come if you didn't have anything helpful to tell us about the problem with the Bifrost?"

"I have what I came for." Talos slanted a quick look in Math's direction before returning his steely focus to Jael. "The Bifrost is your problem."

Jael scowled right back at him. "And the shadows infecting our Bifrost are coming from Gelaira...which makes our problem your problem. You're not leaving with Anrid until you tell me more about these shadows."

Talos's eyes narrowed as a nasty sort of smile twisted his thin lips. "You think you

can stop the girl from coming with us?” He seemed convinced to the contrary as he crossed his arms over his chest, daring Jael to defy him.

“Her name is Anrid, and you bet your blue skin I can stop her! I am master of Imenborg, and you are my guests.”

Math coughed a warning.

Jael shrugged off the cautionary hand the apprentice laid on his arm. “What? His skin is blue: I’m merely stating a fact.”

Half a dozen dark elf mouths pulled into angry frowns. The older elf, the one they called Teague, raised a hand, as if seeking permission to interject. “If I might say, I think perhaps we should all take a breath and consider the larger implications—”

“That will be all, Teague.” Talos cut him off without a flicker of expression.

The older elf snapped his mouth shut, but something frustrated glinted in his pale eyes. What had he been about to say? What implications did he refer to?

“Once we are back in Nestra,” Talos continued, nonchalantly, “I will send our best experts to consult about your shadow problem. I suspect we may be able to offer some insights you’re too...inadequate...to come up with on your own.”

Jael’s teeth ground together, but Math cleared his throat before he could respond. “Thank you, that is most kind.”

“I believe she’s ready to travel!” Trap called from the other side of the room.

The dark elves dispersed, dismissing Jael without a hint of deference to his position. He spun to storm after Talos and demand the continuation of their disagreement, but

a firm hand caught his arm and held him back. He opened his mouth to snarl at Math, only to realize it wasn't his apprentice who had hold of him. A pair of pale eyes set in a weather blue-gray face stared hard at him, expression dark, troubled.

"There is more at stake than you know," Teague murmured. He appeared as if he wanted to say more. But something beyond Jael's shoulder caught his attention, and the elf clamped his mouth closed and hurried away without saying anything else.

What could he be referring to? What else was at risk that he didn't know about?

Jael shook off the troubling questions and followed the others toward the women across the room. They had Medda cocooned in a makeshift sling supported by polls. Even though it had been hours since the accident, the goblin child had shown no indications she might awaken soon. Jael had been hoping against hope that she would wake on her own and give Anrid a reason to stay. But even that hope was to be taken away from him. He kneeled beside the child and touched her cold hand with a few of his fingers. He wished he had the power to instill some of his own strength into her, to give her the will to fight a little longer, to hold on. He could only hope that the dark elves would be true to their word, and that they did indeed intended to take Medda to see their healer.

He stood and turned to face Anrid; the girl would not look at him. She fussed with the bag slung over her shoulder, although it appeared the flap had been securely fastened.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she said, still without making eye contact.

He took a deliberate step closer to her so that only a small space separated them. "Will you?" He whispered the words.

Still, she did not look at him. "I promise," she replied, equally as soft. "I will come back to bring Medda home. But beyond that..."

She didn't need to continue. He knew that she did not intend to stay. For some reason he would never understand why she had chosen the dark elves, who cared nothing for her, over the goblins who loved her fiercely. If only he had the courage to tell her how fiercely. In fact, he opened his mouth to tell her then, to pour out his heart and dump the organized boxes of his thoughts into a messy heap on the floor at her feet. But at that exact moment, Talos cut between them. He jostled Jael backward with his proximity.

"It's time to go." He caught Anrid by the elbow and pulled her after him.

Jael wanted to clobber him, to take another go at his perfectly straight nose. Talos treated her like she was a thing, a possession, as if she didn't have any thoughts or feelings of her own. Why would she choose to go with him? Why put herself into his power when she had another choice?

The answer to his question, of course, was that she didn't care for them—for him—as much as they cared about her. She would rather risk a life in the unknown than stay here with the life she knew she could have at Imenborg. Still, he watched her walk away, her arm held captive by a dark elf hand. He watched when she cast a last, hesitant glance over her shoulder. Her eyes skittered over him as if afraid to linger too long.

And then she was gone.

Teague and one of the younger elves gathered up Medda's sling and brought up the rear of the procession as the dark elves held their torches high, blazing with blue Gelairan fire, and disappeared into the tunnels leading away from Imenborg.

Jael found himself in the playroom with the children.

He had a million and one other things he could have done, such as search for the missing book that held the fate of the world in its pages. Or walk his rounds to make sure his staff weren't running out of runestones and the Bifrost wasn't bringing down the mountain.

Someone would tell him if either of those things were about to happen, he reasoned, feeling rather petulant as he sat at the stone table surrounded by crying goblin children. Rig sat beside him, arms folded on top of the stone tabletop. Occasionally, Jael patted him on the shoulder, but he had no words of comfort to offer. He rather felt like putting his head down on the table and wailing at the top of his lungs.

But, no, that wouldn't do any of them any good.

The little girl who sat on his right side leaned against him. He felt her try to wipe her nose on his sleeve, felt her body shudder as she coughed. Around the table, most of the children were blowing their noses, or not blowing their noses and letting it run free, and all of them appeared like they needed to take a long nap. Trap had asked Cook to make a hearty soup for the evening meal, in the hopes it might boost their strength and allow them to fight whatever sickness they had contracted.

“Why did you let her leave?” Rig cried into his folded arms. Jael had to strain to make out the boy’s words. “Why did you let her take Medda?”

Jael suppressed a heavy sigh. “I told you: Medda is sick and needs a healer, the kind of healer we don’t have here at Imenborg.”

“I should have gone with them.” The boy let out a fresh string of sobs that could have woken the dead. The other children joined him, an off-key chorus of tears, sniffles and coughs that blended into a melody of misery. It was enough to make him feel sick. In fact, he did have a scratch in his throat and had a raging headache behind his eyes. Perhaps he was coming down with it too.

But more than that, he felt weary, so very weary, as if Anrid leaving had robbed the last of his strength. He didn’t think he even had it in him to walk from this chamber and up to his bed. Perhaps he would sleep right here at the table tonight. The thought began to sound quite appealing.

To his right, the little girl snorted and wiped her nose on his sleeve again. “My head hurts,” she whimpered. She leaned into him, and he let her, wishing he could comfort her somehow; wishing he could comfort them all.

But he was as bereft and abandoned as they were.

They were all boats on the Styx without anchors.

Something inside him tugged. It hurt, as if something deep within him had grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked it out. The weariness amplified while a dull ache grew in his chest.

The Bifrost knew that Anrid had gone. He felt the magic calling out for her, felt the void of her absence as keenly as the Bifrost did. Both of them had been abandoned.

The strain of it threatened to crush him, the pressure so heavy he wondered how he managed to remain seated rather than fall flat on the floor.

No wonder he felt so ill. Was it possible he was carrying more of the weight of the Bifrost than he had a few hours earlier? As Anrid walked further away, did her connection to them weaken?

He shuddered to think what ill effects she might be feeling alone, deep within the tunnels of Agmon with no one but the dark elves who cared nothing for her.

Footsteps entered the chamber, but he didn't have the strength to look and see who it was. Math rounded the table and squeezed himself between two of the goblin children, who leaned into him. Math put his arm around them and met Jael's inquisitive look.

"I've been looking everywhere for you."

He knew he should respond, but he was just too tired.

"This is a wretched business," Math said when Jael refused to speak.

"It's not like I can just go after them and force Anrid to come back," he muttered. "I can't. I have no right."

Neither Math nor Rig answered him, although the goblin apprentice grew more serious and Rig more tearful. He wanted Jael to do just that very thing: grab their governess and drag her back to their loving, waiting arms.

"But if you don't bring her back..." Math cleared his throat and chewed on his words. "If she doesn't return, we can't predict the results, what it means for the Bifrost. I just don't know..."

“I know the risks. But we have no right to make her decisions for her. She’s already been abducted once against her will.”

Rig winced and bowed his head.

“We can’t do that to her again. If she comes back, it has to be because she wants to return. Not because I toss her over my shoulder and haul her back like a prisoner of war.”

“Perhaps, if she were made fully aware of the situation...of how much she is needed...how much she is wanted...” Math fell into meaningful silence, his gaze intent and probing. What was he suggesting?

“She knows how much she’s wanted,” he growled. “The children all but begged her to stay. I asked her to stay. And she chose to leave anyway.”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Yes, but did you tell her why you wanted her to stay?” Math’s words were little more than whispers probing his wounded pride.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

But he did know. Rock and bone, did he know.

Math threw up his hands in exasperation. “You are the most aggravating soul in the world.”

“No, that right lies with Kora.”

“Granted. The second most aggravating person, then. You need to tell her how you feel about her.”

“I feel irritated about her. Intensely irritated.”

“Stones help me!” Math jabbed him hard in the ribs, his mouth pulled down in frustration. “You need to tell her that you love her, you obtuse fool. No woman in her right mind would give up her life to stay under any other circumstances. You can’t guilt her into this. You need to give her a reason to stay.”

“Hear, hear!” Trap called from across the kitchen where she blatantly eavesdropped.

Several of the children giggled as Jael fired a “Mind your own business!” back at the housekeeper. This only elicited more giggles from the table. Someone honked into their tissue, and the giggles transformed to hoots of laughter. Even Jael cracked a

smile, but it probably appeared more like a grimace.

“If you’re going to do this, you need to have a plan,” Math continued, as if the matter had been settled. “I hear humans like flowery proposals of marriage—speeches from the prospective suitor expounding on why their union would be a successful endeavor.”

“Proposals of—are you insane? If I’m going to do anything, I’m going to do it properly and give her the traditional binding stone—”

“Are you crazy? You give that girl a rock and she’ll bean you on the head with it!” Math had worked himself into quite the righteous fervor. Jael wasn’t sure he’d ever seen his apprentice with such fire in his cheeks other than when he had a fever of epic proportions.

He scrambled for another argument that might clear him of any embarrassing speeches. “I don’t know anything about human marital customs—”

Math groaned and lifted his face to the ceiling. “Wretched business,” he muttered, repeating his earlier words. “Look, I don’t really feel comfortable meddling in matters of the heart. We have bigger problems to discuss.”

“Bigger problems. Of course.”

“I don’t like this,” Math went on, a furrow between his eyes. “Any of it. I don’t think the elves are telling us everything. They know, Jael. About the soul-binding. And the book.”

“Wait. What?” Jael’s heart sputtered and skipped a beat. “I told you not to tell them about that!”

“I didn’t!” Math’s eyes flashed with an uncommon show of temper. “I didn’t say a word. It was Kora.”

Jael curled one hand around the rim of the stone table and squeezed as if he might try to crush the stone in his grip. “How did he find out? You didn’t tell him—”

“Of course, I didn’t. But he knew. Somehow, he found out, and he told the elves. They were reluctant to lift a finger to help us until he told them about the book and the binding. Then they were really chummy on our way back to Imenborg. The elves wanted to know all about that book, Jael. They’re extremely keen.”

At this, Rig lifted his head and stared across the table.

“If they were that keen,” Jael muttered, “they wouldn’t have tromped off so soon with our nanny in tow.”

Math leveled him with a less than pleased look. “Really? That’s what you’re hung up on? What about the book—”

“It’s missing.” Jael blurted the words.

The other goblin’s mouth hung open, his thoughts derailed.

“Someone broke into my room and stole it from my robes. I’ve been looking. I had thought perhaps you took it for study, but...”

Math shook his head, shifting his hold on the children crowded against him. “I didn’t touch it, I swear.”

Neither of them spoke again for an uncomfortable pause. For his part, Jael didn’t want to voice his concerns about the implications of the missing book. He couldn’t

very well blame the elves when the book had vanished before they'd even arrived.

“We need to find it,” Math said with a tired sigh. “A nameless book in the wrong hands—”

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“You don’t have to tell me about that. I’ve been looking. But I don’t know who would have taken it. The only people who knew about it were you, me, and Anrid.”

“And Kora.” Math’s voice held a sharp edge.

Rig began to cry louder. He covered his face with both hands and wailed so loudly, they couldn’t continue their conversation had they wanted to.

Jael leaned to frown at him, wondering what had initiated this renewed sense of despair. “Whatever is the matter?”

The goblin child wouldn’t look at him. “I did a bad thing,” he sobbed. Tears trickled from between his fingers. “It was me. I took the bad book.”

Anger mingled with confusion as Jael struggled not to smack the child on the back of the head. “What were you thinking?” he demanded. “That’s a very bad book, Rig. You could have gotten hurt. You could have hurt everyone else—what did you do with it?”

Rig lowered his hands at last, fingers sliding down his face to fall idle against the tabletop. “He told me it would help. That it would help Uh-NEE stay with us. That he wanted to help Uh-NEE. I just wanted to help.”

“Who did?” Math coaxed.

Rig’s mouth screwed up with renewed despair. He laid his forehead right down on the table and sobbed afresh. “He said the bad book was hurting Uh-NEE and that he

wanted her to get better. Wanted her stay with us. Help the Frost not shake all the time. He said he wanted to help.”

“Who said this, Rig?” Jael hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but he did.

“P-p-prince Kora!” he wailed.

Ice flooded his veins as Jael bolted from the table so fast, he dislodged half the children, who scuttled out of his way with frightened squeaks.

“Where are you going?” Math called after him.

But Jael didn’t spare a moment to answer. Instead, he bolted from the playroom to shake answers out of Kora before he brought the mountain down around their ears.

Chapter 33

The cavern around them reeked of stagnant water. Somewhere in the shadowed corners, water dripped against stone. Anrid huddled beside Medda, limp on the ground where the elves had deposited her sling when they stopped to rest. Her skin exuded heat when Anrid pressed a palm to the girl’s forehead.

And she still had not so much as blinked an eye or stirred a muscle.

It had been hours. Hours.

Anrid’s body felt as if she had been running uphill, although their progress through the tunnels hadn’t been that strenuous. It was almost as if a part of her was pulling back toward Imenborg even while she forced her feet to step onward—an almost tangible tug of war.

It hurt.

She rubbed her aching chest with a grimace before checking the bandage around Medda's forehead to make sure it was secure. Thanks to Trap's careful work, the stitched wound no longer bled, but Anrid needed to keep it clean and dry. She squeezed Medda's limp fingers and waited for a reaction.

Nothing happened.

Anrid rolled her eyes closed, battling the despair. She wondered if Jael could feel her worry and if it scared him not knowing what was happening. But when she reached out, tentatively, she found she could barely sense him. The connection had grown frail.

What would happen if it snapped?

Swallowing a thick lump in the back of her throat, she rose and eased around a squat stalagmite growing out of the floor of the cave. The dark elves reclined a few yards away, whispering amongst themselves. They fell silent as she approached, as if loathe to allow her to hear their conversation. She licked her lips and folded her hands together, squeezing her fingers hard to ground herself and find the courage to speak.

"I beg your pardon, but when will we be continuing? I think Medda might be getting worse. There are indications of fever—"

"We'll be staying here for a while." Talos cut her off without raising his head from the ornate knife he ran back and forth against a whetstone.

She flinched but stood her ground. "Her head wound is severe," she repeated, more firmly. "She needs to see a healer as quickly as possible. I don't understand the delay."

He said nothing, and neither did anyone else. Snick, snick, snick went the blade against the stone, almost as if it were laughing at her. Anrid waited for him to say something—anything—or to at least look at her to acknowledge her presence, but he bent to his work as if she didn't exist.

The blade dug a little deeper.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She'd long given up her hopes and dreams for the future. She'd been a fool, a dreamy-eyed fool, to think that this stranger would care for her even a whit. And why should he? He didn't choose her any more than she chose him. They were ill-suited, but they were stuck with one another. It was the worst sort of fate she could imagine. The seconds ticked by to the snick, snick of his knife.

She stumbled back to Medda, angry tears burning behind her eyes. Talos would never see them though, those tears. They were hers and hers alone, and she willed them away.

Anrid sat with her back to them and rocked back and forth, growing more agitated by the minute. What were they waiting for? They hadn't been traveling long enough to warrant stopping for the night, and no one had said anything about a meal. Medda lay in her sling, forgotten and growing weaker. Had her breathing become shallower, or was that Anrid's imagination running away with her?

She missed Jael. And Trap. And the children. Even Kora, a little. He wasn't so bad when he was trying to behave himself.

Footsteps approached from behind. She twisted with hopeful enthusiasm as the older elf stopped alongside her, gazing down at Medda. "Any change?" His voice possessed a soft, almost musical quality she might have liked under other circumstances.

She shook her head. "Are we about to leave?"

The elf winced, emotion flickering over his face before he forced an apologetic smile.

“I’m...afraid not. Not quite yet. But soon.” He looked over his shoulder and muttered something that sounded like, I hope.

Panic lanced through her entire body, but Anrid forced it to be still. She needed to remain calm and levelheaded for Medda.

“I’m Anrid,” she said when the elf did not walk away and abandon them. “And this is Medda.”

His observed her with steady eyes. “I know.” An awkward pause hung between them before he cleared his throat. “My name is Teague Meddallan. I have a daughter about your age. Margit, her mother named her. She’s like you. Human.”

“Your daughter?”

He barked a laugh at her confusion. “No, my wife. My wife is human. Margit is...well, half human and half...me.”

“Oh, I see. Of course.” Her cheeks warmed with embarrassment.

To her surprise, he crouched beside her, balancing on the toes of his boots with elbows propped on his knees. She studied him, more than a little surprised to learn that he had a human wife. But why should she be? Humans marrying the dark elves had become a very common practice.

“Your wife,” she began, wondering if he would find insult with a personal question, “was she a peaceweaver? From Haldor?”

He observed her with equal intensity. “She was. One of the first. You would like her, I think. She has enough room in her heart for all of Rhuin.” A rueful smile touched his mouth, but it exuded with sadness. “And my wallet bears proof of it. She gives

away my earnings as quickly as I manage to collect them.”

For some reason, this made Anrid like him. She wanted to meet his wife, this human lady who had made herself at home in Gelaira and sought to give away Gelairan riches to help those in need. What fascinated her even more, though, was that Teague appeared genuinely fond of his wife. She was guessing, of course, but he spoke of her without malice.

“You are both happy?” As soon as she asked the question, she knew it was much too personal and pressed a hand to her flaming cheek. “Oh, forgive me, you don’t have to answer that. I’m just—I meant—”

He held up a hand as she floundered into mortified silence. “We are happy,” he answered, in a gentle way, the way she imagined he might speak to his own daughter.

Was he trying to encourage her? To allay her fears? She managed a wobbly smile of gratitude, although his words had done little to stir the fear broiling in her belly. If her intended was as nice as Teague, perhaps she would stand a chance of finding happiness. But as things were...

Happiness did not wait in her future, not if she went through with this, as she was bound to.

Anrid reached down to adjust the blankets around Medda. “Do you think you could encourage them to leave soon?” She asked the question without daring to look at him.

His heavy sigh answered her question. “I wish I could,” he whispered, for her ears alone. “Believe me, I wish I could.”

He rose then and pressed two fingers against her hunched shoulder before moving to rejoin his companions, leaving her and Medda alone.

A few minutes later, something stirred in the shadows of the tunnel leading back to Imenborg. Anrid unfolded herself and peered over the stalagmite sheltering her and Medda from the others. A shadow peeled out of the darkness. Her heart leaped to her throat, as she feared the living monsters from her nightmares had once again broken free.

But, no, she breathed a sigh of relief. This shadow was of the living variety. Frowning, she squinted to make out who it was, but he was too far away and standing in the blackness of the tunnel. Several of the elves went to greet the new arrival, as if they'd been expecting him.

An unpleasant taste soured her mouth. No wonder they had been lingering here in the cavern: they'd been waiting for someone. But who? And why?

The newcomer handed something to Talos. She inched around the stalagmite, straining her ears to catch snippets of the conversation. She caught a word or two but nothing that made sense until she slipped too close.

“You’ll keep your end of the bargain?” As he said the words, Kora glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of Anrid. His expression twisted—was that alarm? Regret? But he masked the emotion and shifted his attention back to the elves.

Talos laughed a low, cold laugh as he turned the item over in his hands as if it were something precious. One of the younger elves caught Kora by the collar.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“Hey! Leave off!” Kora growled, trying to shake himself free. “We had a deal! I give you the book, and you help us fix the Bifrost!”

“You were never in a position to bargain, goblin.” Talos cast one, narrowed look over his shoulder at Anrid, and while holding her startled gaze, snapped, “Tie him up.”

Chapter 34

“He’s gone.” Math’s whisper held an edge of tension. “One of the maids saw him leave shortly after the elvish party left.”

Math rubbed his hands together in agitated circles, massaging them as if the repetitive motion brought him some sort of comfort or stability. Behind them, one of the children coughed a loud, rattling sound that made Jael wince. They stood in the kitchen while the children picked at their midday repast.

Jael wished he could find similar comfort by just rubbing his stone-eaten hands together, but he was far beyond that. He cursed and earned a startled look from his apprentice and an angry one from Trap, who looked up from the table where she wiped snotty noses on a large towel.

“Apologies,” he muttered, “but what is he thinking? Has he lost his mind?”

Math’s mouth twisted in a pensive frown. “It’s possible that he’s trying to help. Maybe things aren’t as bad as you think—”

“Not as—there is no way you can spin this in a positive light, Math.” He pressed a

clenched fist to his mouth to quell the desire for more cursing. “Whatever he has planned for that book...it’s not helpful. It’s dangerous. Devastating, even. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. And I’ll be dashed if I let that book fall into elvish hands.”

When his angry voice echoed across the kitchen, several wide-eyed children turned to look at him, Rig among them. The goblin boy stared at him through a shimmer of tears, as if he felt the entire responsibility of the missing book on his narrow shoulders. Jael winced, but he didn’t know what to do or say.

Math shifted and blocked Jael’s view of Rig, but whether it was a deliberate move or a coincidence, he didn’t know. “What are you going to do?”

He tapped his fist against his mouth. “I’m going to go after him and get that book back. What else can I do?”

“You’re going to need help. You can’t take on half a dozen elves and your brother by yourself.” Math offered an apologetic smile. “But all of our lads are running themselves ragged walking the Bifrost line. Since Anrid left...”

“I know.” He’d felt it too, the shuddering of the Bifrost. The popping of runestones as they exploded into shards. The imminent feeling of danger. They were running out of time.

A hand tugged at the hem of Jael’s sleeve. “I will help.”

He studied Rig’s upturned face, set in a determined scowl. The goblin boy pursed his lips before repeating, “I will help.”

Jael rested a hand on his thin shoulder and squeezed. “I appreciate the offer—it’s noble and brave, Rig—but you’re not big enough to help in this matter.”

The boy shook off his hand, movements erratic and angry. “I can help. I’m not too little. I can find Uh-NEE. I can always find her. Prince Kora is going to take the book to the elves, yes? Well, Uh-NEE is with the elves. And if I can find her, I can find them.”

An awkward silence fell between them as Jael and Math exchanged a confused look.

“What do you mean?” Math leaned down, bracing his hands on his knees, so that he looked right into the goblinborn’s face. “How can you find Anrid?”

Rig splayed a hand across his chest, his expression pensive and solemn. “I can feel her. I can always feel her. I know where she is. That’s how I learned about your bad book: I followed Un-NEE into the library, and I saw you. I saw you floating in the lights with the book.”

Jael coughed. “What is he talking about?”

“I’m not sure.” Math straightened and scratched the back of his neck. “But I’m guessing it has something to do with the bond between them. The gifts of the goblinborn are erratic and unique. When he bespelled Anrid and brought her to Agmon, it’s possible he created a bond with her. Not on a personal level, but on a soul level. It’s possible he’s bonded to her as surely as you’re both bonded to the Bifrost.”

“We’re all connected in this. Me. Anrid. The children.” It’s why the children could see the shadows. When they kidnapped Anrid, they unintentionally inserted themselves into every aspect of her life. “Because Anrid and the Bifrost? They’re connected now. It’s why they can see the shadows.”

Jael dipped his chin, a sudden fear stabbing at his heart. He’d been feeling the strain of Anrid’s absence in a painful, physical way because of the soul bonding. If the

children were also bonded to her, were they feeling the same way? He cast his eyes over the group, unable to mask his alarm.

“What is it?” Math asked, intuitive as always.

“The children,” Jael began hoarsely, “if they’re bound to Anrid, they’re also feeling the effects of the Bifrost. It’s painful, her being gone. It hurts, Math. I feel like I’m going to collapse, like I can’t take much more. That sort of pressure on children—with them already being sick—”

Understanding blossomed across his apprentice’s features. He too studied the children with growing concern.

It all pointed back to Anrid.

And how much they needed her.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“But I don’t know how to convince her to come back.” He rasped the words, his pride splitting down the middle to admit how inadequate he was to solve this problem. “I could guilt her into returning, and you know she would...but how do we fix this without robbing her of her choices? I need to get a binding stone to make a proper proposal—”

Trap leaped out of her seat and smacked her palms flat against the table as she leaned to stare down the table at him.

“None of this will matter at all if you don’t first catch the girl,” she snapped at him. She had a bit of heat in her cheeks and a glint in her eye. “If you’re going to make this right, you need to go get her first. Get her, get the book, get that brother of yours...and then tell her how you feel. And I agree with Math: use your words and forget the stone. I don’t care how you say it, just do it and bring our girl home.”

A cheer erupted from the children, half of them jumping onto their benches and leaping up and down. They waved their arms as if they stood on the sidelines of a royal parade in Elysium, the ones his mother liked to organize with the streamers and trumpets and big drums.

But his tongue felt glued to the roof of his mouth. Jael worried that he wouldn’t be able to speak a word in that moment, not to save his life. And that was the crutch of it, right there. His life—and the lives of everyone here and all over Agmon—would depend on his eloquence in the next few hours.

But what if he wasn’t suited to the task? What if he caught up to Anrid—a slim chance all on its own—and couldn’t find the words to say? Or said the wrong words

and drove her away?

As he stewed on the dilemma, the cheers from the children subsided into coughs. One of the little girls, a stocky thing with rather unusual lavender eyes, wobbled unsteadily on the bench and reached out to tug on Trap's sleeve. "Missus, I don't feel good," she began moments before she slumped off the bench and crashed to the floor in a motionless heap.

Chapter 35

Kora threw an impressive right hook that caught one of the elves squarely on the nose. The sickening crunch of cartilage and bone reached Anrid even over where she stood. The unfortunate fellow who caught the well-aimed fist tumbled backwards with a cry, both hands covering his face. Exhilaration momentarily erased the fear from the young goblin prince's features, but his elation was short-lived. The rest of the elvish delegation descended on him.

Anrid found herself moving before she took time to consider her course of action. She snatched at the nearest elbow and tried to pull its owner away from Kora. "Please, don't—" But the elf shook her off and dove back into the fray. Undaunted, she threw herself after him and tried to worm her way into the struggling mass of arms and legs pulling in all directions at once. "Please, don't hurt him!" she begged over the grunts and shouts.

Hands caught her around the waist and swung her around and out of harm's way. "Stay out of it!" Teague hissed in her ear moments before he threw her away from the tangle of cursing, shouting elves.

She went down on one knee and managed to catch herself against a stalagmite jutting out of the ground. Instead of doing as she'd been commanded, she struggled to her feet and once again dove toward the goblin prince.

“Kora!” she shouted, her voice rising to a shriek. “Kora!”

As Kora went down, three elves on top of him and another approaching with a rope, Anrid flung herself on top of the pile and pummeled with both fists. “Let him go! Leave him alone!” The poor fellow trapped beneath her writhed to dislodge her, but she caught fistfuls of his long dark hair and pulled mercilessly.

Movement from the other side of the tangle of arms and legs brought her eyes up, but not soon enough to avoid the hand swinging toward her face. She gasped moments before a palm streaked across her cheek, the blow so violent she spun sideways and tumbled across the ground. She rolled twice before skidding to a halt. Hot tears mingled with spackles of light and shadow, the pain so great she couldn’t see anything for several agonizing moments.

White hot rage tore through her. The Bifrost snarled and struggled to reach her, to defend her, but the magic felt far away somehow...as if she’d journeyed so far it couldn’t reach her.

Shoving up on one shaky elbow, Anrid pressed a palm to her throbbing cheek as tears dripped over her eyelids and down her knuckles. She looked up to clash eyes with Talos and felt her heart shrivel beneath the weight of his disapproval, his fury.

The tangled knot of confusion in her stomach shattered beneath the knowledge that she couldn’t go through with this. No matter what was at stake, she couldn’t allow her desire to do her duty or her desire to help cause her to bind herself to someone who hurt and abused those under his care. Duty and compassion were powerful things, but they weren’t the only things that mattered in life.

What of desire and belonging and personal conviction? Was there not a place for those things, even in this harsh world?

There had to be another way for her to help her people, to protect Dagmar, to help Jael and his people.

To save Medda.

There had to be some way without forcing her to marry Talos and put herself perpetually beneath his hand.

She launched to her feet, staggering toward him, finger shaking as fury of her own rose unbidden to her lips. “Release him at once!” she spat as her hair tumbled loose around her shoulders, torn from its bindings. Her entire body felt on fire, and she hoped she was something to behold, something to fear.

But her betrothed curled his mouth in derision and raised his hand as if he meant to backhand her yet again. She threw up an arm to block the blow as Kora bellowed, “If you lay a hand on her, I’ll gut you!” A sickening sound followed this pronouncement, wrenching a cry of pain from the goblin prince.

The fool of a prince.

“Why are you doing this?” Anrid turned her attention back to Talos, who still held his arm upraised to strike her if she drew any closer.

His scowl deepened. “You will return to your charge at once, unless you wish to be beaten and hogtied along with the stone lover.”

Kora snarled and yanked against the hands pinning him to his knees. They had him hunched forward, arms stretched to both sides. One of the younger elves yanked a fistful of his white hair to tip his head back and expose the unprotected region of his throat. His Adam’s apple bobbed as Kora swallowed, eyes locking with hers.

She saw regret, fear, resignation...and warning? He shook his head and flicked his gaze toward Medda's sling abandoned in the corner of the cavern.

Anrid took a step back, arms still raised to defend herself if needed. Talos made an approving sound in the back of his throat as he clutched the magical book to his chest. "That's a good girl." His voice caught somewhere between croon and sneer. "Perhaps there's a mark of sense in you after all. Remember your place and do as you're told."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“My place?” she echoed as a new sort of anger clawed its way up the back of her throat. What was she to him? A tool to be used and discarded until wanted? What true plans did he have for her? Why had he been so intent to retrieve her if he cared nothing for her? “Why?” She croaked the word even as she lifted her chin in stubborn defiance. “Why should I? Why should I obey you when you despise me so much—why did you even insist that we go through with this farce of a union?”

Derisive disbelief twisted his handsome but cruel features. “Dear girl, this never had anything to do with you. You’re nothing.”

Did he hold that book a little closer?

Time stood still as he raked her with a look that put her in her place, as he put it: at his feet, in his shadow, silent and voiceless.

Duty be hanged.

She’d die before she bound herself to him.

But she knew from years of working with unruly children that one had to pick their battles very carefully. So she muffled her pride and indignation with a bowed head. Silently, she turned on her heel and returned to Medda’s side.

And watched from beneath lowered lashes, waiting for the moment when the battle for her future—her own future—might finally begin.

Now that they had Kora and the book, the elves appeared in a hurry to be on their

way. Anrid ran to keep up. Ahead of her, Kora struggled as well. They had trussed him up quite cleverly, wrenching his bound hands behind the back of his head and lashing them to his belt, so that he couldn't move his arms more than a couple inches in any direction. He stumbled and fought to keep his balance as the dark elf guard shoved him onward at a faster pace.

She couldn't see Medda. They'd been separated—a deliberate move to further demoralize her, she was sure—but she hoped the girl wasn't being mistreated at the front of the procession. As the hours limped onward, she grew more and more concerned about how Medda fared. She'd just about worked up the nerve to demand a moment to check on her ward when the delegation halted in a large cavern. The chamber was so dark she couldn't see the perimeter, but she heard the rush of water somewhere close by.

A hand caught her on the shoulder and threw her to the ground beside Kora. She fell against him, catching herself on his knee. He stiffened and cursed soundly, but Anrid silenced him with a furious, “Hush!”

He studied her for a moment before returning his irate gaze to their captors. Anrid caught hold of his elbow and helped him reposition so that he sat cross-legged instead of kneeling. He leaned back against the wall, arms still pinioned over and behind his head. She drew her knees to her chest and huddled beside him.

They settled Medda on the ground a dozen yards away. Anrid's heart twisted. She turned her face into her shoulder to smother a moan she couldn't suppress. Kora hissed between his teeth but said nothing.

After half an hour, Teague approached them with a flask and plate of cold food. He handed them to Anrid and avoided meeting her gaze.

“Medda?” she whispered as she fought in vain to make him look at her.

The dark elf held a silencing hand to his lips and focused on the others behind him before muttering an almost inaudible, “Alive.” Then he left them without a backward glance.

Anrid sagged against the stone wall and squeezed her eyes shut, overwhelmed by the horror and relief. How was it possible to feel two such emotions at once without one beating down the other? They were too contrary—too at odds—and yet she felt both in equal measure.

She set herself to the only task at hand, nourishing Kora and herself. She broke the dry bread into bite sized pieces and moved to lift one to his mouth. He turned his face away.

“You eat. You need your strength,” he muttered.

She set her teeth together, hard. “You will eat as well, or I’ll stuff it down your throat by force.” He swiveled to study her, perhaps to gauge the sincerity of her threat. “You’re in no position to best me at present.”

The faintest hint of a smirk broke free of the conflicted swirl of emotions he wore so plainly.

“No talking!” one of the elves barked at them.

Anrid sealed her lips together and held up the bit of bread, raising her eyebrows to silently voice her question. Kora seemed reluctant to concede, but she guessed he had no desire to be further demoralized by force feeding. He parted his lips and grudgingly accepted whatever she fed him, although he frowned when he realized his portion of the meager fare was larger than her own.

“I’m too angry to be hungry,” she mouthed when she thought no one was watching.

A muscle in his cheek twinged, but he said nothing to that.

She suspected he felt the same.

They'd only just finished eating and drinking the water in the flask when one of the elves reclaimed the dishes and caught her by the elbow to pull her to her feet. Kora growled a warning, but the elf dropped the plate and swung a fist so hard and fast, Anrid barely had time to cry a warning. The blow caught Kora in the midsection and jarred a groan out of him.

"I'm fine!" She snatched up the discarded dishes to prove her intent to cooperate. "I'll come with you. Please. Let him be. He's a fool of a man and not worth your time."

The elf shot her a look she couldn't interpret, but he left Kora alone and prodded her across the cavern. Instead of taking her toward Medda, however, he led her a couple dozen yards away from Kora and pointed to a smooth place on the ground.

"Sleep while you can," he growled as he snatched the plate and flask from her hands.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She glanced about for some way to use this new development to her advantage. There were no weapons about, no small rocks that might serve as a substitute. They intended to have her lie down close to the perimeter of the chamber, the wall lined with towers of limestone built by centuries of dripping mineral water. There happened to be space behind the towers, however.

“Sleep!”

Anrid swiveled her attention back to him. “I need to relieve myself,” she blurted so loudly her voice echoed around the cavern and frightened some flying creature in the depths. “And I wish to sleep behind those rocks. Allow me that dignity, at the very least. I am yet unmarried and unaccustomed to sleeping in the presence of...” She swept a hand to indicate the lot of them.

The elf watching her looked over his shoulder to seek permission. Talos stared at her, unblinking, expressionless, but he offered a curt nod before returning to his own repast, which looked sizable compared to what Anrid and Kora had been offered.

Without waiting for him to change his mind, Anrid fled for the stone columns and disappeared behind them. A twinge inside reminded her she did have a pressing need to attend to.

She waited for what felt like several hours. One of the guards came to check on her after a short while, to make sure she was sleeping. She’d crawled as far down the narrow crevice behind the columns as she thought they’d allow and laid down, pretending to sleep. She blew from her mouth, hoping the gentle rise and fall of her body in steady breaths would convince them she had dozed.

Footsteps peeled away from her and she sagged in relief.

She waited much longer and listened to the quiet murmur of voices. Only once the cavern had fallen silent and remained so for a good while did she dare ease to her knees and begin to work her way deeper into the crevice, toward Kora. She hoped the gap would allow her to come out close to him. If she could sneak to him and untie his hands, he could go for help.

Rock dug into her hands and the soft places of her belly and thighs as she wiggled onward, praying against hope that it would spit her out in a useful place. At last, the ground eased upward and she caught flickering blue lights reflecting off the wall of the cavern as she bellied her way out of her hiding place. She could see the dark elves laid out around a small fire. One guard sat with his side to her, arms folded as he stared unseeing into the fire.

Exhaling a silent breath, she searched the shadows for Kora.

There, only a few yards away.

He still sat, bound, leaning against the wall. He appeared still and at ease, but there was something too tense and alert about his posture for him to be asleep. She nibbled on her lip before easing out of her hiding place and angling along the wall toward him. She took great care to remain in the shadows as best as she could. Kora's head whipped toward her before she'd crossed half the distance. He swept an anxious look toward the elves and appeared of half a mind to send her back, but she crawled stubbornly onward and eased up beside him. He said nothing but leaned forward and allowed her to claw at the thin ropes behind his wrists.

Curses—blood caked his forearms, the bindings so tight they'd cut into his flesh. Her stomach twisted as she pulled at the knots in an attempt to free him. How could she have ever imagined she would align herself with these people? Had they no mercy?

No decency?

By the time she freed Kora's wrists, her fingers ached, and she could feel cuts on her fingertips and blood caking her nails: Kora's as well as her own. The goblin prince made no sound as he flexed his hands and let the ropes fall free. Still, he remained as he was, unmoving. She caught his gaze and held it before flicking her eyes toward the tunnel they'd come through. He shook his head.

Stubborn fool.

She glared and pointed toward the tunnel. Help, she mouthed.

Another shake of the head pulled a grunt of displeasure from her. He shifted one arm to jab her collar bone with a hard finger and then point toward Medda. Understanding flooded her. She appreciated that he was loath to leave them in danger while he slipped away to safety.

But didn't he realize they couldn't come with him?

Medda needs help, she mouthed with exaggerated precision. Healer. Healer. Medda needs healer.

His brows twisted together as his nostrils flared in irritation. He didn't like it, but he had to realize she was right. As much as she might wish otherwise, Anrid and Medda couldn't go with him.

They were destined for another path, one that led onward, deeper into the unknown, deeper into danger.

A startled cry echoed through the cavern. Their heads whipped toward the campsite, where the guard had lurched to his feet and now moved toward them.

“Go!” Anrid screamed, shoving Kora hard on the shoulder. He rolled to his feet but hesitated as if torn between what he knew he should do and what he wanted to. “Go, go!”

Casting her one last anguished look, Kora sprinted toward the tunnel.

Anrid scrambled to her feet and darted to intercept the elf, to distract him in any way she could. He flung out an arm to push her away, but Anrid ducked and threw her arms around his waist, clinging to his sinewy frame. He staggered beneath their combined weight and went down on one knee. Nails dug into her shoulder and then her arms as he tried to tear her loose.

Her arms began to tremble, and she knew she couldn't hold out much longer. With her face pressed against his ribcage, she had no other means to defend herself, no means to attack. Other than her teeth. She cringed from the thought but then sank her teeth into the tender flesh covering his ribs. She got mostly fabric, but she bit hard enough to startle him. He slammed down with an elbow, hard, and caught the hollow between her neck and bruised shoulder so hard she almost blacked out. Her arms fell away. A boot caught her in the stomach. Pain exploded as she rolled and skidded down a sharp angle in the floor and up against the cavern wall. Her shaking hand splayed against the cold stone to brace herself.

Help. She pressed her forehead against the limestone wall and reached deep inside herself. She knew it was still there, her connection to the Bifrost. It surged, that tie that bound her to Agmon. The deep places of the earth groaned as the connection flared stronger.

She could almost feel the icy heat ripping through rock and limestone, through cavern and earth as the Bifrost surged to come to her. Jagged rivers of light began to tear the cavern open. Screams echoed from behind her as she pushed herself to her knees and twisted to squint toward the elves, toward Medda.

But she saw only a pair of dark boots hugging well-formed legs. Hands caught her roughly under the arms and yanked her to her feet. She stumbled to maintain her balance as he all but threw her away from the cavern wall. His hand splayed across the back of her neck and shoved her to her knees, which met the uneven ground with agonizing force. She caught herself with both palms on the ground just before she faceplanted.

Jael, where are you?

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

The thought tore through her, one last desperate plea for help.

“What did you do?” Talos demanded, still pinning her in place.

The Bifrost writhed in the back of her mind, spitting angry sparks as it clawed its way closer to her, as if trying to close the distance between them.

It was trying to help her.

She let the ghost of a smile turn her mouth as she looked up at Talos through a veil of tangled red curls. “I called for help, you clod,” she breathed without remorse.

As the Bifrost continued to writhe, he leaned so close their noses could have touched. “What did you do?” he screamed. Spittle flecked her face, but she stared into his narrowed eyes without responding.

He cursed and shoved away from her so hard she went down to her elbows and almost smashed her face against the ground. “Hold her down!”

She felt more hands on her shoulders, then her wrists, yanking them out to her side. A new sort of terror bloomed inside her. What did he intend to do? Beat her senseless? Lop off her head? Drive a blade into her heart? Something much, much worse? She panted with terror but refused to scream. There was no time for that, no energy to be spared on something so primal yet useless.

Instead, she stared up at Talos as he snatched the book from a pocket in his cloak and wrenched it open. She watched his eyes flicker as he flipped through the pages,

skimming for whatever horrible thing he wanted. The moment he found it, she knew by the pleased lift of his cruel mouth. He began to mutter words, dark and terrible words in a language she had never heard. Blue flames flickered from his fingers as he tented one hand over the pages of the book.

“What are you doing?” The words wrenched out of her unbidden. Whatever it was, if it came from that book, the one Jael deemed so dangerous... “That book isn’t safe.”

“I know.” Talos held her gaze. “And I must thank you for your part in bringing it to my attention. If it weren’t for you, or your precious goblin princes, I might never have found it.”

“What do you want with it? What are you going to do?”

The fire flickering at his fingertips burned a little brighter. “There is a world beyond ours, you know.” His voice had taken on an eager, reckless quality that frightened her more than anything else had. “And there are things in that world that can make or break kingdoms.”

“I know! It’s breaking Agmon apart, literally!”

“Better them than us.” A hateful smile touched his mouth. “It won’t be my kingdom that breaks. We’ll rise from the rubble and free ourselves from the cursed Shadewood, take our proper place in the world. Our world.”

He was mad. Truly mad.

“And this—” His gaze shifted to caress the hateful book in his hand. “—this may be the key we’ve been looking for, the way we gain true access to the shades, to their power. Until now, we’ve only seen hints of it. But this...this could change everything. I should also thank you for your sacrifice,” he continued. He stepped

toward her with the playful grace of a cat stalking a mouse. “It’s so kind of you.”

Bile rose in the back of her throat. “Sacrifice?”

“Yes, of course. This sort of magic works best with blood, you know.”

One of the elves twisted her arm, lifting the tender side of her wrist toward the ceiling. She shrieked as he whipped a blade from his belt. She saw the blood spilling from her arm before she felt the searing streak of pain. Talos continued to mutter as he kneeled beside her and positioned the book beneath her arm to catch the drops of blood.

Of her blood.

Her stomach dropped in horror. Whatever he was doing, if it required a blood sacrifice...even she with little knowledge of magic knew this was bad. Blood magic was the worst sort, the forbidden kind.

The book flared to life with a hiss and a growl that sounded like thunder beyond the mountains.

“What are you doing?” she moaned.

At last, Talos glanced her way, flashing a smile that revealed white teeth. “Calling for reinforcements.”

The thunder of the deep, unseen places surged to a roar that threatened to shake the mountains down on them.

Chapter 36

A premonition of imminent danger drove Jael through the tunnels at a run. The Bifrost yanked him along, all but screaming his name. Its power lanced through his head, down his veins, into his bones. He didn't know what was happening, but it must be something of the worst sort for the Bifrost to be calling to him in this way. He rounded a bend in the tunnel leading to the last great chamber on the far end of Agmon, the place that lay adjacent to Gelaira and ran parallel to the rivers.

His connection to Anrid had been growing stronger by the minute, her emotions reaching out to him like pleading arms.

Behind him, Rig and Math puffed for breath. They were close behind him, Rig hiked onto Math's narrow shoulders because the goblin boy couldn't keep up. True to his word, Rig had pointed them in the right direction. Jael could feel it in his bones.

He could feel her.

But something wasn't right...something was wrong. He felt that too.

There wasn't time to contemplate that now. He barreled around yet another bend, this one angling down as it neared the great cavern. Something loomed into his path, but he didn't have time to skid to a halt. Instead, he plowed into the shadowed figure and sent them both skidding across the cavern floor. He rolled and got his feet under him again, head whirling.

A muttered curse greeted his ears as he held his runestone aloft to light the tunnel.

Kora gaped back, one hand pressed against the side of his head. Blood coated his arms and splattered the tunic pulled taut over his shoulders. "What'd you go and do that for?"

Jael didn't think. He lunged and caught a fistful of that bloody tunic and shook his brother hard enough to dislodge every last one of his lying, scheming teeth.

"You imbecile!" He shook Kora again, disappointed when none of his teeth popped out of his mouth. "What have you done?"

Kora grabbed his clenched fists and tried to shove him off. Guilt and anger battled for possession of his expression as he struggled to free himself. "You can thrash me later. There isn't time—"

"I'll thrash you now, you lying piece of rot."

“There isn’t—” Whatever Kora intended to say broke off as the earth bucked beneath them, so violently it flung them both into the side of the tunnel wall. They slumped to the ground, but the shaking of the ground only escalated. A low, horrible laugh rolled over his awareness. But when Kora spun to look behind him, yelling, “What was that?” Jael realized the horrible truth.

Kora could hear the laughter too.

It continued to roll over them, in sickening peels of fiendish pleasure. Taunting them. Goading them. Daring them.

Jael released his hold on his brother and took a single step toward the darkness, toward the creature that beckoned him with horrible laughs. But Kora caught his forearm and held him fast. “What have you done?” Jael rasped.

Kora had no answer. He stood frozen, his skin a ghastly pallor beneath the dried blood, expression frozen in confused horror.

Jael heard a scream as familiar to him as the pulse that thundered in his own ears. With that, he needed no further encouragement, but shook off Kora’s restraining hand and forced his legs into a run. His sore feet skidded around the last bend and down the incline into the cavern. Blue flames flickered against the darkness that felt much too deep, much too intense, much too dark. It only took Jael a moment to understand why.

Shadows raced around the cavern, incorporeal beings caught somewhere between life and death. He could almost make out the shape of a body here, a face there, a hand stretching out as if to grasp...

His chest constricted when he saw Anrid bound on the floor. She had been forced to her knees, her arms stretched out in both directions. The two elves holding her in

place ducked and gaped at the shadowy forms swirling around them. Beyond them, facing Jael, Talos held a book—the book—but his focus too had been captured by the beings circling the cavern.

He took a step forward but hot, white light drove him backward as a crevasse tore open the floor between him and the others. Jagged cracks splintered away from this large wound in the floor, racing across the cavern and splitting open rock and stone and crawling up the walls with a cracking hiss. Jael ground his teeth together, backed up two paces, and then took a running leap over the crack in the Bifrost. The light caught and lifted him higher, helping him clear the wide gash in the floor. He hit hard and rolled to his feet just before a dark elf dashed toward him. Jael threw up an arm to block the dagger flashing toward him, glinting in blue Gelarian flame and white Bifrost light. But at the last moment, one of the shadows dove toward them. The dark elf inadvertently threw himself into the creature's path.

His scream echoed as the creature tore him from the ground, but his shout was cut short as the shadow consumed him. There was no other word for it. One minute the elf hung suspended in the air, the next he vanished beneath the weight of the shadow holding him aloft. Then he was gone.

Jael snatched at his pockets, searching for a spare runestone. When he couldn't find one, he used the light stone he held. His fingers shook as he wiped the light rune from the stone with his sleeve and then traced a warding rune: a single line with a second arcing line above it. Purple light exploded from his clenched fist as he held the runestone high. Two more shadows recoiled from it, screaming.

Another dark elf had been sprinting toward Jael, but he'd skidded to a halt when his companion was torn away and devoured. Jael recognized the older elf's face as he turned round, haunted eyes toward Jael. Teague took a step backward as another shadow dove toward them. Jael stumbled forward to cast the lavender glow of the runestone over Teague's body. The shadow bounced off the rune-summoned barrier.

Teague met and held his gaze in an unspoken expression of gratitude. Then he drew his knife and pointed back the way he'd come.

“He’s using the book!” Teague shouted.

Jael needed no encouragement. He pounded after the dark elf, toward the campsite at the center of the cavern, toward Anrid. Blood ran down her arm and dripped to the ground.

She still kneeled, held fast by one dark elf—the other degenerate had released her to fight off the shadows by hurling blue fireballs into the air around them. The fire slowed the shadows down, but it hadn’t driven them off. Screaming obscenities in a dark language Jael didn’t understand, they coalesced to form a cloud above the campsite.

Jael and Teague broke into the circle of light cast by the blue fire smoldering in the stone fire ring. Lavender light clashed with blue and with the jagged arcs of white light from the cracks in the Bifrost. Jael braced himself as a shadow dove toward him. He felt the runestone recoil from the impact as it drew power from him in order to sustain itself. He gave willingly. He felt bits of himself being pulled in all directions as the Bifrost took everything he had to offer, and then some.

He was only feet away from Anrid. She looked up as he approached, her face deathly pale and streaked with tears. When she saw him coming, she curled her free hand into a fist and swung it toward her captor, beating at his thigh until he shoved her away from him. The moment of distraction served its purpose. Anrid’s scream reverberated through the room as a shadow caught hold of the dark elf by his shoulders and dragged him, kicking and shouting, into the writhing mass of shadows above.

Anrid managed to get to her feet as Jael skidded to a halt beside her. He didn’t ask how she was, didn’t ask if she needed help. He caught her around the waist and

crushed her against him, inhaling the garden-fresh scent of her red curls. She said nothing but buried her face against his chest, fingers weakly clinging to the lapels of his robe as if they didn't have the energy to do even that.

“Medda.” She gasped the word into his robes. He ignored her, instead grabbing for her arm to investigate her injury. The cut on her wrist wasn't deep enough to cause any permanent damage, he hoped, but it bled too freely. He ripped his cloth belt from around his robes and used it to tightly bind her wound. She hissed and rocked with pain when he knotted the belt tightly.

Only then did he search the cavern for sign of the goblin child. Had the shadows gotten to her? Why had he not thought to look for her sooner? He hadn't realized how much the tiny goblin child meant to him, how much her toothy grin had wormed its way into his heart...

He bellowed the child's name.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Math tore past him, with Rig still high on his back. The young apprentice held a runestone high that cast its own feeble dome of amethyst light.

“There! She’s there!” Rig screamed and pointed toward a cropping of jagged stalagmites. “Medda! Sissy!”

Shadows converged on the place, as if they’d only just noticed the child, too. Math sprinted toward the sling just visible behind the outcropping. Moments before the shadows descended, the circle of the dome spread over Medda and the sling. The shadows smashed off the barrier and the force of it drove Math to his knees. Rig tumbled from his back, scrambling on all fours to get to Medda while Math gripped his runestone and held it higher.

Rig pulled his sister onto his lap and hugged her, sobbing.

“Stop him,” Anrid gasped weakly. “You need to—stop him.”

Jael returned his focus to Talos, who still held his hand tented above the nameless tome, mouth twisted in shock. Had he not known what messing with that book could do?

“What are you doing?” Jael’s voice echoed over the cruel laughter of the shadows testing the strength of the two domes.

Talos worked his mouth, but no words came.

“What are you doing?” Jael repeated the question. “You need to stop this. Now!”

You can't stop us. We are forever. Unstoppable. Unquenchable. Unsatiated.

Chilling laughter echoed in Jael's bones. Even the dark elf flinched away from the terror he had unleashed. Had he thought he could control them?

Talos seemed to regather his courage as the voices reverberated around them. His mouth set in a forbidding line as his brows twisted and lowered over his hard eyes. "I am doing what I need to do for my people." He spat the words at Jael, as if he were to blame for whatever woes plagued the dark elves. "The shades will return Gelaira to its glory."

Anrid twisted in Jael's arms so that she could see her betrothed. "But you're putting the rest of Rhuin in danger! Don't you see that? These shadows—these shades—they're ripping Agmon apart!"

His gaze flitted over her as if she were of little importance. "The unworthy always fall."

Your fall is inevitable. The shades' laughter rose to ear-splitting shrieks. Inevitable. Inevitable...

The word rolled over and over in crushing waves that threatened to pop his eardrums.

Teague moved into Jael's peripherals. He'd been so quiet; Jael had forgotten he was even there. The older elf took one more step toward his leader. "But they're killing our own people!" he protested. "Talos, they're killing us." He waved a hand as if to indicate the others that were no longer present...the dark elves that had been lost.

Talos stared back at him, unflinching and unrelenting. "The unworthy will fall," he repeated coldly, clinging to his foolish sentiment. "Those that remain will be stronger for it."

At this, the shades dove toward them with renewed intensity and smashed against the fragile barrier cast by the light of Jael's runestone. He buckled beneath the staggering power of the attack. The rune tore more strength from him, from the Bifrost, as it fought to maintain the shield. Anrid cried out and sagged against him, as if her strength was also torn from her to maintain the spell.

Talos lifted his hand, the one tented over the book. As he twirled his palm toward the ceiling, violent blue flames erupted around his hand and formed a fireball. Jael opened his mouth to order him to stop, but with a mere flick of his wrist, Talos flung the fireball toward them.

Jael only had time to twist his body to shield Anrid, to brace for the impact.

Only it never came.

Kora sprinted around him and threw his own body into the path of the projectile.

Chapter 37

Anrid screamed when Kora recoiled, collapsing after the fireball caught him on the chest and ignited with a roar.

A bellow reverberated in Jael's torso as he pushed her away and dove toward Talos before he could summon another magical attack. The amethyst light from the runestone flickered off the cavern ceiling and walls in erratic motions, the way a spinning prism might catch the sunlight .

Wicked laughter attacked her on all sides. She struggled to ignore it and dropped to her knees beside a stunned Kora, who laid spread-eagle with blue flames licking at the front of his rumpled and torn tunic. Panic froze her in place.

You can't save him, the shades hissed into her ear. You can't save any of them.

She believed them.

The words invoked a despair in her unlike anything she'd ever known. They tore open a pit inside that could swallow and drown her in its depths.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She could so easily succumb to it.

But something kept her from plunging into the abyss. Faces flickered in her memory. Treasured moments in time. Medda snuggling with her in bed. Rig as he wrapped his arms around her waist. Kora's feckless grin. And Jael.

That moment in her bedchamber when he'd kissed her to chase away the shades, to tear her from their dark hold. She could almost feel his mouth against hers once more, his heart beating in tune with hers as if an invisible thread bound them together, something that went beyond the rune bonding, beyond the Bifrost. Something deeper and more precious.

Anrid clung to that memory and tore herself from the darkness as it tried to swallow her. She wouldn't give up on him, or on any of them. She would fight to her last breath to save them if she could.

She gasped for a stabilizing breath and ripped the apron from her shoulders, the string of beads snapping and pinging across the floor. After she wadded her hands in the fabric, she beat at Kora's chest to extinguish the flames. The heat nipped at her fingers, at her exposed wrists, but she ignored the growing discomfort.

He recovered his wits and rolled onto his stomach with a yelp, to smother the flames she hadn't been able to touch. She caught him by the arm and helped him to his knees, but he didn't say anything to her or acknowledge that she'd kept him from turning into a goblin torch. Instead, he scrambled to his feet and sprinted toward Jael and Talos. The goblin prince and the dark elf were deadlocked, Talos trying to hang onto his book, Jael to his runestone, as they pushed and shoved with their free hands.

Kora stumbled into the fighting pair, knocking all three of them to the ground. Anrid took a step forward as the book flew from Talos's grasp and skidded across the floor of the cavern. But it came to rest against Teague's boots. The dark elf stared down at the book, as if stunned.

"Get the book!" Jael shouted as he grappled with Talos alongside Kora. They barely had him contained, the dark elf screaming obscenities as he ripped one arm from Kora's grasp. "Anrid, get the book!"

She took two steps but wasn't fast enough. Teague stooped to snatch up the forbidden volume and cradled it in his weathered hands. He looked entranced by it, held captive, even.

She skidded to a stop mere feet away, heart in her throat. "Teague..." She put a bit of warning into her voice but didn't know how to convince him to give up his prize. She held out a trembling hand as the shades howled all around them and battered against the protective barriers with renewed determination. "I need that, please."

Teague met her gaze then, something torn in his expression. Was he trying to choose between doing what his people wanted him to do and what he thought might be the right thing? She hoped so.

Skadi's frost, she hoped so.

"Teague, please give me the book." She let the words fall from her lips as gently as she could and offered a compassionate smile, only for him. "If you wish to save your family...your people...you cannot keep that book. It isn't the way. Please. You need to let it go."

The look in his eyes shifted then, over the space of one blink. The tension in his face eased, and he closed the book and held it out to her, willingly.

She grasped the weathered cover with both hands and curled her fingers around the spine. It felt...heavy. A buckling sort of heaviness, as if she held the entire universe in her hands.

Her lungs failed her, chest tightening as her knees weakened and gave out. She collapsed into a seated position on the ground as darkness encroached from the corners of her vision, squeezing the light into a pinpoint.

What an inconvenient time to faint.

“Hold those!” Jael shouted from the shadows. “You! Keep him down! Hurry!”

An eternity of moments passed before strong hands caught hold of her elbows. Gentle fingers ran down her arms, across the backs of her hands and pried the book from her grip. “Let it go, Anrid. I’ve got it.”

She let him take it. The darkness receded, but it didn’t want to release her. She blinked and fought to focus on Jael where he kneeled in front of her, so close their knees touched. He held the book open in front of him, but his eyes were on her.

The last of the shadows vanished from her sight, and the screams of the shades seemed to fade away as she thought of Jael, and only Jael.

“I don’t know how to send them back,” he rasped. A pained expression twisted his face, one filled with hopelessness and regret.

“Yes, you do. We’ll do it together: you, me, and the Bifrost.” She braved a smile for his sake and positioned herself more securely on her knees. “We’ve done it before.”

His eyes fluttered closed, lashes brushing his pale cheeks before he opened his eyes again. “Not like this. There’s too many of them. I don’t want to hurt you. Or the

children. We're all bound to this now, Anrid. You and me and the children."

Somehow, she knew that.

She could risk her own life without a thought. But the children...she glanced toward Rig and Medda. The boy held his sister tight to his chest, cowering beneath the fading light of Math's runestone. The apprentice appeared about to collapse from the strain.

"Use me." Kora's voice echoed toward them, low and grating. They looked at him as one. Kora kneeled on the ground, his knee pressed into the small of Talos's back as he and Teague held him down. The elf still would not concede defeat, uttering curses that made Anrid's toes curl. "I got us into this mess. Bind me to that blasted book, as well. The more the merrier."

"And me!" Math called, smile weak and forced.

"Me as well." Teague looked from Jael, to Anrid, and back to Jael. "It's our fault this has happened. I need to help fix it."

Talos bucked and screamed in dark elvish, dark words that could only be curses.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

Anrid hesitated and then reached out to brush her fingers on the side of Jael's hand. Did he shiver beneath her touch? His eyes met and clung to hers. She saw his desperation and longing and wished more than anything she could tell him how much she cared, that she would die for him...that she would stay with him forever, if he asked her.

But there wasn't time for sentiment. Only action.

"Do it." She gave him a stern look, the kind she reserved for the naughtiest of children. "Let's end this. All of us. Together."

He leaned a hair closer, his breath teasing her face and stirring her loose bangs against her cheeks. "I—I don't want to hurt you." The agony in his expression made her heart ache unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

She wanted to weep, but instead she smiled and grasped both of his hands, clinging to him as he clung to the book that could save or end their lives.

That could save or end the world as they knew it.

"I know," she said simply. "But you won't. Not if we do this together. I won't leave you, Jael."

I'll never leave you.

Perhaps he understood the words she didn't have the courage to utter, for a hint of a smile touched his mouth before he lowered his gaze to the book and steeled himself

for the task at hand.

It was time to end this madness, no matter what it cost.

Chapter 38

His hands shook as he traced the new bonding rune. The Bifrost knew what he wanted to do: she pulsed her approval, her urgency. Glowing white runes formed in the cavern, encircling each of them. The runes around him and Anrid glowed brighter, their souls previously bonded to the magic. But with each passing moment, the others' runes burned a little brighter as the bonding took root.

“Rig, no!” Anrid’s hoarse cry tore his focus away from the book and the magic and the strain it required to maintain it.

A circular rune had appeared around Rig and Medda, faint and luminescent.

“I want to help!” he cried.

Jael’s hands shook as he tried to remove the rune forming against his will. The Bifrost fought with him. He’s willing. He’s willing. Need him...need him...need him...

“Jael, do something!” Anrid clenched his hands tighter and dug her nails into his skin.

He ground his teeth together, shaking from the effort. “I—I can’t. The Bifrost has already bonded to him, and she won’t let him go.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, but she didn’t argue again.

The shades pounded against the fracturing barrier above them, as if they knew their

time was running out. They screamed in his ears, drowning out the whispers of the Bifrost. He tried to ignore them, but they spoke such vile things...dark words that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The runes flared more brightly as the bonding took full root. The Bifrost hummed with renewed energy and fed more power into the runestones maintaining their protective domes. Hope stirred inside him, and he waited to see if it would be enough to drive the shades back to their hellish realm.

But the cavern continued to shake, the ground bucking beneath his knees. Light shuddered from the Bifrost, erratically, as if it still struggled to grasp its full strength.

Not enough...it's not enough...

A groan of dismay tore past his lips. "It's not working!" he cried over the tumult. Anrid leaned closer to him, so close he could have tipped his head to kiss her. "It's not enough!"

Her eyes held his, refracting the white and amethyst lights swirling around them. "Can you expand the spell?"

"What do you mean? There's no one else here."

She pursed her lips and leaned even closer. "Maybe it takes a kingdom to save a kingdom!" She had to shout to be heard over the screaming of the shades. "Can you spread the spell to the rest of Agmon?"

"No!" Horror twisted his gut at the mere thought. It was his job to protect Agmon, his calling, his purpose. He couldn't bring the rest of the kingdom into his mess. "I can't bind them without their consent! That would be—wrong! So wrong!"

She flinched but didn't argue more, as if she understood.

There had to be another way, but no matter how hard he thought, he couldn't think of one. His body grew weaker, his fingers numb and head light. He couldn't do this. There had to be another way...

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

I will ask. I will ask them.

The Bifrost whispered to his soul, flooding his senses with warmth and compassion, as if she too understood his struggle. That dying hope flickered one last time.

“You don’t have to do this alone! Let them help us!” Anrid must have heard the Bifrost’s plan as well, and she approved of it.

The weight of the decision threatened to break him. He’d always tried to do his duty without needing help, to carry his own weight, to do what was required of him. But he wasn’t enough. Not now. Would it be wrong to ask for help? To let them help?

Anrid’s tear-filled eyes whispered the words she didn’t say. She approved of the plan. She wanted him to ask for the help of his people. And if they were indeed willing...it would be nothing short of pride for him to refuse.

“All right,” he breathed.

The Bifrost threw herself outward, the strain pulling him thinner and thinner as if he too were being spread throughout all of Agmon. Anrid and the others cried out, their bodies stiffening and arching from the strain.

Help us, help us, help us...

The Bifrost’s plea tore throughout the entire kingdom as it sought for anyone willing to come to their aid. Jael felt thousands of voices crying out in fear, with questions he could not answer. Help us...

There was only need.

And companionship.

Anrid's hands clung to his even as she grew weaker from the strain: she was softness and fire rolled into one beautiful, burning presence. He sensed Kora close by, his energy sharp and feverish. Math, a bright and youthful warmth. Teague, his glow more subtle, more mature. And little Rig, as bright as a new runestone flaring to life for the first time.

Then, there were others. Other lights. Other glows. Other thoughts. They flooded the Bifrost, slowly at first but with growing numbers.

The shades threw themselves into one, last desperate attack. Math screamed a warning as the runestones began to fail. The purple barrier cracked, and darkness leaked through. Several shades broke through the barrier, hissing and screaming.

Icy, hot white light tore through the cavern, and he lost his hold on consciousness.

When he came to, he lay in a familiar place. The heart of the Bifrost pulsed, surrounding him with rose, amethyst, teal, and green hues. There were ambers and muted oranges, all connected by the wispy, white threads of the Bifrost.

He rose to his feet. He wasn't alone; Anrid sat nearby, her auburn hair cascading around her like a cloak. Kora stood a few feet away, hands on his hips as he surveyed their surroundings. Math and Teague and Rig...they were all there.

And there were others, peeling out of the rainbow of colors, hundreds of souls—no, thousands of souls. Had all of Agmon answered his call for aid?

A singularly familiar form peeled out of a golden smear of light. He was tall and

broad, with dark hair graying at the temples and slanted eyebrows. King Ereb stepped closer to him. Two other forms followed on his heels—Eris and their mother, Queen Nyx.

He braced himself for chastisement.

King Ereb clasped his shoulder in a firm hand. “Was it enough?” he asked, his voice low and intended for Jael’s ears alone.

Jael blinked and studied his father, searching those deep-set, piercing eyes for answers. He found no condemnation...only concern.

He exhaled, long and deep. “I think so,” he managed at last, relief blooming in his gut. “The Bifrost feels at peace. I’m not sensing the shadows anymore.”

“So this—bonding—has driven them away?”

Jael searched inside himself, inside his connection with the Bifrost. He could find no trace of danger, no gaping cracks to the world beyond trying to grasp entry through the Bifrost. “I think so,” he whispered. “I cannot say where they’ve gone, but they’re gone. If they’re still lurking in Gelaira, the elves can deal with them. It’s their problem now. We owe them nothing.”

King Ereb’s eyes flickered close, but then they snapped open as a pleased smile touched his mouth. “I can’t say I disagree with you, all things considered. The matter will require...more insight. Well done. For a moment there...”

“I know.” He had thought they’d reached the end, too.

Jael thought this would be the end of it, but his father hesitated, his right hand twitching as if he wished to reach for Jael, but held himself back. “I fear—I fear I

owe you an apology. I should never have put this on you. This was far bigger than one person. I shouldn't have asked you to deal with Kora instead of owning my own responsibility. I have no excuse."

Queen Nyx cleared her throat.

The king shot her a mildly annoyed but wry look. "No excuse other than I was exasperated and at my wit's end. I'm sorry, Jael."

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

The words alone appeared to lift the weight from his shoulders just a little.

Queen Nyx wrapped him in a hug and planted a warm kiss on his jaw. “I’m so glad you’re all right.” She was a pretty goblin, smaller than most, but sturdy and built for hard work. A gift she embraced with her whole heart. Nyx could frequently be found in the kitchens working alongside the servants or in the gardens harvesting produce with the farmers.

“You don’t usually operate with such...dramatical flare,” Eris inserted as he stepped into their circle. His eyes sparked with humor. “I’m impressed. Although I’m not entirely sure what we’ve gotten ourselves into.” He glanced around, a touch of concern wrinkling his brow. “Are we dead?”

Jael barked a laugh. “Stones, no. This is temporary and will fade once the Bifrost is satisfied with the binding.”

Eris appeared relieved and chuckled ruefully. “That’s good to know. What does all this mean though? What now?”

Silence stretched between them. No one answered him, because no one possessed the answer to the question. This was uncharted territory. A whole new world.

“I suppose we will find out,” Jael said as he became aware of how tired he was.

King Erebus gripped his shoulder and squeezed. “Together.”

Queen Nyx pulled away from Jael with a final pat on his arm. Her gaze swept around

the heart of the Bifrost, as if searching. “Kora! There you are!”

For the first time, Jael realized that their youngest brother stood apart from the family. His body betrayed tension, hands clenched at his sides, head turned so that no one could look him in the eye. A flicker of anger tore through Jael.

“He has a great deal of explaining to do.”

The others started at his cold tone.

“I see.” King Erebus’s voice filled with disappointment.

Queen Nyx uttered an exasperated sigh. “Really, Kora. What have you done this time?”

But Kora wouldn’t answer, his shoulder to them as if it might protect him from their wrath and disappointment. Jael parted his lips to tell all his brother’s recent indiscretions, but a gentle hand settled on his forearm and squeezed. Anrid stepped alongside him, eyes round and filled with questions.

“And who is this?” Nyx’s voice filled with curiosity, and something else Jael couldn’t quite pinpoint. She studied Anrid with extreme interest.

Jael laid his hand over the one Anrid had placed on his arm. “Oh, Mother, I’d like you meet Anrid. She is...well...we’ve collected a rather hefty number of orphans at Imenborg and she takes charge of them. Erm, their governess, I suppose you might say.”

It seemed so inadequate when she was so much more than a governess. She’d done Agmon a service they could never repay. She’d done something to him he would never forget. His heart yearned to tell her how he felt, but he feared his words would

not be welcomed.

She'd never expressed any desire to stay in Agmon.

Nyx hummed. "I see. Orphans, you say? I'd love to hear more about that eventually, but for now: it's a pleasure to meet you, Anrid."

Anrid dipped a curtsy. "And you, your majesty."

Nyx laughed. "Oh, none of that. We are to be friends, you and I, are we not?" She cast a gleaming look toward Jael. Heat filled his cheeks and went straight to the tips of his ears.

The king cleared his throat, arms crossed over his chest. "Well, I should like you to report to Elysium when this is all over, to give me a full update. Bring the orphans and their keeper with you, and we can find a place for them."

A stone settled in the pit of Jael's stomach. "Oh, but—"

"Thank you for the invitation," Anrid said at the same time. "I'd be honored to visit your city. I've heard much about it." She avoided looking at him, and yet she hadn't pulled her hand away from his touch. It burned like fire beneath his palm.

He pulled away, steeling his heart for the disappointment it must endure. "There are matters I should attend to first," he said. He sounded curt and cool, but he knew no other way to mask his emotions.

Anrid flinched and stepped away from him, locking her hands behind her back.

"Talos." Kora breathed the name as if it were a curse.

Jael's pulse leaped to a gallop. He'd forgotten all about him: how could he have neglected to make sure the elf was in hand? "Rock and bone!" He spun in a circle, but of course there was no sign of the dark elf here in the heart of the Bifrost. "I need to go back. Bifrost, send me back!"

Lights and color swirled as the magic released him from her hold and returned him to reality.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

He woke in the cavern, the hard stone floor against his aching back. All was quiet. He studied the ceiling above him, searching for signs of the shades, but they appeared to have been banished once again. With a groan, he pushed himself up by one elbow. Anrid lay crumpled beside him, hair spilled across the floor. The others were spread out further away, still unconscious.

And Talos—

He searched the dark recesses of the cavern, but there was no sign of the dark elf. He'd escaped.

Jael shifted to support himself better. His hand met an unfamiliar object on the floor, something that felt warm and dusty and rather like paper. A pile of ashes scattered around his hand. Frowning, he lifted his hand and shook off the ash.

It was the nameless tome, he realized. The pages had been burnt and the cover charred, so that only ashes and a few fragments of the leather binding remained. Had the strength of the binding spell been so great it destroyed the book in the process? Or had that been the work of the Bifrost?

The magic thrummed in the back of his mind to confirm.

Well, then. At least they wouldn't have to worry about any other traitorous wretches getting their hands on the stone-eaten book.

The others began to stir, one by one. Kora sat up first, groaning as if he'd been beaten senseless. His shirt hung open in the front, burnt and torn beyond repair. Beneath the

scraps of fabric, Jael glimpsed fiery red skin where his brother's flesh had been burnt as well.

"The children!" Anrid's moan refocused his attention. She'd clambered to her knees and was crawling across the floor on all fours to get to the two small heaps by the limestone crags.

"Uh-NEE?" Rig whispered.

"I'm here, love. I'm here."

Jael stumbled toward them, relieved to hear the boy's voice. He'd been so worried the strain of bonding with the Bifrost would be too much for him.

Anrid had her arms around both children and was trying to lean over Rig's shoulder to check on his sister. The tiny goblin child lay motionless, her body as still as stone.

A cold, heartless emotion tore through his veins. "Medda," he rasped.

Anrid clutched at the child's tunic, frantically. "Jael! I—I don't think she's breathing!"

Chapter 39

Anrid blinked back tears as Jael kneeled beside her and reached for Medda. His large hands pulled her toward him, gently, out of Anrid's shaking hands. He laid the goblin girl on the floor and pressed his fingers to her frail throat. Time stood still as they waited.

His shoulders sagged. "There's a pulse, but it's faint."

She's not dead...she's not dead...Anrid burst into tears. "We need to help her...before...before..." Sobs punctuated her words.

Jael gripped her shoulder with a firm hand but offered no words of comfort. Footsteps approached moments before Teague crouched beside them. His expression, while grave, offered a hint of hope. "I can still get her to the healer in Nestra."

Anrid lifted her face and clung to this slim hope. They still had time. If they could get her out of Agmon and into Gelaira as quickly as possible...

Jael tucked his chin to his chest. "I cannot take her." He murmured the words as if speaking them filled him with regret. "My father has summoned us to Elysium. And I dare not leave Agmon...until we know for sure how things...how things stand with the Bifrost." He met Anrid's gaze at last. "And there is another matter to consider. The children—they're bound to you, Anrid. When you left, they all became sick. Math and I suspect it's because they've bonded themselves to you. We need to get back to Imenborg to check—to make sure—"

She pressed a fist against her mouth. "I didn't know." She squeezed her eyes shut against the horrible thought that her actions had hurt the children she loved so much.

His hand tightened around her shoulder. "You're not to blame. None of us could have known."

"But—what about Medda? If she's bound to me as well..."

Jael said nothing, appearing distressed.

Rig stirred in her arms. "I'll take care of her." He spoke with solemn conviction. "I always take care of her."

Anrid kissed the top of his head. “I know you do, love. I know you do. And you do it very well. But this is something else, something more serious.”

The goblin boy shook his head, stubborn. “I think I can keep her strong enough until we find the doctor. She’s my sister. I can keep her strong.”

Anrid’s hand stilled on the boy’s shoulder as she considered what he had said, what he meant.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“It makes sense,” Jael said slowly, “that Rig is also bound to Medda. They’re very close. He could be speaking the truth. I think he understands, Anrid, and he’s telling you they will be okay. You need to trust him. You can’t fix everything by yourself. I know you want to help, that you can’t stand the thought of not doing something—” Here his expression turned mildly reproachful. “—but sometimes the best thing to do is to not interfere and trust others to do the right thing.”

When had he come to know her so well? Her lips trembled, and she pursed them. “But I can’t just let them go alone! Jael, I have to go with them. I have to—”

He squeezed her shoulder, his fingers digging into her skin. “Dear girl, I won’t send them away by themselves! I need you to trust me, and Rig. He wouldn’t suggest this if he didn’t think he could take care of his sister.”

“But—”

He leaned closer, so that they were eye level, face so close she could have leaned forward and touched their noses together. “Trust me,” he whispered. “Please, Anrid.”

She didn’t want to give in; it felt like betraying the children to give in to this plan. But Jael had made solid points. She did jump into things recklessly because she wanted to help. And, yes, this had gotten her into a lot of trouble. It all began that day when she marched into the forest and left behind the caravan. She didn’t blame Rig at all for using magic on her...even if he had not bespelled her, she knew in her heart she would have searched for him.

She hugged him tighter and battled to calm the beating of her heart, to force her

emotions to see reason. She couldn't forget about the other children waiting back at Imenborg...had recent events eased the strain on their bodies? Or made it worse?

"But who will go with Rig and Medda?" she whispered around barely contained tears.

His eyes rolled closed, as though expressing intense relief. Then he rose to his feet and pulled his hand from her shoulder. A rush of cold followed the absence of his touch that left a hollow pit in her stomach.

"Kora!" He snapped the words as if it were a blade in his mouth.

Kora stiffened as though expecting a blow.

Anrid held her breath, wondering what harsh words Jael would throw at his younger brother. She wanted to beg him to temper judgment with compassion, but Kora had put them all in grave danger. What he had done was forgivable...but grave. Very grave. So she held her tongue and said nothing.

This was a matter to be settled between brothers.

"You will take the children to Nestra." His jaw clenched, and he searched for words. "Consider this part of your penance. You have much to set right. I don't know what punishment Father will see fit when he hears of your betrayal, but consider this my punishment. You're to bring the children to Nestra and remain there."

Kora flinched beneath the gravity in Jael's tone. "I understand," he said, pained. "But...how long shall we stay there?"

"Until Father summons you home!" Jael barked the words, fists clenching at his side. "Until then, you're not welcome in Agmon."

Anrid gasped, horrified on Kora's behalf, that he should suffer such banishment. Horrified for Jael, that he must cast such a sentence on his brother. "Jael, is that necessary?" she whispered.

"Yes." The word was bitter, unyielding, and allowed for no further discussion.

Something in Kora seemed to snap. He took a sudden step forward, hands clenched at his sides. "I was trying to help!"

For a moment, even Jael had nothing to say.

"What were you thinking, Kora?" he demanded, as if collecting himself. "What you did wasn't helping. You put people in danger. You got people killed."

Kora lifted his chin, his handsome mouth set in a forbidding line that made him appear older, harder. "You wouldn't tell me anything. You treated me like a child that couldn't handle anything, like you didn't want me to be here. Everyone wants me to just do what I'm told and not think or act for myself. I had to put the pieces together on my own. I learned from Rig that you were playing with that forbidden book, Jael, and it scared me. It scared me for you, and for our people. But you wouldn't talk to me, so I had to figure out what you were doing on my own."

"But why did you give the stone eaten book to the elves?" Jael's voice developed a raw edge, as if Kora might indeed be getting to him. Was he beginning to suspect he may have treated his brother unfairly? That perhaps he held partial blame in all this?

"Because they wouldn't have come if I hadn't promised them the book!"

Silence answered Kora's angry declaration. He clenched and flexed his hands as if trying to get control of himself. When he continued, his voice was barely a whisper. "They wouldn't have come, Jael. They wouldn't have helped. I already had the

book—I take full blame for tricking Rig into stealing it for me—and with Anrid leaving and the Bifrost growing more unstable, I knew we needed their help. I made a judgment call, one I knew you wouldn't be able to make. You would never have agreed to giving them the book.”

“For good reason! Look what Talos did with it. He nearly killed us all!”

Kora flinched and turned away as if Jael had struck him. “I—I see that now. I didn't realize he had no intention of helping us. I thought we could manipulate this to our advantage. And if I had to go and steal the stone-eaten book back, I would have. I just—I just—”

“Tried to help,” Anrid whispered. She caught Jael's eye and held it. He appeared stiff and uncomfortable, as if he didn't want to hear what she had to say. “He just tried to help, Jael. I'm not saying what he did was right, but please see that he was trying to help. Like me. And all the trouble I got us into by trying to help when I shouldn't have. I'm no better than Kora and should share an equal measure of blame. We all share blame in what happened.”

Jael winced then, as her words struck home. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I will agree with that,” he murmured, briefly meeting her gaze and then Kora's. “I will admit I didn't do right, either. I was careless with the book, and I shouldn't have treated you so badly. I know you're unhappy, Kora. I know it. And I'm sorry I didn't care more. But what you did...it's not my place to pronounce final judgment.”

Anrid held her breath, waiting for his final word.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

“My decision stands,” he whispered. “You’re to go to Nestra with the children and remain there until Father summons you. He will decide your future.”

She cast her gaze toward Kora, who had staggered backward, as if he’d been delivered a physical blow. His mouth worked soundlessly, but in the end, he clamped it shut and said nothing. He accepted Jael’s decision in silence. She ached to imagine what he must be experiencing in that moment, what pain he held inside and kept to himself.

Couldn’t Jael have shown mercy? To his own brother?

But when she studied Jael’s face, she saw something in his eyes that made her want to weep. He was in pain, deep pain that he probably couldn’t have spoken to them about if his life depended on it.

Perhaps this decision was him showing mercy.

Teague led them to a boat that had been tethered a short distance away, where the River Styx flowed through a tunnel next to the great cavern. It was a small but sturdy boat with intricate carvings she wished she had time to examine.

Math helped Anrid settle Medda in the boat’s bottom, layered beneath blankets. The boat shifted as the runekeeper climbed out. Anrid pressed her lips to the sweet child’s forehead. “Come home to us, little one,” she whispered, brokenly.

Then she reached out both arms to catch Rig as Kora lowered him into the boat. He climbed in after the boy and took his place at the oars. Teague would steer the rudder,

since he knew their destination.

“How long until you can reach the city?” Jael asked Teague. Math moved to stand beside him, looking thin and weary.

“A day at most. We will get her there in time, if it is at all possible. I promise.” The dark elf’s expression turned very grave. “I know my word means very little, with the evil my people have done to yours, but I swear to do this thing for you.”

Anrid turned her face away, feeling as if she were eavesdropping on a private conversation she shouldn’t be privy to. She wasn’t a goblin nor a dark elf. What had happened these last few days went beyond her. Where did she belong now? Her betrothed ran off without her, not that she would have gone with him after this. What fate lay ahead for her? Would they find her another husband? Would she return to Haldor in disgrace? Be forced to watch Dagmar be taken instead?

She shook off the fears for herself and kissed Rig on the cheek. “Be good and take care of your sister,” she ordered with a smile.

“I will, Uh-NEE.” He hugged her, then, like he thought he would never see her again. “I wish you could come with us.”

Her heart twisted. “I know, love. I wish that too. But I need to go take care of the other children. They need me too. And you’re big and strong and brave. And you have Prince Kora to take care of you.” She rested her chin on the top of Rig’s tangled hair and focused on Kora. “You will take care of them. Won’t you?”

He flinched, as if wounded by the doubt in her voice. “I will.” He said nothing else, but she believed him.

“And—take care of yourself too, Kora.” She reached out a tentative hand and laid it

on his forearm. She wanted to say much, much more...but it wasn't her place. She could only offer comfort. His fate wasn't hers to decide. "I hope—I hope we'll see you again soon."

His somber expression shattered with that wry, half smile he favored so much. "I hope that too. I know you'll miss me."

She laughed, but it sounded rather broken to her own ears. "You know I will, you cad."

He caught her hand in both of his and lifted it to his mouth, but he brushed the back of her hand lightly and released her immediately after. "Be happy, Anrid," he said with sincerity. "Whatever path you choose, be happy."

She swallowed hard and resisted the urge to peek at Jael. Still, Kora smiled knowingly as if he understood her internal struggle. She blushed scarlet and put Rig away from her to rise from the boat. Jael and Teague had finished their conversation, and each reached out a hand to assist her to solid ground again.

Teague shook hands with her. She would have liked to get to know him better: he reminded her of her father in some ways.

"Thank you for helping us." The words didn't sound enough to express her gratitude.

He smiled anyway, but the light didn't quite reach his eyes. "It's the least I could do." He squeezed her hand and released her. Still, he hesitated and made no move to climb aboard the boat. "About your obligation to Gelaira." He licked his lips and considered her. Heat filled her cheeks under the intense perusal. "I will speak on your behalf. Consider your obligation fulfilled, Anrid. You don't owe Gelaira anything else."

Her breath caught in her throat. Her obligation fulfilled? Did he mean it? Truly?

A smile warmed his countenance, as if he took pleasure in giving her this great gift.

“I am...free?” she managed, unable to grasp what it might mean.

He nodded. “I will see to the details. You are—indeed—free.”

Tears pricked at her eyes, and she lurched forward to wrap him in a hug. He released a startled gasp but then patted her on the back with a laugh.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He set her away from him, smiling. This time, the light reached the windows into his soul. “I would hope there are people in the world who would do the same for my own daughters,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

She didn't trust herself to speak without wailing, so she just smiled and turned to Jael. "What about the Bifrost? And my connection to the children?"

As if he was perplexed, a deep crease marred Jael's brow. "I don't know for sure, but if there is any way at all to free you from the binding, I swear on my life I will find a way to make it happen. So that you can go home."

Her smile faded as she absorbed the implication of his words. He assumed she would leave, and this implied he wanted to help her go. What did that mean for them? How much did Jael care for her?

While Teague entered the boat, she took a step back. She stood between Jael and Math as Teague untied the tether and pushed the boat into the center of the river. The Gelairan craft slipped away and, as it disappeared into the shadows of the mountain, a piece of her heart went with it.

What now? Her thoughts whispered. What is next for me?

For the first time in ages, she didn't know what path lay before her. Teague and Jael both claimed she was free, but was she really?

Her heart seemed inextricably bound to Agmon.

The children revived within two days. Anrid's presence worked like a magical charm, and soon the little rascals were up to their usual shenanigans. There were food fights in the kitchen and pillow fights in the laundry room and wrestling matches in the bathroom.

It was a joyous thing to behold. Even the harassed maids didn't complain, too happy to see the children recovered from their close call.

On the morning of the third day, Jael strapped a bedroll to the backs of all the children and a heftier pack of supplies to himself and Anrid, and sent them off after breakfast for the journey to Elysium.

"How long of a walk will it be?" Anrid asked as they left the halls of Imenborg with squealing children pressing against them.

Jael spoke without glancing at her. "Only half a day. Then we will board a boat which will take us the rest of the way. It's an easy day's journey, but I expect it may take us longer."

She studied him a few moments more, but he never once looked her direction. Her heart twisted and withered as she turned around and retreated to the back of the group to make sure no one straggled.

He was avoiding her. Of that, she was quite certain.

She could guess why: he hadn't forgiven her for leaving with the elves. Or perhaps he felt guilty for his part in Medda's injury. She'd seen him with the little girl and knew he cared about her deeply. How the uncertainty must plague him as strongly as it troubled her!

He led the way with two straggling lines of children behind him. Anrid brought up the rear of their merry procession to make sure they didn't lose anyone along the way. The children peppered her with questions. None of them had been to Elysium and wanted to know what it would be like, what would happen to them with they got there, and things of this nature. But she had no answers to give them.

She was just as nervous about this as they were.

Her fate, too, hung in the balance.

True to his word, it only took a little over a day to reach the capitol city. The boat they had used was quite big, with several bunks in a below-deck compartment where they slept for the night. The children were fascinated by the pulley-system. Because the river ran in the wrong direction, the boat had to be pulled upriver by a series of pulleys and gigantic ropes attached to iron rings on the hull of the craft. The thought of the ropes snapping and them hurtling back down river made Anrid sick to her stomach, but the children reveled in the experience.

They left the boat late in the afternoon on the second day and walked for only an hour before entering a wide, well-traveled tunnel.

“All right, you lot!” Jael called back to them. “Be on your best behavior, and I’ll make sure there are cookies all around. Understand?”

They graced him with eager, angelic smiles.

Jael exchanged the briefest smile with Anrid before leading them around the bend and up a long flight of stone stairs.

Sunlight streamed from the opening at the top of the stairs, warm and golden and beckoning. Anrid practically ran up the steps, so eager to feel the heat of the sun on her face. She broke out of the tunnel and onto a circular stone platform. The rays of the sun shone so brightly she had to shield her eyes from the intensity. She’d grown accustomed to the darkness of Imenborg.

The children squealed and covered their eyes, chattering. A couple of the little ones began to cry. But a goblin guard with a huge basket dished out spectacles with a

darkly tinted glass that dimmed the light of the sun. Even Anrid accepted a pair and blinked delightedly to discover the spectacles did ease the strain. The crying vanished and the giggles resumed.

Anrid walked to the edge of the balcony and stared out over Elysium. It was bigger than she had imagined, surrounded by jagged, white-crested mountain peaks. The sun glittered off windowpanes and fountains of flowing water while dragonets sang and fluttered about rooftops. But what amazed her the most was the massive, translucent dome that arched over the city. The magical dome, glowing a faint amethyst color, stretched over every inch of Elysium. Not one building lay outside the barrier. Set so far in the north and high in the mountains, she would have expected the air to be breathtakingly cold. But it was almost...balmy.

She twisted her palms to the sun and let her skin soak in the warmth. It sank into her bones and drove away the chill of recent events.

“Are you coming?” Jael’s shout pulled her out of her peaceful moment. Reluctant, she turned from the cityscape and hurried after him and the children.

Jael led them off to a couple of large wagons pulled, not by horses, but by huge mountain goats. The rams were bigger than anything Anrid had ever seen, but they stood as docile as a domestic horse bound to a carriage. The real adventure commenced, as Anrid had to grab at tunics and belts while the children dove toward the edges of the wagon trying to lean out to observe everything there was to see. She wondered if Jael was having as much trouble as she was, but she couldn’t see him in the wagon ahead of them.

It only took half an hour to ride down wide, cobblestone streets to reach an impressive central structure—a keep, they would have called it in Haldor, but this more resembled a palace. With high, sweeping towers topped by graceful roofs and round stone balconies with fluted stonework designs, it was unlike anything she had

imagined. Beautiful and intricate...not stern and functional like the stone towers from home. It might have sprung out of a children's fairy tale book.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:55 am

More goblin guards appeared to escort them inside. Anrid whistled half a dozen times until she managed to get the children into their lopsided lines. The guards led them up impressive stone staircases and down vaulted halls until they approached a set of massive doors that ran nigh to the ceiling. Anrid tipped her head back to gape at their overwhelming size.

“Everyone, stay in your lines and, for stone’s sake, don’t do anything embarrassing. You’re going to meet the king and queen now, got it? Do you know what a king and queen are?”

Excited bobbing of heads ensued, although Anrid doubted the little ones had any idea at all. She hoped no one decided to give unsolicited hugs and rip off their clothes and run around in merry nakedness...an experience they’d been subjected to more than once at Imenborg by Gorge who hadn’t yet grasped the importance of attire.

“Are you ready?” She glanced up and saw that Jael, finally, stared straight at her. He’d been so awkward and distracted the past couple of days, she wondered if he even remembered that she was present. His dark gaze held hers captive for a breath, and she thought she might drown in the pure pleasure of being seen. But then he seemed to take her silence as an affirmative and turned away. He splayed his palms against the wooden doors and shoved them open with obvious effort.

They stepped through the doorway into a vaulted chamber streaming with amethyst-hued sunlight.

A roar of voices exploded from all sides.

Chapter 40

The cheers of Elysium welcomed him home.

Jael braced himself to endure the attention and exultation, knowing the people needed their chance to celebrate. He held his head high as he marched down the aisle toward the dais at the other end. His mother and father sat on intricately carved stone chairs, embedded with rune crystals that reflected the light from the sun. His mother smiled and pressed one finger to her lips. Jael faltered and glanced behind him.

Anrid and the children still stood at the entrance to the hall. They gaped into the chamber, expressions frightened. The children clustered around Anrid and clung to her skirts. She wrapped her arms around as many of them as she could, looking so terrified she probably didn't have any comfort to offer her charges. Blushing for not noticing their distress himself, Jael retreated back down the aisle.

"Now, see here," he said with an encouraging smile. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Everyone is happy to see you. Don't you want to come and meet my mother and father?"

One of the younger girls peeled her face out of Anrid's skirts. She squinted past him. "The pretty one on the chair is your mum?"

He flashed her a grin. "Indeed, she is. And she's promised cookies to any well-behaved goblin who visits her today."

A dozen more faces emerged from their hiding places, eyes gleaming with interest.

"Don't you want cookies?"

Crag stepped forward, a head taller than anyone else in the bunch. "Are they big

ones?" The rock monkey on his shoulder chirped and licked its lips.

Jael knew from experience that the wretched little beast could easily eat as much as the children, despite its vastly inferior size.

"Oh, indeed." Jael nodded gravely. "Very, very big."

The rest of them emerged at last. Giggles and nods answered him all around.

"Well, then, into your lines, you lot. Shortest in front." The children pushed and shoved one another to form their lines. "Not you, Crag, you're as tall as a goat. To the back of the line." He caught the goblin boy by the collar and redirected him.

Crag grumbled his complaints but obeyed.

Once he had the children mostly into rows, Jael turned his attention to Anrid. She stood at the rear of their motley procession, face pale beneath the freckles. The rays of the sunlight highlighted her auburn hair and made it violent red around the edges. Her eyes, however, were huge with distress. His heart twisted that he hadn't realized how unnerving this would be for all of them. He doubted any of them had ever received a royal summons before.

Suppressing a curse of self-loathing, he held his hand out to Anrid, palm to the vaulted ceiling. She didn't move at first, but then she stirred herself and eased around the children. Her eyes held his and never wavered as she came to stand by his side. Still, she hesitated a moment longer before sliding her sweaty palm into his fingers. He squeezed before repositioning, so her hand touched under his arm for a proper escort.

"It will be over soon," he whispered out the side of his mouth as he resumed the trek down the aisle. "Just curtsy and smile, and I'll get you out of here as quickly as I

can.”

A ghost of smile touched her mouth.

They tromped down the aisle in straggly rows. Bolstered by the promise of sweets, the children began to wave to the crowds lining the aisle. A ripple of laughter from the audience made Jael glance over his shoulder to see some of the girls pirouetting. But what must have tickled the crowd was little Gorge who had left his line to strike a mighty pose, as if to show off his miniscule muscle.

“Gorge!” he barked.

The lad giggled, grabbed for his sagging trousers, and dove back into the line near the rear where he could no longer be seen between the taller fellows.

They managed to reach the dais where his mother descended the stairs and greeted the children. Jael opened his mouth to tell them to bow, but the children flooded around him and Anrid and descended on his poor mother.

Nyx spread her arms wide, however, to welcome the eager arms thrown around her waist and legs. “What a fine, brave group you are, to have traveled so far to see me!” she exclaimed over the din. The crowd fell quiet when King Ereb cracked a smile and lifted a hand to silence them.

“We came ever so far!”

“And we are so hungry!”

“I think we’re starving!”

Nyx shook with laughter and turned to Jael, who offered an apologetic smile. “I’m afraid I offered them your best and biggest cookies, Mother. It’s good to see you.”

Her merry smile softened, the delicate wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “I’m delighted to have you home, Jael.”

“And you’ve brought so many friends with you.” His father remained seated in his chair, and Jael couldn’t blame him. He probably had no wish to be mobbed in front of the court.

“No Kora?” His mother’s voice grew a little strained.

Jael winced at the same time Anrid tightened her grip. He hugged her arm a little tighter to his side. “I’m afraid not, Mother. I will update you and Father shortly.” Not here. His eyes whispered.

Nyx dipped her head as if she understood. “Well, I hear you’re expecting cookies. Perhaps we should attend to this important matter right away.”

Cheers erupted from the children as they bounced up and down on their toes. More laughter rippled through the court. Nyx clapped her hands and shooed them to the left

of the dais, toward a side entrance. They took off with thundering footsteps while she strode to keep up behind them.

Anrid pulled away from him to follow. Jael splayed his hand over hers to halt her. She tipped her face toward him, a confused frown playing about her lips. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He didn't want to let her out of his sight, but how could he tell her that here in front of everyone? So he released her, his fingers sliding over the back of her hand before he let her pull away.

Perhaps it was for the best.

He needed to speak with the king in private.

Two hours later, Jael left his father's private study to search for Anrid and the children. King Ereb and Prince Eris had taken the news as well as could be expected, considering the gravity of Kora's betrayal. As much as it pained Jael to admit, he approved of his father's choice of punishment. What Kora had done...it put them all in a bad place. A very bad place.

There had to be consequences.

He pushed the unpleasant thoughts from his mind, eager to see Anrid's smiling face, eager to be surrounded by excited children clamoring for his attention. The king had a plan for them—and Anrid—as well, and Jael desperately hoped they would all approve. He couldn't wait to tell Anrid the fruits of his conversation with the king.

She had been a large part of their conversation.

They weren't in the kitchen, but one of the scullery maids sent him to the gardens. When he left the cool shade of the castle and stepped into the balmy, floral arena of the gardens, shouts of laughter greeted him. He hurried between rows of gently

stirring trees and meticulously maintained flower beds. When he emerged in the central courtyard, he discovered the children frolicking in the huge stone fountain he used to play in as a child. Anrid and his mother sat nearby on a stone bench.

“Gorge, leave your pants on!” Anrid shouted over the splashing and squealing.

Jael suppressed a grin and strode toward them.

Nyx met his gaze and rose to greet him. Now that the official items were out of the way, he knew she would greet him as mother and not queen. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed a warm kiss to his cheek. In return, he held her tight to his chest and thanked the stones she was safe. He’d missed her. It was easy to forget about family when he was neck deep in rune business, but whenever he came home...he realized how big a hole his family left in his heart.

“I’ve missed you,” she said as she pulled back, her hands over his shoulders and arms. “You seem mostly whole. Although those bruises tell a story.”

He grinned at her. “Oh, yes, a swashbuckling tale you’re sure to enjoy.”

“I’ll insist on a proper retelling later on.” She smirked back at him, a glint of anticipation in her eyes. “I’ve been talking to your friend.” The queen turned to include Anrid in their conversation. Anrid jolted to her feet, as if summoned, and joined them with her hands folded in front of her. Nyx reached out to thread her arm through Anrid’s. “I like her.”

Anrid’s cheeks flushed scarlet.

“I do too.” Jael spoke the words before he thought better of it. Was it his imagination, or did her cheeks darken even further? Was that a good sign?

Nyx glanced between them, a smile playing about her lips. She was thinking and scheming, he guessed, but he didn't want to know what she up to. Nyx possessed a love for romantic tales and swoony intrigues. He could only imagine what she thought of the pretty human girl who had swept into her son's life with her entourage of goblinborn orphans.

He cleared his throat and wondered how to best broach the subject at hand. "I've been discussing things in detail with father. There is a matter of great importance I need to speak with Anrid about. About her future and the future of the children."

Nyx's smile widened. "Ah, yes, of course. I shall keep an eye on the children, shall I? It looks like the maids may need help. That little fellow seems to have lost his trousers."

Anrid choked and pressed a fist to her mouth as Gorge streaked by in naught but his birthday suit, his sodden trousers tied about his neck like a scarf. A small goblin maid with sleeves rolled above her elbows tore after him, bellowing for him to cease and desist with impressive lung power for so thin a girl.

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 2:56 am

“Let’s walk, shall we?” Jael tucked one arm behind his back and held the other out to direct her toward the trails that wound into the flower garden.

Anrid dipped her head and stepped to his side, leaving a space of two feet between them. He considered closing the distance but thought better of it.

The scent of mint and lavender greeted him as they left the revelry at the fountain behind. Anrid held out a hand and trailed her fingers over the leaves and flowers with a delicate touch. She kept her face averted so that it was impossible for him to catch her eye.

“I’ve spoken with my father about what to do,” he began at last.

She hummed a response but still refused to look at him.

Agitated, he pressed sweaty palms to the sides of his trousers. What had her so reticent? Was she nervous about the outcome of their discussions?

“I’m sorry,” he blurted, deciding to get the hardest subject out of the way first. “About—about Medda. I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

Anrid’s lips parted. “Oh, Jael. I-I never should have said the things I did. That wasn’t your fault.”

“No. You were right. I did lose my temper and that got her hurt.”

She studied him, expression grave but pained. His palms grew sweaty as he waited

for her to respond, hoping against hope that she wouldn't blame him forever. Just when he began to fear she would never answer, she sighed under her breath. "I don't blame you, Jael."

The weight of worlds eased from his shoulders. He could have cried from relief. "I'm still sorry. And I know she's going to be okay: Teague and Kora will see to that, and you'll be able to see her again soon...really soon." He cut himself off and pressed shaking palms against his thighs. It was himself he was truly trying to convince.

Not her.

"I sure hope you're right," she murmured as they rounded a bend and passed a stand of dark green bushes with coral-hued berries. A teal dragonet fluttered about the berries, chirping excitedly.

"I do too."

An awkward moment passed.

"So. Father finds himself in need of an Interim Minister of Goblin Affairs. The current Minister is hoping to retire soon, and they need someone to take charge of the orphans and their care: the distribution of supplies to the schools and the training of teachers to guide them. It was to be Kora's job, but...I'm not sure when or if he will be up to the task."

As the words spilled out of him, her eyebrows gradually rose higher and higher. She bit her lip in a confused manner. "Oh. Um. What's to become of him? Of Kora, I mean."

He set his lips together in a firm line. Of course, Kora would inspire her compassion too. "He's to be punished for his actions," was all he would say.

She lifted her face then, in blatant disapproval. He accepted the full force of her gaze, glad to finally have her attention.

“What he did cannot be ignored, Anrid. There had to be consequences. Surely you expected that.”

At first, she refused to concede. But he saw the resistance melt from her stiff shoulders, from her grim expression, until only weariness and sadness remained. “I did expect it. But I had hoped for mercy.”

He ached to reach for her, but he kept his palms tight against his legs. “My father showed mercy,” he murmured as he cut in front of her to halt beneath a small arbor. “Believe me. He showed a great deal of mercy.”

The narrow arbor forced them to stand close together, with a mere six inches between them. How his fingers itched to reach for hers! But first, there were things to discuss. “Ahem. Back to the position of the Minister. My father is inclined to offer you the position.”

She didn’t react to his words, not at first, her focus on the purple blooms sprouting from the verdant arbor trellis. But then her body stiffened, as if she had absorbed his words, and her gaze flew to his. “I beg your pardon? He wants me to do what?”

“Accept the position of Interim Minister of Goblin Affairs. You have a way with the children, Anrid, and a head for organization. You’d be perfect for the job.”

“But—but—I’m just a governess. I can’t work in a court, alongside—alongside nobility and educated people. I’m just—I’m just—”

“Perfect.” He breathed the word. “You’re perfect for it.”

“But where would I live, and what would I do, and what about the children? Where would they go? I don’t want to be separated from them. And I wanted to go to Nestra to collect Rig and Medda. I’m dying to know she’s all right—and my sister! I need to contact Dagmar and let her know where I am and—”

He caught her by the elbows then and tugged an inch closer to derail her frantic flurry of thoughts. “I’ve considered all that,” he said. “I really think this is for the best, Anrid. You’ll train here for a few weeks to get a grasp of how things work, but then you’ll be free to run your office from anywhere you want. I made that part of the terms.”

Her lips parted, but she didn’t speak.

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“You might even work from Imenborg.” He whispered this part, half-fearing she would reject the notion outright.

A gentle breeze wafted her curls around her freckled cheeks. She stared at him so intently, he wondered if she was searching for something, some answer he hadn’t yet spoken aloud. Nerves twisted his stomach and glued his tongue to the roof of his mouth once again. Stones, he was so bad with words.

“But—why should I work from Imenborg?” she asked at last, each word slow and precise as if she had chosen them with deliberate intent. “What are the benefits? The reasons?”

So that you can be with me, he wanted to shout, but he wasn’t sure that she was ready to hear those words. And how should he say them? Should he ask her to stay with him? Or should he express how much he cared for her first? Was there a specific order these things were supposed to be done? He’d been warned against giving her a stone...but what then did human males give their sweethearts?

When he remained silent, something sorrowful filled Anrid’s expression, and she pulled away from him. As her arms slipped through his fingers, he felt as if he were losing the most precious thing he’d ever wanted in his entire life.

Chapter 41

A despairing emotion emanated from Jael, as if some dark thought plagued him that he wouldn’t share with her. How could he be standing so close and yet feel an eternity away? Her body ached to lean closer; her arms longed to wrap around him

and her lips to whisper that everything would be fine. But she didn't dare do any of those things.

A governess simply didn't go around hugging princes. At least not without being given permission.

And, for whatever reason, Jael couldn't—or wouldn't—tell her how he felt.

On the subject that mattered most, he said nothing at all.

She could feel it though. He was in agony.

He ran a ragged hand over his face and rolled his eyes closed. "Rock and bone, why are words so hard for me?"

Anrid clutched her skirt and resisted the urge to reach for him. Dare she hope this meant he did have something he wanted to tell her? She held her breath and waited, every fiber of her being longing to lean into him.

Still, he said nothing.

They stood in the perfect place, with flowers and verdant, green growing things all around them. Sunlight speckled their heads and shoulders, cutting through gaps in the leaves and branches with a delightful purple hue from the magical barrier that protected Elysium. If only he would speak, if only he would whisper the words she longed most to hear...

Perhaps she needed to take matters into her own hands. Anrid licked her lips and took a fortifying breath as she considered her options. "Perhaps," she began with more than a little trepidation, "perhaps actions speak louder than words. So, they say, anyway."

His gaze devoured her face as if she had given him a spark of hope. “Does that mean—I mean, do I have your permission—”

She grew tired of waiting. She’d been waiting on men for ages, waiting for her fiancé, waiting for Jael, and she couldn’t live with herself if she let her chance at happiness slip away without a fight. She wanted to know what her future held...no, she wanted to choose her own future. She took a step closer and curled her hands around the lapels of his robe. He stiffened and craned his head away from her as if to get a good look at her.

“Would you lean down, please?” she asked, quite primly. “Has anyone told you that you’re ridiculously tall?”

A trace of a smile touched his mouth as he obliged, leaning down so that their faces were mere inches apart. His searching gaze never left hers. “Is this better?”

She pretended to consider while she grasped for her nerve. “Um, no, I would like you closer, please. Just a bit.”

He shifted yet again, his hands stealing around her and catching her by the back of her elbows. “This is much easier than words,” he whispered.

“Yes, but you’re going to have to say it.”

“Say what?” His gaze had dropped to her mouth, and the nerves she’d been feeling leaked away. He wanted to kiss her; she knew that now. It was a matter of him working up the nerve.

She offered him a dazzling, breathless smile—the sort that teased and encouraged at the same time. “I think you know,” she chided him. “I’m not going to say it first. I am, after all, only a governess.” I choose you, she thought, now please choose me,

Jael. Please, choose me.

He growled in the back of his throat. “You most certainly are not just a governess.” The words were hot and indignant, and made her smile deepen even more. “You’re wonderful, and I never want to let you slip out of my fingers. When you left with the elves, I thought—I feared I would never be whole again without you. I thought I’d lost you forever, and I’d never told you how I felt, how much you meant to me, how much you mean to all of us. You belong here, Anrid, you belong in Agmon. With me.” Now that he had finally gotten started, Jael seemed unable to stop the frantic flood of words pouring out of them.

A single tear leaked down her cheek, but this wasn’t a tear of sadness—it was of joy and relief and longing all wrapped up into one riotous package. It was as if her insides were filled with goblin children jumping around all at the same time. With a contented sigh, she lifted her arms and cupped her hands behind his neck.

“But why should I work at Imenborg instead of here in Elysium?” She couldn’t help but poke one last time, and then she feared she would give in and let him kiss her however he pleased.

He huffed as if agitated and tightened his grip on her. “Because I love you, Anrid Fray. That’s why you shouldn’t live in Elysium. It’s too far away. I would never see you. The children would never see you. I’m planning to start an orphanage at Imenborg, so that they can stay with you: all of them. And as many more as you want. You can have every last naughty orphan in Agmon, if that’s what your heart wants. I would give them all to you. I would give you the world—I would—”

“You can kiss me now,” she interrupted and leaned up on her tiptoes.

He needed no further encouragement.

Jael's mouth captured hers with a shy sort of urgency, testing at first but growing more possessive by the second. The minutes that followed were among the happiest she had ever experienced in her whole life. In his arms, she knew where her fate would take her, what her future would look like. No, not all the twists and turns, surely. But she believed if she had Jael by her side, and the children around her, she would live a complete life.

With no regrets.

She couldn't imagine anywhere else in all of Rhuin that she would rather be. She didn't need magic or enchantments to be perfectly, exquisitely happy.

"Hey, look!" A delighted squeal from down the path caused Jael to tear his mouth from hers.

She took a moment to catch her breath before peeking over her shoulder to see a stark-naked little Gorge standing on the pathway, pointing straight at them. Crag loomed behind him with a grin that stretched across his chubby face; one hand clutched the scruffy rock monkey against his chest.

"Uh-NEE is giving away kisses!" Gorge shouted. "I want one too!"

Crag's ears burst into flames while Gorge pelted toward them, popping in and out of existence every few feet. A herd of half-clothed goblin children tore into view and raced straight toward their hiding place under the arbor.

“Oh, dear,” Anrid breathed at the same time Jael muttered, “Rock and bone...”

She screeched when he spun her around. His large hands circled her waist moments before he hauled her over his shoulder. She clawed at the back of his robes, her stomach digging into his shoulder bones as she hung over him in the most undignified position. “Jael! What are you doing?”

He spun on his heel and sprinted away from the screaming children. His strong arms grasped her thighs against his chest as she bounced up and down. “I’m kidnapping you good and proper, my love,” he grunted, breathlessly. “Why should Rig have all the fun?”

She succumbed to childish shrieks of laughter as her goblin prince tore through the gardens with their children hot on their heels.