



Stolen

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: With the bonds I forged in the vampire court shattered, I seek refuge in a foreign kingdom. Surrounded by questionable allies, I long to forget the past. But every time I close my eyes, I see the men I left behind. My dreams haunt me, stirring up feelings and desires I'd rather forget. And then there's Midian, a king who shouldn't exist. He whispers in my mind, hinting at power that could be mine for the taking. Enticing me with the promise of true freedom. Showing me Laurent in peril...and Varick trapped in a cage. As I venture deep into the heart of the old elven kingdom, I risk getting ensnared in a trap far more powerful than I ever imagined. Will I be able to break the chains that bind me and save the men I thought I loved, or will I succumb to the darkness that calls my name?

Total Pages (Source): 86

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Chapter One

GIVEN

Laurent's dark head moved between my spread thighs. His tongue stroked lazy circles around my clit, making me moan and toss my head on the pillow.

"Wider, princess," he murmured against my slick folds. "Open for your king."

I obeyed, but I was incapable of replying. His tongue was far too talented. I could only grip the sheets and bite my lip to keep from screaming loudly enough to alert the servants. He licked me relentlessly, working the bar in his tongue over my clit. Sliding his lips down to my opening. He kissed me there, sucking at my eager flesh before thrusting his tongue inside. The canopy around the bed was drawn, enclosing us in a darkened space. Still, I could see the glossy black waves of his hair and his leanly muscled shoulders.

And I could hear. My ears filled with his satisfied murmurs and the wet sounds of my desire. He kissed my pussy the way he kissed my mouth, by turns gentle and dominant. I never knew which to expect, which only added to my pleasure.

He lifted his head, and silver eyes captured mine. His glossy mouth turned down in mock disapproval. "I know you can spread wider than this, sweetheart. Whatever will I do with such a disobedient queen?"

I looked down my body, taking in my bare, trembling breasts and hard nipples. My heaving stomach and splayed thighs. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

The lust in his eyes dampened. He frowned. “No, you’re not.”

Disquiet struck, like someone plucking the wrong string on a harp. I started to sit up.

His hand landed on my thigh. We both looked at his bloodied fingers. Deep gouges split his skin to the bone. Smoke curled from the wounds.

My breath caught. The discordant notes clanged in my head.

“No,” he said, rising to his knees, and now he was clothed in his black mantle with the ruby-studded crown of Nor Doru atop his head.

And we were no longer in his bedchamber in the Midnight Palace.

Now, we stood in the center of the same open field I’d dreamed of since childhood. The clearing was surrounded by tall grasses that stirred in a warm breeze. White blossoms floated through the air and disappeared before reaching the ground. There were no trees, and no sun to burn my skin. Just pure, soft light. It was beautiful, except for my furious, powerful husband dripping blood all over the grass.

He cradled his wounded hand to his chest. As I watched, his flesh dissolved completely, leaving a skeletal hand drenched in blood.

I cried out and clutched at my heavy skirts. Because I was clothed now, too, my gown one of the dozens he’d gifted me when my brother Rolund sent me across the Rift to be Laurent’s blood slave. Only Laurent hadn’t enslaved me. He’d made me his queen, fucking me before his priests and gods. Binding me with blood rites I didn’t understand and he’d never bothered to explain.

My husband bared his fangs. “You’ve killed me. And Varick too.”

I shook my head. “N-No. I didn’t. I haven’t. I didn’t mean to.”

He turned away. In a blink, the tall, elven male took his place.

My heart pounded like a beat of a drum.

It’s the dream. I’d seen the man so many times, his face was as familiar to me as my own.

But as usual, he faced away. Long, pale hair cascaded down his back. His dark-blue mantle puddled on the grass. The rich fabric was trimmed in silver embroidery. I knew that if I got close enough, I’d see a pattern so intricate I’d marvel at the expert needlework required to create such beauty.

But I didn’t want to venture close. Because the last time I’d dreamed of him, he’d gushed blood from his mouth. Desperate to save him, I’d torn open my wrist in my sleep.

And then Varick had fed me while Laurent stroked my pussy until I came.

My heart hammered in my chest. I knew I was dreaming, but that didn’t stop tentacles of fear from slithering around me and squeezing tight.

The man turned his head. His face was beautiful in profile. Elegant nose. Thickly lashed blue eyes. Strong jaw and flawless skin. He was stunning. Otherworldly.

But the pointed ears that had once enthralled me now filled me with a deep foreboding.

Elven. Whoever he was, he was one of the creatures from the Thicket. Memories flashed through my head, images replaying in rapid succession. The crunch of leaves

under my feet as I ran from mocking laughter that seemed to echo from nowhere and everywhere all at once. The swirl of eerie, green fog. The rasp of steel on steel and the screams of dying men. Laurent's voice hissing words wrapped in dark blood magic. Varick's body dragged backward by dark shadows.

I saw all these things even as I saw the tall, pale-haired elf turn all the way around. Blue eyes locked with mine. Sorrow filled his gaze. His deep voice rolled across the space between us, and this time I understood his words.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“I wasn’t strong enough.”

My heart pounded harder. This was new. Every other time I’d dreamed of the elf, he’d spoken in a language I didn’t understand.

Strong enough for what? Before I could voice the question, vines raced across the clearing. They burst from the grass and traveled quickly over the ground. Thick and twisted, they covered the space in seconds.

“I wasn’t strong enough.” The elf’s voice rang out again, but he was gone.

Vines rushed across the clearing, twisted lengths moving far too quickly to be natural. They sprinted over the grass and covered the ground.

I blinked, and now I stood in the center of a massive stone hall. Pillars soared around me. Vines covered everything. They hung from a ceiling so high above me I could barely make it out. Light pierced the darkness in long, diagonal shafts.

And Varick sat at a long, stone table, his face pale and expressionless. Vines slithered around him, wrapping and wrapping and wrapping and not stopping. They pinned him to his chair. Crossed over his chest and bound his arms tightly to his sides. Imprisoning him as surely as if he was locked in a cage.

Yet he gave no sign he noticed.

The elven male strode from somewhere and paused in one of the shafts of light. My breath caught again. Because I’d never seen him like this. Never, not in all the years

I'd dreamed of him.

He was as beautiful as ever, only now his gaze was amused rather than sorrowful. A smile curved his lips. "Given," he said, and his voice flowed under my skin and touched parts of me it shouldn't have been able to touch. Parts Laurent had tongued and licked and sucked. I looked down, and for a split second I was nude again. Just as quickly, my gown covered my aroused body.

But I didn't want the arousal this time. Nevertheless, heat squirmed between my legs. My nipples puckered tightly and pressed against my bodice.

The elf chuckled.

I took a step back. My foot caught in a vine, stopping me.

The elf slid his gorgeous, clear-eyed gaze to Varick before regarding me once more. As his stare bored into mine, his smile grew. "What a tangle you've created."

My eyes flew open. A beamed ceiling filled my vision. I gasped, my chest rising and falling in the narrow wooden bed. I sat up, and blankets fell to my waist. Slowly, reality chased away the remnants of the dream—and my lingering desire.

I was in Wesyfedd, in the Fortress of Aberwas, home of Rhys the Fair.

"I'm safe," I whispered, shoving hair from my face with shaking hands. "I'm safe." It was something I'd repeated often over the past two days. But no matter how many times I said it, I couldn't quite make myself believe it. Maybe because Aberwas—and all of Wesyfedd—was surrounded by the Thicket.

And now I knew exactly what dwelt in the forest.

Despite the banked fire glowing in the hearth, ice slid down my spine. I'd dreamed of the pale-haired elf my whole life, but tonight was the first time he'd ever looked amused.

No, mocking. The same as the dark-haired elf who'd chased me the night the shadows took Varick. For as long as I lived, I would never forget the sound of that elven male's voice.

"Given. Now is a good time to run."

He'd smiled as he said it, just like the pale-haired elf from my dream. And like the pale-haired elf, he'd used my name with a familiarity that lifted the hair on my nape.

A chill crept through me, and I shivered in the bed. With a muttered curse, I flung the blankets back, wrapped my borrowed robe around me, and hurried to the fireplace. But as I reached for the wood basket, more unpleasant memories assailed me. Rowena before me, her brown eyes wide and afraid as she handed me a solstone dagger. "The south is with you."

But it wasn't. I knew that now. My brother Rolund was the south, and he wanted me dead. He'd ordered Rowena to give me the most dangerous weapon known to vampires in the hope that Laurent would discover it in my possession and order me thrown into the Rift.

Sorry to disappoint, Brother.

Although, perhaps Rolund was pleased with how things had turned out. Laurent had indeed discovered the dagger, but only after he, Varick, and I had slept together for the first time. The blade had wounded my husband as deeply as the betrayal he'd accused me of.

But he'd betrayed me, too. Me and Varick both. Bitterness welled as the memory of Varick's voice filled my head. "Laurent believes the prophecy you overheard has something to do with you. He thinks you and I are supposed to conceive an elven-born child. And his priests have convinced him that he needs to toss that child into the Rift so it can reemerge and save the kingdom from the unveiled sun."

Running had been our only option. Wesyfedd had seemed like the safest place. The only place. But Laurent had followed. He'd bound Varick with blood magic as the shadows raced toward us.

Then the dark-haired elf had appeared on horseback.

And more elves had emerged from the trees.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Creatures that shouldn't exist. Beings that hadn't been seen in more than five hundred years. They'd taken Varick. They had nearly taken me. And now I had no idea if Varick lived.

The wood basket was empty. But the chill in my bones persisted. Teeth chattering, I wrapped the robe more tightly around me and left my room. I crept through the darkened fortress, my bare feet silent as I followed the wood-paneled corridor to the Great Hall.

When I entered, I immediately stopped short.

Rhys the Fair sat before the massive stone hearth, his big form looking entirely at ease in the chieftain's chair. Which made sense, considering he was the chieftain of Wesyfedd. The "bandit king," as the Sithistrans and Nor Doruvians called him. The name wasn't a compliment. It referenced the Wesyfeddians' penchant for smuggling and highway robbery—and perhaps disdain for the unconventional way the Wesyfeddians chose their leader. The chieftain didn't pass down power to his sons. Instead, the people elected their leader. He was supposed to serve one ten-year term, but Rhys was several years into his second.

It wasn't hard to guess why. Tall and broad-shouldered, he exuded strength. Dark-brown hair waved back from a high forehead. His eyes were the same color, and crinkled at the corners as if he spent much of his time laughing. It was unusual for such a young person to have crow's feet, but the lines didn't detract from his looks.

On the contrary, they added something compelling to his features, which were among the most handsome I'd seen. "Bandit king" might be an insult, but the "fair" tacked

onto his name was simply honest truth. It was difficult not to stare at him.

But I was staring, I realized—and he was staring back.

“Given?” He rose, a look of concern on his face. “Is everything all right?” His lilting accent reminded me of Jordan. But Rhys’s brogue was far thicker than the ex-brother’s. Vaguely, I wondered if I’d ever seen Jordan of Twyl again. But I pushed the thought away. The only Wesyfeddan I needed to worry about right now was the chieftain.

“I’m sorry,” I told Rhys. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.” I folded my arms, suddenly aware of my bare toes peeking out from under the hem of my nightdress and robe. Rhys’s court was nowhere near as formal as Castle Beldurn or the Midnight Palace, and the wooden fortress was far more primitive than what I was used to, but the people of Aberwas still followed basic social norms. And appearing before the chieftain in my nightclothes would definitely raise eyebrows. He was probably wondering what possessed me to wander into his hall half-dressed in the middle of the night.

I cleared my throat. “I, um, ran out of firewood.”

“Ah.” His face split in a grin that displayed white, even teeth. He gestured to the smaller chair set at an angle to his. “Come warm yourself by the fire.”

“I should really get back to my bedchamber...” I trailed off as I noticed the paper in his hand. The red seal of Nor Doru dangled from a black ribbon attached to the parchment.

Laurent’s seal. My heart thumped faster. My husband had sent a missive to Wesyfedd.

Rhys noticed me looking. He tipped his head toward the chair. “Sit. No one will disturb us.”

Even if I’d been inclined to push back against the order, I didn’t want to. I needed to know what was in that missive.

Rhys waited until I was settled before resuming his seat. He stretched his long legs before him, his leather boots hugging his muscular legs all the way up to his knees. I’d seldom seen him wear a jacket in the two days I’d spent in Aberwas. He removed it as soon as he came indoors, and he spent most of his time in leather trousers, a black linen shirt open at the neck, and a dagger strapped to his hip. I suspected he had other weapons hidden here and there on his person.

I also suspected I’d never know just how many he concealed. It hadn’t taken me long to realize the bandit king of Wesyfedd was a formidable warrior. He didn’t wear armor like a knight, and he didn’t need to. His strength was evident in his thick shoulders and sword-callused hands. He’d rolled his sleeves up, displaying tanned, muscular forearms.

He’d been kind to me over the past two days, but I hadn’t seen much of him. He appeared to be in great demand, always surrounded by fighting men and townspeople from Aberwas. He seemed to understand I was reluctant to face the curious stares of his subjects, because he’d assigned me servants and had meals delivered to my chamber. But the privacy meant I’d spent two days in isolation, with no idea what was happening in the outside world.

He lifted the parchment, setting the ribbon swinging. “This arrived while I was hunting today. I’ve just now had a chance to read it.”

I followed the arc of the dangling ribbon for a moment before meeting his gaze. My throat was so dry I had to swallow before I could speak. “What does it say?”

He handed it over.

The message was brief. Laurent knew I was in Aberwas. He demanded Rhys return me to my “rightful lord under the law.” If Rhys refused, Laurent was prepared to invade.

“He won’t,” Rhys said quietly. When I looked up, his brown eyes held a hint of amusement. “Not even the priest-king of Nor Doru can force knights through the Deadworm.”

At the mention of the Deadworm, a tremor passed through me. The Thicket was terrifying, but the caves that ran from the Wesyfeddan forest to the heart of Aberwas had left a lasting impression I preferred to forget.

“You didn’t like your trip through the caves,” Rhys said, watching me.

“I don’t enjoy enclosed spaces.” Or dampness. Or pitch-black tunnels that seemed to go on forever. By the time Rhys and his men had finally led me to the surface, I’d worried I might never see the light of day again. The dark, close spaces had played tricks with my mind, making me feel like I was being smothered. Or buried.

Rhys drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “I’m not overly fond of them myself, to be honest. But the Deadworm keeps Wesyfedd free. My people value their independence.”

I looked at the missive I still held. “I don’t blame them.”

For a long moment, the crackling fire was the only sound. Then his expression changed, all traces of humor vanishing from his eyes. “Are you afraid of your husband?”

I opened my mouth to answer—then immediately shut it. Was I afraid of Laurent? He'd never hurt me, at least not physically. With that thought, a past conversation rose hot and swift in my mind.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“I’ll never hurt you,” he’d said. “Unless you ask me to.”

I’d frowned, confused by the statement. “I’ll never ask you to hurt me.”

His silver gaze had burned so hot I’d almost stepped back. “You might one day.”

I hadn’t understood what he meant until I wed him—and he showed me that pain could be a companion to pleasure. He was masterful in bed, my husband. But he was also far more dangerous than I’d realized. He could override my will with a word. He could steal the breath from my lungs. Before we wed, he told me he needed blood to use his magic. But that was a lie. In the Thicket, he’d choked off my air and held Varick rooted to the ground with nothing more than his voice. What else was my powerful, devious husband capable of? The fact that I didn’t know was its own kind of terror.

But this was secondary to his betrayal. As much as I tried to understand Laurent, I simply couldn’t. “The Deepnight is failing,” Varick had whispered in my head. “Disappearing. If the canopy disintegrates, the people will burn and Nor Doru will fall.”

As ignorant as I was about my vampire half, I knew the vampire kings had always held some mystical sway over the Deepnight. Without the canopy, only highborn vampires could survive. And even then, the naked sun would sear the skin. The lowpeople would perish. Tens of thousands would die.

But was that a good enough reason to kill an innocent child? My innocent child? Could the possible destruction of Nor Doru justify Laurent’s deception? He’d brought

Varick and me together because he wanted us to fulfill a prophecy I knew almost nothing about.

Rhys wanted to know if I feared my husband. But how could I explain something I didn't understand myself?

"There are more frightening things in the world," I said finally. "The Thicket is proof enough of that."

His expression let me know he'd noted my evasion. But he let it slide, and then his eyes grew shrewd. "The problem with prophecies," he said softly, "is that they're always written like fucking riddles. And everyone thinks they've figured out what the damn things mean."

I froze. "You know of it?"

He nodded. "Rumor has it you were raised by a nurse who ensured you knew your histories. Including the tales most dismiss as children's bedtime stories."

"Helen," I said, a pang shooting across my heart. "She gave me as much knowledge as she could."

"Then you know Wesyfedd has always been free despite being surrounded by powerful neighbors. When Eldenvalla was at the height of its power and the Thicket was nothing more than an ordinary forest, we resisted the elves' attempts to swallow us up. There's a reason for that, Given." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his battle-scarred fingers laced loosely together. "Our ancestors knew the elves courted danger. They called up power they shouldn't have. We knew a day might come when we had to stop that power from spilling into our lands. And then it came, and we did what we had to do."

My heart beat faster. “The histories say the Brotherhood raised the Thicket.”

“Brothers from Wesyfedd.” His brown eyes reflected the fire. “The land here has its own kind of magic, and the people are connected to it. You might say it runs through our veins.”

My voice was a thread of sound. “Is that how you saved me in the forest?” He’d held the elves at bay with bursts of light. No torch or lantern was that bright, especially in the gloom of winter.

He sat back in his chair. “Partly, yes.”

Disappointment rose within me. Maybe he wasn’t going to be as forthcoming as I thought. Laurent and Varick hoarded information like it was gold. Perhaps Rhys was no different. Or maybe, like all the other men I knew, he thought I was too feeble-minded to grasp what he was saying.

The fire popped, making me jump.

I cleared my throat. “I haven’t thanked you enough for rescuing me, and for allowing me to shelter here.” Wesyfedd clung to its independence, but Nor Doru and Sithistra could crush the tiny territory. Its mountains and caves couldn’t stop a truly determined army. I was a fugitive from the north and the south. My very presence in Aberwas placed the whole territory in enemy crosshairs. The fortress was solid but by no means built to withstand a siege. If Rhys were smart, he’d demand a ransom from Laurent and then deliver me into my husband’s waiting arms.

Brown eyes regarded me steadily. “You’re safe here. And welcome to stay as long as you wish.”

I released an unsteady breath. “Thank you.”

He watched me for another long moment. “Would you ride with me tomorrow? There’s something I’d like you to see.”

An invitation rather than a command. I’d been cooped up in his fortress. The idea of fresh air was appealing. I let my gaze fall on his battle-hardened hands, and then lifted it to his rugged, well-formed features. I’d be safe with him at my side.

If there were other reasons the prospect of riding with him tempted me, I ignored them. I wanted information. That was all.

“Yes,” I said. “I’d love to.”

Chapter Two

GIVEN

“You’ll need these.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I turned in the doorway of the stable that hugged one of the fortress's square wooden towers. A tall, striking woman strode toward me, her shortened skirts snapping around her calves. It was a clever style, albeit one that would have scandalized Rolund's court. Her gown didn't drag in the mud as she came to me, and she didn't have to clutch yards of fabric as she walked. The garment was plain but fit her trim curves perfectly. The gown was also well-made, which meant she was one of the merchant class. Or part of a smuggling family. The last was probably the most likely. We were in Wesyfedd, after all.

"Here." She stopped before me and held out a pair of gloves, and I realized we were the same height. It was only the way she radiated command that made her seem taller—and older. But she wasn't old at all. She was around my age. She was also attractive, with dark-brown hair and clear skin dusted with freckles. Her eyes were a blend between green and brown. Hazel, I thought. Her irises seemed to flicker between the two shades. The change was both compelling and unsettling, and it left me feeling a little off balance. Like the ground beneath my feet was shifting.

"For the sun," she added, a little frown forming between her arched brows.

Abruptly, I realized I was being rude. "Oh! Of course." I took the gloves and glanced at the bright sky outside the shadow of the stables. She was right. Despite the chill of the winter air, the morning sun glowed brightly. There was no Deepnight here. I'd burn without something covering my hands. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Her brown-green gaze moved over me, taking in my riding dress and thick cloak. Her eyes lingered on my chest before traveling down to my hips. "Everything appears to fit. I worried my gowns might be too long for you."

“Yes...” Heat touched my cheeks as I glanced down at my borrowed clothes. “I mean, no, everything fits well. I’m afraid I’ve been something of a beggar since I arrived. I didn’t bring anything of my own.” I bit my tongue before I could volunteer more information. While I wasn’t exactly hiding, the fewer people who knew of my presence in Aberwas, the better.

She waved a hand. “I’m happy to lend you the clothes. You wear them well.”

For some reason, the heat in my face flared higher. Her voice was low for a woman’s, but not unpleasant. It had a husky quality to it. Her accent was as thick as Rhys’s. “Thank you,” I said, my own voice sounding oddly high-pitched in my ears.

“You’re welcome,” she said again, humor in her eyes. “Fortunately, we’re about the same size.” Her gaze returned to my chest. “Although, your breasts are bigger.”

I resisted the urge to pull the cloak more tightly over my chest, which suddenly felt as warm as my face. I was indeed more well-endowed, and her gowns were tight in that area. “I didn’t realize the clothes were yours,” I said stupidly. Because of course I hadn’t. A servant had brought them. I didn’t even know this woman’s name.

“I’m Igrith,” she said, as if she’d guessed my thoughts. She nodded toward the gloves. “You should put those on. Our winters aren’t as harsh as Nor Doru’s. The sun will be bright today.”

Somehow, arguing with her seemed unwise. So I found myself pulling the gloves on under her watchful, oddly penetrating gaze. When I finished, she gifted me with a soft smile.

“Good.” She looked me over again, and this time her hazel eyes settled on my mouth. “I’ve never met a vampire before.”

“Never?” I pressed my lips together, but I couldn’t help touching my tongue to the tip of one fang. I hadn’t fed since I arrived in Aberwas. I could go without blood for a bit longer, but hunger huddled at the edges of my consciousness. Eventually, I’d be forced to ask Rhys for blood. I wasn’t looking forward to it. In my experience, humans viewed vampires with disdain, fear, or some combination of both. I had a feeling Igrith tilted toward the disdain side of things.

“Your kind rarely ventures into our mountains and caves,” she said. “You didn’t know that?” Her expression turned discerning. “Although, I suppose you wouldn’t, being raised in Sithistra.”

“I don’t know a lot about my vampire side,” I admitted. “I’m only half-vampire.”

Her smile turned wry. “Half is enough. Still, wedding the priest must have been a shock for you.”

My heart rate sped up. She knew far more about me than I knew about her. “Laurent isn’t a priest. At least, not completely.”

Her eyes appeared to shift toward green. “Is that what he told you?”

Before I could reply, the crunch of boots rang out, and we both turned as Rhys approached. He was dressed as he’d been the first time I saw him, with a close-fitting leather breastplate embossed with a mountain surrounded by a laurel wreath. Leather gauntlets climbed to his elbows.

He reached us, his brown gaze moving from me to Igrith. “Cousin. You’re up early.”

“Always earlier than you.” She turned and strode off, her slim back straight. “Good luck today, Given,” she called over her shoulder as she headed toward a horse paddock on the other side of the gravel courtyard. She spun, walked backward, and

tossed Rhys a saucy look. “If you’re riding with him, you’ll probably need it.” She turned again, her shortened skirts swinging.

Rhys watched her go with a smile pulling at his mouth. Then he turned to me and winked. “So you’ve met Igrith.”

“It was kind of her to lend me clothes. I hope I’m not putting her out.”

“You’re not. She wouldn’t have offered if it bothered her.”

I looked at the paddock, where Igrith had taken a saddle from a groom and was slinging it over one of the horse’s backs. “She looks like you. Now that I’ve seen you two together, there’s a definite resemblance.”

“She’s my second cousin. Our families wished us to marry, but Igrith has always been more like a sister to me. Her father pressed her to stay in Aberwas and find a husband.” He watched Igrith accept a quiver of arrows, that little smile still in place. “But my cousin is more interested in the hunt.”

A groom opened the paddock. Igrith nudged her horse forward, exited the small enclosure, and galloped toward the forest with her dark-brown hair streaming behind her.

“You allow her to ride out alone?” I asked Rhys.

His eyes twinkled. “I pity the man who attempts to allow my cousin anything.” He gestured for me to follow him to the paddock, where a cluster of men in leather armor like his own waited with saddled horses. As I flipped up my hood and fell into step beside him, he tossed me a reassuring smile. “Igrith can handle herself, don’t worry. She’s an accomplished huntress.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Envy flitted through me. Few things were more freeing than a swift gallop on a horse. When I was younger, riding had offered an escape from Queen Amantha's censuring looks and sharp pinches. My father's First Queen had hated sharing my father with my mother, which was ironic considering Amantha's devotion to the Towers of the Mir. The faith taught that men should take two wives: one of the mind and one of the heart. The Brotherhood, which spread the Towers' teachings throughout Sithistra, claimed jealousy was a test. Something sent from the Fir, the demon realm, to turn weak females away from the one true god, the Lord of the Mir.

Well, if it was, Amantha had failed miserably. Sometimes I wondered if my mother had welcomed death. I didn't like to think about it, but if the whispers were true, Amantha had made life as difficult as possible for Vessa of Lar Satha, my beautiful, tragic mother who'd left her home in Nor Doru to marry a human king. Theirs was a love story, although some in the south claimed my mother had bespelled my father with her beauty.

I'd never know the truth, because my mother had died when I was six months old—and then my father had shut himself away until he died, too.

Robbed of a rival to hate and a husband to resent, Amantha had focused all her grief and hatred on me. So I'd spent as much time on horseback as I could. Helen had even fashioned leather trousers for me to wear under my gowns. But I'd never been permitted to ride out alone. As I watched Igrith's figure disappear into the nearby forest, longing mixed with disbelief.

"You don't worry about highwaymen?" I asked Rhys. As soon as I said it, I wished I could take the words back. According to the stories I'd been raised on, roadside

robbery was practically a Wesyfeddan tradition. For all I knew, Rhys approved of the practice. Or participated in it.

But he chuckled as he led me to a horse. His big hands encircled my waist, and he lifted me easily into the saddle. He guided my booted foot into the stirrup, then smoothed my skirts down my calf.

I gripped the reins. Despite the layers of fabric and leather between us, my skin tingled where he'd brushed my leg.

He patted my horse's neck. "No one will harm Igrith. The menfolk around these parts fear her tongue as much as her arrows."

"Or they're jealous. You said she's a skilled hunter. Maybe they worry she's better than they are."

His eyes crinkled. "You know, Given, you may just be right about that."

* * *

Four of Rhys's men rode with us, which made me feel better about leaving the safety of the fortress. However, my good feelings slid away as we skirted the edge of Aberwas and entered the forest. The trees were ancient-looking, their branches gnarled and black. After a while, I pulled my hood down. The late-morning sun couldn't penetrate the canopy, and my hands were sweating inside my borrowed gloves.

Memories of my escape from the Thicket plagued me. When I tried to shove it from my mind, scenes from my latest dream paraded through my head, each twisted tableau more vivid than the last.

I couldn't help but think the two were connected. But how could they be? What happened in the Thicket was real. My dream was not.

Still, my thoughts returned to Varick again and again. I knew Laurent was alive—and busy sending threatening missives to Rhys.

But Rhys claimed Varick couldn't have survived the shadows that dragged him from the clearing where I last saw him. We hadn't spoken of it since Rhys pulled me from the forest. It was cowardly of me, but I knew I was avoiding the subject because I didn't want to face the prospect of Varick being gone.

Laurent's general and I had butted heads from our first very meeting at the Rift. But there was also an undeniable connection between us. And now I knew why.

We were both elven-born. Descendants of elves who fled the elven capital Vai Seren as earthquakes reduced Eldenvalla to rubble and demons overran the elven kingdom. The survivors had hidden among vampire families, diluting their blood with Nor Doruvians for generations until all of Ter Isir believed the lost elven descendants were nothing more than legends. I'd believed it, too—until the night I left my body standing on a freezing balcony in Nor Doru and traveled to my brother's castle in Sithistra. I might have dismissed it as another dream, but when I tried to wake, I was locked out of my body. Trapped in a black, soundless void, I'd quickly spiraled into panic.

Until Varick's voice guided me back. If he hadn't saved me that night, I would have frozen to death.

He'd spoken in my mind, using his own elven gift to prove we shared the same ancient blood. And he'd kissed me, forcing me to acknowledge that our blood didn't care about our differences. Varick didn't want me in Nor Doru. He most likely didn't want me in Laurent's bed. But he wanted me. And I wanted him.

And I refused to accept that he was dead.

Leaves crunched under the horses' hooves, pulling me back to the present. The beasts were smaller than the mounts the Nor Doruvian knights rode, but they were sturdy. They were also seemingly undaunted by the trees, which had grown thicker and taller. Much taller. We skirted the edge of the Thicket now. A light snow fell, and the temperature had dropped. I huddled more deeply in Igrith's cloak.

The men fanned out and let their horses pick their way over the uneven forest floor. Rhys rode at my side, his knee occasionally brushing mine. If he was nervous, he was skilled at hiding it.

"We won't venture too far in," he murmured. "To the border and no farther." He pointed to a line of trees just ahead. "The barrier starts there, where the trees are taller. See the difference?"

I saw it, but it didn't put my mind at ease. "Why are we here at all?" Irritation prickled through me. The Thicket was the last place I wanted to be.

He reached over and took my reins. "Whoa," he murmured to my horse, his accent making the ordinary word sound richer, almost whimsical. One of his men glanced back, and Rhys nodded at him. The man returned the gesture, then faced forward and motioned to his fellow riders. They moved deeper into the trees.

"Rhys..." I began, nerves replacing my irritation.

"It's fine, I promise." He turned in the saddle and covered my hand with his. "Do you trust me?" The look in his eyes was the same one he'd given me the night he saved me from the elves. He'd appeared at precisely the right moment, a halo of light around him. And he'd beaten back the darkness. I wasn't sure where my certainty came from, but I knew the shadows couldn't pierce that light.

“Yes,” I said. “I trust you.”

Satisfaction gleamed in his gaze. He swung out of the saddle. Once again, his big hands gripped me around the waist, and he lowered me to the ground. His men were out of sight now, but the sound of their horses moving through the leaves drifted back.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Rhys removed his gloves. He pulled mine off and tugged me away from the horses. We stood about two dozen feet from the barrier, but its presence was like a weight against my side. Despite Igrith's heavy cloak, I shivered.

"You haven't fed since you arrived," Rhys said. "Are you hungry?"

The statement was so unexpected, I answered without thinking. "Yes, but it's—" I snapped my mouth shut as confusion swamped me. He was asking me this now, steps away from the Thicket? For a moment, I wondered if he might be joking. Some poor attempt at lightening the mood.

But his eyes were serious, his expression earnest. He took my hands, his fingers warming mine. "I'm the only chieftain ever elected to a second term."

The change of subject fueled my confusion. "Yes. I knew that."

A wry smile touched his lips. "I fought it. I didn't want to lead again. But the vote wasn't even close. The people didn't choose me because I give compelling speeches or look good on a throne. They chose me because of my bloodline."

The sounds of his men had faded completely. Now, it was just the two of us in the quiet forest. There was no one and nothing around. Except for the Thicket. It was like a living entity—a malevolent presence that lifted the fine hairs on my body. But the intensity in Rhys's eyes did that, too. His regard pressed upon me in an entirely different way. Far from malevolent, it drew me in, making me yearn for something I couldn't describe.

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“You saw what I did in the Thicket the night I beat back the shadows.”

“I’m unlikely to forget it.”

“Wesyfedd is a unique place, Given. Isolated from the other kingdoms. We keep to ourselves, and we protect ourselves. Long ago, when Eldenvalla was at the height of its power, the elves tried to conquer us. But the land resisted. It still resists, through our caves and mountains and the forests that surround us. Magic runs under the very ground we stand on.” He squeezed my hands. “And it runs through our people’s veins.”

I couldn’t help glancing at his neck. It was a strong neck—and just as well-formed as the rest of him. His pulse beat steadily in a thick vein that made hunger gnaw at me. I’d been spoiled in Nor Doru, drinking as much blood as I desired whenever I wanted it.

“There is power in blood,” Rhys said. “I can share mine with you. Once you have it, you won’t have to fear the shadows. You’ll be able to cast light as I do. I’ll show you how.” He hesitated. “Igrith...knows things. She’s always been able to see farther ahead than most, and I don’t mean down the road. She believes you’ll need this power. And when my cousin speaks, I listen.”

His meaning sank in. “You want me to feed from you? Here?”

“Aye.” He tugged on my hands, pulling me a tiny bit closer. But there wasn’t that much space left between us, so my hips brushed his. “Let me give you this power. And then let me show you how to use it.”

Power. I had so little of it. Even as queen, I had little agency of my own. Now that I

was on the run, I had none at all.

Rhys didn't press. Just watched me with those unwavering brown eyes. He radiated heat, his body so much warmer than the cold, dead forest at my side. The pulse in his neck throbbed, the steady thwomp thwomp filling my ears like a drum. I usually blocked out the sound of heartbeats, but his was hard to ignore. Before I could think better of it, I reached up and cupped his jaw.

Stubble scraped my palm. He tilted his head to the side, breaking my stare at last and exposing his neck. It was a vulnerable position, and something about him offering himself lit a fire I had no hope of containing. Baring my fangs, I struck with a hiss.

He jerked. A second later, he moaned deep in his throat. A strong arm wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me more tightly against him.

I barely noticed. Because his blood was unlike anything I'd ever tasted. It was laced with something rich and uninhibited, like a wild summer storm or a gulp of water from an icy-cold river. There was nothing subtle about it. These weren't hints or undercurrents. His blood didn't whisper. It roared.

I swallowed greedily, my fingers sliding into his hair so I could keep his head where I wanted it. Desire flared hot, pumping moisture to my sex and making my nipples poke hard against the front of my riding dress. The lust was a side effect of feeding, but it flared so much higher this time—undoubtedly because of his blood.

It didn't matter. I didn't care where it came from. I only knew that I wanted it. The forest and the cold fell away. Now, there was only his hot blood and his warm body and the sweet ache between my legs. I sucked at his neck and reveled in the unruly power singing through my veins.

He wanted it, too. I felt it in his thick, hard arm clamping me against him. Heard it in

his masculine whimper. Low and husky.

It was the latter that jolted me from the bloodlust that threatened to spin me into a frenzy. I wrenched away, my chest heaving. Blood spilled from the corner of my mouth. I wiped at it hastily as I struggled to rein in my desire.

“I’m sorry,” I said hoarsely. “I took too much.” His neck still bled freely, the twin puncture marks glaringly red against the stark winter landscape around us.

He palmed his neck, his eyes alight with the same lust that pummeled me. “I’m well. You didn’t hurt me.”

“I’ll seal my bite.” Before my nerve deserted me, I rose on tiptoe and swiped my tongue over the marks. When I drew back, an awkward silence fell between us. He didn’t look drained. His skin was still a healthy tan, and his heart pumped as steadily as before.

I had to stop listening for it. And I had to ignore how much I wanted to step back into his arms and feel his body against mine.

A dangerous ache. It was always this way. Feeding meant pleasure—something I hadn’t fully understood until I crossed the Rift and drank without shame or censure. But the pleasure wasn’t always convenient. I’d learned that too.

Rhys swallowed hard. Then he shook himself and reached for my hand. “Come. It shouldn’t be long now.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

For what? I wanted to ask. But some part of me already knew. Maybe it was his blood coursing through my veins. It flowed hot under my skin, rooting me to the land. Lending me an intuition I hadn't possessed before. I took his hand and let him guide me closer to the barrier between the Wesyfeddan forest and the Thicket. He kept my hand in his as he gazed in the direction his men had traveled.

My stomach clenched. I peered between the trees. Snow drifted among the trunks and branches. Without warning, sound and motion exploded before us.

Horses burst from the trees, the men from Aberwas bent low over the beasts' necks. They bolted toward us at full speed. Shadows swarmed behind them.

A wild cry caught in my throat. I squeezed Rhys's hand, and I would have run but he held me fast.

"Stand, Given!" His voice boomed over the noise. "There is nothing to fear!"

The horses bore down on us. The shadows parted, and an elven rider appeared. Long hair whipped behind him. His eyes glowed an otherworldly blue. He bore down on the Wesyfeddan men, his mouth stretched in a wide grimace.

"Now is a good time to run."

The words of the black-haired elf who chased me into Rhys's arms rasped in my mind. But there was nowhere to run now. Even if I pulled from Rhys's grip and sprinted as fast as I could, I could never run fast enough. I was going to be crushed...

Rhys flung out his free hand, and I watched in awe and fear as light gathered on his palm in a perfect ball. It glowed a bright, cheery yellow. At its core, it blazed like a mini sun, energy swirling in a mesmerizing dance. Rhys flung the ball hard. It sailed in an elegant arc and hit the elf squarely in the chest.

Light exploded all around us. I threw up my arm, temporarily blinded. Horses' whinnies and men's shouts reached my ears. Rhys's presence left my side, and his deep voice joined the shouting.

When I lowered my arm, the men had the elf pinned to the ground on the border of the Thicket. Rhys stood over him with his back to me. The elf writhed in the men's grip, his long hair trailing in the snow. His horse reared, its eyes rolling wildly. One of the men tried to grab its reins, but the animal whirled and galloped into the shadows, disappearing into the Thicket. The other Wesyfeddians struggled to hold the elf, who thrashed, his lean body straining. He was slight compared to their muscular bulk, but the men were clearly using all their strength to hold him. Their knees slid in the snow, digging deep gouges in the forest floor.

The elf glared up at Rhys with venom that stole my breath. "You must release me," he hissed. "You have no power here, mage."

Mage. A magic-wielder who wasn't supposed to exist outside of legend and myth. Then again, neither was the elf sprawled on the ground. Now I knew what I'd tasted in Rhys's blood. Not just power.

Pure magic.

Rhys's reply boomed around the trees. "I have all the power here. Your evil can't pass."

The elf continued to fight. Against my will, I was drawn forward, my gaze locked on

the creature in the snow. He was beautiful, but his was a brutal beauty. There was a sharp edge to it. Something that made me want to both look away and stare forever. I moved closer, my heart hammering in my chest.

The elf's glowing eyes snapped to me. Suddenly, he stilled, and a smile curved his lips.

He's too perfect. That was the problem, I realized. He was flawless, and something about his utter perfection filled me with a deep foreboding.

But I couldn't stop myself from moving to Rhys's side. The elf observed my progress, his smile growing. His hair was a deep, rich red that spread over the snow like blood. His blue eyes glowed like they were lit from within. They were almost too bright to look at, like staring into candle flame for too long. I blinked and jerked my gaze away.

Abruptly, icy tendrils snaked through my head. There was a distinct pressure to it, as if someone trailed an icicle along the inside of my skull.

I winced and clutched at my temple.

Rhys addressed me without taking his eyes off the elf. "Don't let him in, Given. He'll pull memories from your mind and use them against you."

The advice came too late. The elf's tone turned light, almost teasing. "You're far from home, Princess."

Shock rippled through me. I stared, disbelief mingling with terror. Because those were among the last words Laurent had said to me the night I ran away—and the elf had spoken in Laurent's voice when he repeated them. If I'd listened with my eyes closed, I would have thought Laurent stood with us in the Thicket.

“Ignore him, Given,” Rhys said tightly. “Don’t let him in your head.”

The elf’s eyes gleamed brighter. “That’s right, Given.” His voice changed again, switching to Varick’s deeper tone. “Some power is too dangerous to be set free.”

The horror in my gut churned faster. Varick had said those exact words to me the night I discovered I was a farseer, when he pulled me back from the abyss before I froze to death. He’d held me on his lap before the fire, his eyes stark as he warned our elven blood made us a volatile combination. To drive his point home, he’d spoken the warning directly into my head, using the elven gift he’d inherited from his ancestors who escaped the destruction of Eldenvalla.

“That’s enough,” Rhys said sharply. He kept his eyes on the elf as he extended a hand to me. I took it with shaking fingers and let him pull me against his side. He moved his hand under mine and held it aloft in the direction of the elf. “You have the power to banish him,” he said, his accent thick. “That’s what you gained with my blood. It’s hot. Do you feel it?” As he spoke, his hand under mine grew warmer.

The elf’s expression grew somber. “You’ll never be able to do it. Weak little girl.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Rhys said. “He’s a liar. It’s his only gift.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Lies as a gift. The idea struck me as odd, but maybe it shouldn't have. Laurent was skilled in deception. So was Varick. My husband and his general wielded half-truths like a weapon.

"Reach for that heat, Given," Rhys said. His skin burned hotter, the temperature edging toward uncomfortable.

The elf surged up, throwing off one of the men. I would have stumbled back, but Rhys seized my arm. He thrust his free hand out, and light shot from his palm and struck the elf in the shoulder, driving him back to the ground. As soon as the creature was down, the man he'd tossed pinned him harder.

Rhys moved behind me. He gripped my arm and placed his cheek alongside mine. His chest was a solid presence against my back. His breath fluttered over my jaw. "You can do it. The time may come when you have no choice, so do it now while I'm here to guide you."

My head spun. How could I wield magic I'd gained but moments ago? "I don't know how to do this."

"Aye, you do. Imagine yourself holding a candle. If you put your palm over that flame, it'll burn you." He turned my hand over so my palm faced the ground. "Feel it now. The flame is dancing over your skin."

The moment he finished speaking, it was true. Heat seared my palm, making me suck in a breath.

“There,” he rasped, and when he flipped my hand up, a tiny ball of light balanced in my cupped palm.

My eyes widened. “Oh...my—”

He pulled my arm back and flung it forward. The ball of light sailed through the air and struck the elf. His red hair flew as he hissed and fought the men holding him.

Rhys grabbed me around the waist and half-dragged, half-carried me backward. The air pressure changed, and my ears popped. “Now!” he called out, his shout loud in my ear.

The men jumped up, releasing the elf. They sprinted toward us, their boots flinging snow and dirt as they skidded over the barrier. The elf sprang up and pursued at a speed that had a scream tangling in my throat. I stumbled back, knocking Rhys back, too.

The elf slammed against an invisible wall, his face inches from mine. He snarled, his gorgeous face a mask of rage. But in the space of a heartbeat, his features smoothed. He backed up and gave me a mocking bow. When he straightened, he was smiling once more. “Until we meet again, Given.”

“Be gone,” Rhys growled.

The elf’s eyes gleamed. With a final hiss, he spun and fled, his red hair like a flag behind him. He was out of sight within seconds.

And he left no footprints in the snow.

Rhys turned me around. He kept his hands on my shoulders as his brown eyes searched my face. “Are you all right?”

Definitely not. I licked my lips. “Was he real? His footprints...”

“He was real,” Rhys said grimly. “The elves were always light on their feet.”

My mind caught on his use of the past tense. “Were?”

Rhys’s mouth tightened. “What you saw just now wasn’t an elf. Not really.” He motioned to his men, who began gathering their horses. Rhys turned his gaze back to me. “Come. It’s time you learned the truth.”

Chapter Three

GIVEN

“Your nurse’s name was Helen Gelfort.”

I looked sharply at Rhys. He rode beside me on our way back to Aberwas. His men trailed at a respectable distance, giving us a modicum of privacy as we talked. The snow had stopped, and the sun was shining brightly again. I’d pulled my hood up and put on my gloves.

“Yes,” I said. “She raised me from a baby.”

“She did right by you? Taught you the story of the War of the Three Kingdoms and the Fall of Eldenvalla?”

“Yes. Everything.”

He gave a satisfied nod. “We chose wisely, then.”

My scalp tingled. “We?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“Before she was Helen Gelfort of the Southern Sea, your nurse was Helen of Aberwas.”

I tugged on my reins. Rhys stopped his horse and raised a hand for his men to do the same.

“Helen was Sithistran,” I said.

“No, lass. She was born and raised in Wesyfedd. She married a fisherman and lived in the south for a time. When he died, she moved to Beldurn, where she became a lady-in-waiting to King Baylen’s new Queen Consort.”

My mother.

“Helen was given the assignment before my time. But I know we put her in Beldurn for a specific reason.”

My horse tossed its head, and I eased up on the reins I’d been holding in a death grip. Rhys sat tall in his saddle, projecting his usual aura of quiet strength. But I was done with quiet. I was tired of being kept in the dark. Tired of everyone around me having answers when I had none.

“The elf called you a mage,” I said.

“Aye.” He rested his battle-scarred hands on his pommel. “I have the blood.”

“And Helen?”

“Another of our kind.” A smile touched his mouth. “And skilled at hiding it.”

My heart beat faster. “I never knew. She didn’t say anything, not even before she died.”

His voice softened. “Her silence kept you safe. If Queen Amantha had discovered a mage in her castle, what would she have done?”

“I’m not sure she would have believed it. She was devoted to the Towers of the Mir. The Brotherhood teaches that magic comes from the Fir.”

Anger darkened his features. Contempt laced his tone as he said, “Magic is the only thing keeping their towers safe. I might forgive them for forgetting, but their ignorance is voluntary. The Brotherhood banished mages from their ranks generations ago. Now, the brothers put their faith in money and politics. If they bothered to ever look in the mirrors they drape around their necks, they might recognize their own hypocrisy.”

I didn’t disagree with him. But his vehemence didn’t tell me anything about my own situation. “Why did the mages place Helen in my mother’s service?”

“There are seers among us. Years before you were born, they foretold that an elven-born queen would sit the throne of Sithistra...and eventually deliver a child. We knew that child was important. We had to protect you.”

“Why?” Confusion rose hot and thick. “Varick says I’m dangerous. Now you’re telling me I’m important. Which is it?” Frustration made my voice sharp. “You said it was time I learned the truth, so tell me what’s true.”

He moved his horse closer and lowered his voice. “Helen told you the stories. Five hundred years ago, Sithistra and Nor Doru went to war. They fought for two decades,

vampires and humans killing each other indiscriminately. Avenor of Eldenvalla wanted his enemies divided so he could conquer them both. The elves had dabbled in black magic for generations, summoning demons from what the Brotherhood calls the Fir. But its proper name—its only name—is the Shade.” His voice dropped lower. “It’s a plane wholly different from ours, and the portal between our worlds should have never been opened.”

My horse shifted, sensing my anxiety. I kept my eyes on Rhys as I patted the beast’s neck. “But the elves opened it anyway,” I said.

He nodded. “They lusted for power. And here’s what the stories get wrong. The elves didn’t summon the demons to do their bidding. They invited the demons into their bodies.”

An icy finger trailed down my spine. The redheaded elf’s twisted, furious face flashed in my mind.

“Demons can’t take corporeal form on this plane,” Rhys said. “They can only attach to the living. The elves were so greedy for power, they allowed the demons they summoned to possess them. But they made a fatal mistake. The longer a demon lingers in the body, the more control it gains over its host. Eventually, the host will die, giving the demon complete control of the body. King Avenor knew this, but he was determined to win his war and crush his enemies. He pushed his people to keep the demons bound inside themselves. The elves continued their battles...and they waited too long.”

Bound. The word tripped through my brain, triggering memories of the night Varick saved me and then kissed me.

“Varick of Lar Keiren is elven-born,” I said. “He said his father couldn’t be bound.”

Rhys put a hand over mine. As before, his palm was hot through his glove. “I told you the creature we saw in the Thicket wasn’t an elf. There are no more elves, lass—only the living dead. Every being in those trees is a shell, nothing more than a host for the demon inside it. Five centuries ago, nearly everyone in Eldenvalla died in the quakes. The few who managed to escape couldn’t shed their demons when they fled the destruction. Their bodies had enough life left in them to sire a handful of children. Those were the first elven-born. They passed on elven gifts, but they passed on other things, too.”

My scalp prickled again. “What are you saying?” I whispered.

“In the months after the Rift opened and Eldenvalla fell, the mages got word that some elves had fled before the Thicket sprang up. We learned they were living among the vampires, and that a few had sired offspring. We weren’t sure what this meant, but we worried. So we hunted for them. We searched all of Nor Doru, looking for these elves and their children.”

“And you killed them?” I rasped, Varick’s voice echoing in my head. “In the library at my family’s estate at Lar Keiren, ancient records talk of knights going from house to house, searching for elves who might have escaped the Thicket.”

“Some,” Rhys said bluntly. “Not all. Their children became the elven-born, but that name is misleading. Like calling the Shade the Fir, it conceals the true nature of the children who sprang from the ones who fled the destruction of Vai Seren. Some of those children inherited beautiful gifts. But every elven-born carries darkness inside him...or her. It is knitted onto your souls.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

His words sank into my skin as surely as his heat warmed me through my gloves. Even so, a chill crept around me, numbing my lips. “So you’re saying I’m part—”

“Demon,” he said. “It’s a burden, to be sure, Given, but you need to know the truth.”

Fear gripped me. There was a sword strapped to his side and who knew how many other weapons concealed under his clothes. His men sat on horseback behind us. I had no hope of outrunning them.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked through a tight throat.

“No, lass,” he said quickly. “Put that thought from your mind. If my kind wanted you dead, Helen could have done it when you were in the cradle.” As I released an uneven breath, he squeezed my hand. “We are not our forbears, you and I. And as I told you before, my kind have gone to great lengths to protect you. You’re the key to everything, Given.”

“The prophecy,” I said, fear seizing me all over again. If he thought I would sacrifice a child to the Rift, he was as mistaken as Laurent.

“The savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift,” Rhys said. “One of the Brotherhood spoke it the night you were born. He recorded it on the same parchment the brothers used to predict your birth one year prior. A mage posing as a brother ripped the second prophecy from the parchment and smuggled it out of Sithistra.”

“Smuggled it?”

He shrugged. “You can take the mage out of Wesyfedd...”

Ordinarily, I might have smiled. But I couldn’t muster any levity. “Why did the mage steal it?”

“Our seers foretold your birth long before the Brotherhood did. We knew you were special. We wanted to study the second prophecy here in Wesyfedd, where the land pulses with magic. We also knew that various groups might interpret the prophecy differently. Once word of it spread, that’s exactly what happened.”

My heart sped up. “You think Laurent’s interpretation is wrong?”

He turned his gaze to the forest. His dark eyes grew distant, and when he looked at me again, his expression was inscrutable. “We believe the prophecy is much bigger than Nor Doru or Sithistra. You’ve seen Wesyfedd on a map. The Thicket surrounds us on three sides. Wesyfeddians know the enchanted forest better than any in Ter Isir. The barrier is weakening, Given. It’s been happening for years. If it falls, nothing will stop evil from spilling into Wesyfedd. And it won’t stop with us. It will cover all of Ter Isir.”

A shadow fell over us. When I glanced up, the sun had moved behind the clouds. Goosebumps lifted on my arms, but not from the dip in temperature.

“The prophecy could mean you,” he said, “or a child of your blood. We mages don’t pretend to know. The only certainty is that men and monsters will try to bend the future to their will. I and others like me are determined to protect you. If anyone’s will matters here, it’s yours.”

I frowned. “So...you’re saying I could decide how the prophecy plays out?”

He gave me a wry smile that reminded me of Igrith. “Therein lies the allure and the

danger of prophecy. Now that you know about it, will you try to steer the outcome? That can be dangerous.”

“You’re not making me feel better,” I said irritably.

He withdrew his hand. “I know, lass. I believe the saying is ‘ignorance is bliss.’”

I fell silent, my head spinning with everything he’d told me. There was so much to take in—the prophecy and free will and learning I was, according to him, part demon. I didn’t want to believe it, but I’d seen the elves with my own eyes. “You used light when you saved me,” I said. “And again today.”

Rhys nodded. “It’s pure magic. We call it banishing.”

“Would it work on me?”

“I can’t say for sure. Every elven-born is different. You’re half-human, which makes you unique.”

“Or weak.”

“That’s far from the truth, but I can see why you might believe it. You’ve been at the mercy of powerful people your whole life. Shuffled around without anyone consulting you on your wishes. Prophecies sometimes cast the unlikeliest among us in roles we’d rather not accept. But that’s Fate for you. I’ve yet to meet anyone who truly understands it.”

“That’s just it,” I said. “I don’t understand any of it. Laurent thinks I’m supposed to restore the Deepnight. Rolund thinks I’m supposed to”—I groped for an explanation—“I don’t even know what he thinks! The Deepnight creeps south, but he spoke to the Prelate of the Brotherhood about banishing devils. My husband wants to

toss my child into the Rift, and my brother seems determined to see me there.” My voice rose. “How is that saving anything? What am I supposed to do?”

My horse shied. Rhys caught its bridle. I watched in misery as he murmured to the beast under his breath. The animal calmed, but my blood coursed through my veins as hot and unchecked as before.

When the horse quieted, Rhys lifted his gaze. “I can’t tell you what it all means, Given. The mages observe—and we endeavor to keep you safe when others would try to use you for their own ends. But I can tell you what we believe, and it’s this: Everything is connected. The Deepnight began to shift and bleed away around the same time the Thicket started to weaken. Evil is never content to rest. Dark power never stops once it accomplishes its goals. Always, it seeks more. We mages bound the demons, but the spells we used to raise the Thicket weren’t meant to hold forever.” He sighed. “I wish I knew what you’re supposed to do next, but I don’t. But I can guide you, and I can protect you.”

I stared at him—the “bandit king” who was anything but. Could I trust him to protect me? He didn’t have an army, but maybe he didn’t need one. Not after the things I’d seen him do in the Thicket. If I could believe him, he and his kind had been watching over me my whole life.

“The unlikelyest among us,” I said quietly.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

One corner of his mouth lifted. “It’s not a bad thing, being underestimated.” He moved quickly, reaching behind my ear like he meant to grab something. When he pulled back, a ball of light perched on his palm. He closed his hand, and the light winked out. “Keep your enemies guessing, and they’ll never see you coming.”

Chapter Four

GIVEN

The field was covered in vines again. They were thicker now, the twisted ropes completely covering the grass. The blue sky was gone, replaced with a heavy gray that seemed like it could burst into rain at any second. But I didn’t pay much attention.

Because Varick stood in the middle of the clearing, facing me.

I rushed forward.

“Don’t.” His harsh voice boomed in my head, stopping me so abruptly I tripped and almost went sprawling. By the time I recovered, the vines covered him, too. They hadn’t been there before, but now they wrapped around him from his thick thighs to his broad shoulders. As I watched, one curled around his neck.

“Varick,” I gasped. Excitement pushed through my fear. This didn’t feel like a dream. It felt real. “Let me help you.”

“No.” He spoke in my mind again, his voice little more than a growl. “You were

foolish to bring me here, Given.”

My lips parted. “I didn’t.”

His face remained expressionless, which made the anger in his tone that much more jarring. “This place is your creation. You brought me, and you can send me away. Do it now.”

“Send you where?” I moved closer.

“Not another step!”

“But where are you? Tell me so I can help you!”

“You can’t help me.” There was a pause, and I could sense his hesitation. “Tell Laurent...I don’t regret a single moment.”

My throat burned. Whatever our differences, Varick and I had reached a tenuous truce that last night in Nor Doru. He’d helped me escape Lar Katerin’s dungeons after Laurent accused me of planting the solstone dagger. Even now, I was drawn to Varick. The pull was so strong, it was hard to dismiss it as nothing more than the elven blood we shared. It felt like so much more. I hadn’t stopped worrying about him in the two days I’d been in Wesyfedd.

And now he sounded like he was saying goodbye.

My voice wavered. “You’ll tell him yourself.”

The vines under my feet shifted, throwing me off balance. I flailed, just managing to stay upright.

“Go,” he urged, his voice in my head forceful, almost frantic. “Quickly, Given, before he comes.”

“I can’t.” I turned and swept my gaze around the edge of the clearing, which seethed with moving vines. One wrapped around my ankle. “I d-don’t know how to stop this.”

“Yes, you do. You made this place. Look at me.” He spoke in his general’s voice—the one he used to make his soldiers spring to attention. It worked just as well on me, because I obeyed at once.

The vines wrapped around his neck. One trailed up his cheek. His eyes gleamed bright gold. “Unmake it.”

I bolted upright in bed. My chest heaved. Tears coursed down my cheeks. “Varick,” I said breathlessly.

There was no one to hear me. Once again, I was alone in my bedchamber in the Fortress of Aberwas. I rubbed my palm over the tears drying on my cheek.

Varick was alive—and he was in danger. I had to do something.

I left my bedchamber and hurried toward the Great Hall, hastily pulling my robe around me as I went. The sound of voices stopped me before I could round the last corner.

“You can’t keep her here forever, cousin,” Igrith was saying, her husky voice low and tense. “She needs to go. I’ve seen it.”

Rhys’s reply was just as strained. “You’re the first to admit your sight is fallible. And I’m not keeping her. I’m keeping her safe.”

“Are you sure you know the difference?”

“Do you?” he snapped.

“That jaunt to the Thicket today hardly kept her safe. Given has a role to play. You can no more stop the prophecy than you can reverse the course of a river. If you try, magic will simply find another way. The outcome is unlikely to please anyone.”

I crept closer and pressed my back against the wall. It was wrong to eavesdrop, but they were discussing me. I’d told Rhys I trusted him. This was my chance to find out if I was stupid to do so. Rhys’s voice dipped lower, and I had to strain to hear.

“Today was necessary,” he said. “Knowing what you know, how can you say she shouldn’t learn to banish?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Rhys. I’m the one who told you it was important to teach her. But there are better ways to train her than forcing her to confront the terror she narrowly escaped two days ago.”

My heart thumped hard. Igrith had a point—and one that hadn’t occurred to me. I’d gone with Rhys because he asked me to. I hadn’t grown angry when he took me to the edge of the Thicket and lured an elf from the forest. But maybe I should have.

There was a shuffling sound like boots on the flagstones, and I held my breath and braced for discovery. But Igrith spoke again, her voice low but clear. “We’re dancing around the point. Why train her at all if you’re going to make her a prisoner?”

My blood ran cold. For a brief moment, I considered stepping from the shadows and confronting Rhys for lying to me. But I forced myself to stay put and keep quiet.

“Spare me the dramatics,” he said. “Given is not a prisoner here.”

“Then she’s free to go?”

Silence.

Igrith gave a humorless-sounding laugh. “Tread lightly, cousin. If you fail to protect the realm, others may decide you’re not fit to lead us after all.” Footsteps rang out. “I’ll leave you to your thoughts. And your schemes.”

Panic gripped me. She’d walk right past me if she left through the hallway I stood in. I darted a look in the direction of my bedchamber, but the sounds of a scuffle and Igrith’s soft yelp had me freezing again.

“Don’t threaten me,” Rhys said in a deadly voice.

Igrith’s tone more than matched it. “Unhand me, cousin. Lest I decide I prefer your head mounted above my mantel.” There was a blunt sound, followed by Rhys’s pained grunt. “With your balls in your mouth,” Igrith added.

Her footsteps started up again, but they moved in the opposite direction and faded quickly.

I didn’t dare look around the corner. With dread nipping at my heels, I returned to my chamber. The sight of my bed brought my dream about Varick rushing back. I’d gone to the Great Hall hoping to find Rhys so I could enlist his help in finding Varick. But now I knew what his answer would be. If I told Rhys I was considering leaving Aberwas, he’d make sure I couldn’t. And according to Igrith, that would be a mistake.

“She needs to go. I’ve seen it.”

Well, I'd seen Varick. He was somewhere in the Thicket, and he was resigned to death. I couldn't let that happen.

With a racing heart, I pulled Igrith's warmest dress from the wardrobe. If I were fortunate, the stables would be unattended at this hour. But even if they weren't, I had to risk it. I couldn't stay in Aberwas a moment longer. Varick was out there, and I was determined to find him before it was too late.

* * *

"You could have at least said goodbye."

I whirled, barely managing to swallow my yelp. Igrith emerged from the shadows, a cloak thrown over her gown. Her rich brown hair spilled over her shoulders in waves.

But it was her eyes that held my attention. I thought they were penetrating before. Now, they seemed to peer straight through me. Or perhaps deep inside me, seeing things I'd rather keep secret.

Like my plan to go after Varick.

"I have to go," I said. It was no use lying. I cast a nervous glance at the stable doors. "Please don't tell Rhys."

She turned and swung the heavy stable doors shut, then eased the latch down with careful hands. She came to me and pitched her voice low. "You overheard us in the Great Hall."

I darted a look at the doors behind her, half expecting Rhys to come barreling through them. "Does he know?"

“No. He had no idea you were there.” She smiled. “I’m a much better hunter than my cousin.”

Relief washed over me, but wariness arrived quickly on its heels. “Are you going to try to stop me?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

She folded her arms. “You heard what I told Rhys. The prophecy won’t stop for anyone. If you dam it up, it will simply flow in another direction, and not always in a way you expect. Rhys puts us all in danger by threatening to keep you in Aberwas.”

“Why does he want to?” I’d only known him for two days. If anything, he should want me gone. Laurent was threatening to invade. The Brotherhood wanted me dead. The prophecy was a nebulous thing. Far from concrete. My enemies—and their armies—were very real. My presence put everyone in Aberwas in danger.

Igrith’s expression turned thoughtful. “Our line is among the most powerful of all the mages in Wesyfedd. We’ve watched you from afar. Rhys was brought up knowing he might need to help you one day. Now that he’s met you, I think he feels protective toward you.” Her shoulders lifted in a sigh. “My cousin is a good man, Given. But like a lot of men, he can be shortsighted at times.”

“But not you,” I said, a tingling sensation spreading down my arms. In the dim light, her eyes were more unsettling than ever.

Now, they glinted with something fierce. “No, not me. And I know women can do dangerous things. I’ve seen you enter the Thicket.” She tapped her temple. “Seen it, do you understand? Some visions are stronger than others. They come with more clarity and greater certainty. If my cousin stands in your way, Fate might decide to push him out of it.”

“Kill him?”

“Perhaps. We all have a path to tread. Rhys can’t trample yours without

consequences.” She sighed. “I love him, so I’m shoving him out of the way first.”

I smiled, picturing it.

She hesitated, and her brow furrowed before she spoke again. “I know you’ll emerge from the trees, but I don’t know how or with whom. Or with anyone. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I wished I didn’t. “You don’t know if I’ll get Varick out.” I didn’t bother explaining why I was convinced he was alive. Something told me she already knew.

“Just because I haven’t seen it doesn’t mean it won’t happen. Visions are imprecise. The future is fluid.” She flashed the wry smile I already recognized as one of her signature expressions. “We all have the free will to choose our own paths, even if our choices turn out to be stupid.”

The tingling in my arms turned into a shiver. “I hope I’m not being stupid.” My chest tightened, and I knew my worry showed on my face. “I don’t really know what I’m doing,” I confessed. “Rhys showed me how to summon the light, but he did most of the work. I’m not sure I can do it on my own.” Especially if the elves find me before I find Varick.

And they would. It was something I’d refused to think about until now. Because if I dwelt on it too long, I knew I would lose my nerve and retreat to the safety of my bedchamber. But that would leave Varick in whatever prison he was trapped in. I couldn’t do that, either. There were no good options. Somehow, I never had any good options.

“I can help you,” Igrith murmured, “but you’ll have to feed from me.”

That stopped my descent into a spiral of self-pity. “How will that help?”

“The banishment magic Rhys showed you is rooted in this land. Only those born of Wesyfedd can wield it.” She nodded toward my cloak. “Rhys lent you his gift the same way I lent you my clothes. You can borrow them for a time, but they’re not made for you. Ultimately, they belong to another.” She lowered her voice. “And even more so in your case because you carry the seed of the demons’ darkness within you.”

Well, Rhys had left that part out. More deception. Or, at the very least, omission. Bitterness laced my tone. “Rhys told me there’s power in blood. He didn’t tell me it was temporary.”

“Because he didn’t expect you to leave.” She untied her cloak. “I’m a stronger mage than my cousin. The magic in my blood will take you farther than his ever could.” She gave me an expectant look. “Now, how does this work? Do you bite my wrist or my neck?”

“Wrist,” I said automatically. After my encounter with Rhys, I didn’t want to risk a sexual response. Although, it was probably inevitable. The thought raised heat in my cheeks.

She undid the laces at her wrist and rolled up her sleeve. She licked her lips, her demeanor uncharacteristically nervous. “Will it hurt?”

“No.” Already, my fangs throbbed. I listened for her heartbeat—and found it. “Most people say it’s...pleasurable.”

Surprise flitted through her eyes. A sudden charge entered the air. “All right.” She stepped closer, then offered her wrist. “Take as much as you can. The power will last longer that way.”

I didn’t want to prolong her anxiety, so I took her arm and pierced her vein. Desire

struck instantly. It came on harder this time, and I wondered if it was because I'd fed so recently. Or maybe I was just more accustomed to taking the vein. I'd starved in Sithistra, restricted to occasional sips of animal blood. That changed the moment I crossed the Rift. In Nor Doru, I drank blood-wine with every meal, and I fed from Laurent during sex.

This wasn't sex, but my body didn't seem to know the difference. Lust flared higher—and then higher still. My nipples tightened. Desire pummeled me, obliterating rational thought. I pulled Igrith's arm more tightly against my chest, making her stumble into me. She gave a soft moan...and then pressed her body to mine.

It was my turn to moan. I was accustomed to a man's hard, solid muscle. There was no give in it. But Igrith's soft curves were entirely different. Because we were the same height, her hips lined up perfectly with mine. Her skin smelled sweet, like herbs and wildflowers. The feminine scent flooded my senses. We swayed together, our skirts tangling.

And she was right. Her blood was far more potent than Rhys's. It crackled with energy as it slid down my throat. Hot and frenetic, it burned as it spread through me. But it was a good burn. The kind that warmed me from the inside out. Painted the inside of my eyelids red like I'd turned my face up to the sun. That thought made me realize I'd squeezed my eyes shut as I swallowed in great, greedy gulps. I forced them open, and I swore I could see lust in the air like a cloud of mist. Raw power flowed in a loop between us, each sweep more intense. The desire grew more intense, too, until a fierce ache blossomed between my thighs.

A dangerous ache. I'd felt it every time I fed directly from the vein. But never—never—like this.

Igrith locked gazes with me. Her eyes widened, then slid to half-mast. Her lips parted,

and a rosy flush stained her cheeks.

Her power continued to fill me up. It was right there, just waiting for me to reach for it. I could have the ball of light in my palm with little more than a thought. It was a heady realization, knowing I had that kind of weapon at my fingertips.

The throbbing between my legs intensified, becoming almost painful.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Igrith whimpered as if she suffered the same affliction. Her chest heaved, her soft breasts brushing the backs of my hands.

Somewhere in my desire-addled mind, a voice of reason urged me to stop. If I drank too much, I could easily tip from feeding to bloodlust. Vampires who succumbed to that frenzy usually killed their prey.

But she tasted so good—and the desire squirming through me refused to be quieted. My breasts felt hot and swollen. More heat built between my legs. Moisture trickled from my sex, teasing my oversensitive flesh and making me whimper and roll my hips.

Igrith tipped her head back and cried out.

Had she...come? The thought was a bolt of clarity that finally pierced the lust clouding my mind.

With supreme effort, I pulled my fangs from her wrist and sealed the wound with clumsy, blood-drunk movements. I thrust her arm from me like it was on fire. Then I turned and stumbled away.

She caught my elbow and forced me back around. “You stopped,” she said, panting like she couldn’t catch her breath.

“I’m sorry.” I tugged from her grip. The haze of lust lifted, and embarrassment rushed in, leaving me shaky and flushed. “I can’t help it.”

Her chest rose and fell. “I don’t want you to,” she said fiercely. Then she grabbed my face in both hands and kissed me.

For a moment, I was too shocked to move. I stood rooted to the floor, my mouth opening on a stunned gasp.

She pressed her advantage, stroking her tongue boldly along mine. Like her body, her lips were soft. So much smaller than Laurent’s or Varick’s. While I was absorbing this, she ran her hand down my waist to my ass.

I let out a surprised squeak and pulled my head back. “Igrith—”

“Hush,” she said, her mouth on mine before I could speak again. She kissed me as she slid her other hand down to my waist. She kept going, palming my ass with both hands and yanking my hips into hers. My desire hadn’t ebbed completely, and the contact nudged the apex of her thighs against my own. Heat flared, pulling a moan from deep in my throat. I was drenched between my legs. High on her succulent, powerful blood.

And this could not happen.

I broke off the kiss. “Igrith, please.”

She tangled her hand in my hair and pulled my head back. My vision filled with narrowed hazel eyes and a pert nose dusted with freckles. Her free hand brushed my breast, making shivers course over my skin.

“Do you like that?” she murmured, finding my nipple. She plucked at the taut peak through my gown.

“I can’t,” I moaned. I couldn’t give in to this.

“Why not?” She tugged harder on my hair, forcing my head back. She leaned in and brushed her lips over the hollow of my throat.

“I—” My breath hitched at her touch. “I’m wed,” I said hoarsely, my eyes threatening to slide shut. Vaguely, I knew I should stop this. Push her away and run from the stable. But I couldn’t muster the resolve. Not with her wild, magic-laced blood in my veins. Not with the way she was touching me. She kneaded my breast, making me whimper and bite my lip. Her taste lingered on my tongue. Her touch was lighter than Laurent’s. Certainly lighter than Varick’s. But she knew what she was doing. It was like she could read my mind as she cupped my breast, her thumb unerringly finding my nipple.

“You’re wed to a man who shares a bed with another man,” she said in her husky voice. “All of Ter Isir knows it.” She flicked my nipple, dragging another breathy moan from me. “Rumors have flown from Nor Doru. People whisper that the priest-king beds his general and his wife at the same time. If that’s not wrong, why should this be?”

I shuddered. “It’s different.”

“How?” She released her grip on my hair and took my face in her hands. “I want you,” she breathed. “And I know you want me. I’ll make you feel better than they ever did.”

My body trembled. Her power filled me, and I almost expected to see light under my skin as I gripped her arms. But all I saw were my ordinary hands, my fingers so taut my knuckles turned white. I was only half-vampire, but I was far stronger than Igrith. I drew on that strength and shoved her away, sending her stumbling into a stack of hay bales.

I put on a burst of speed, flitting out of her reach. But I kept her in sight as I shook

out my skirts. I was hot and uncomfortable between my legs, my body aching with unfulfilled desire. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have shoved you that hard.”

She leaned against the hay bales, her chest still heaving. Slowly, the flush in her cheeks faded, and she rubbed a hand over her face. “‘Tis I who should apologize.” She avoided my gaze as she shook her head. “We’re not supposed to—” She pressed her lips together. For a moment, it seemed she wouldn’t speak again. But then she lifted her head. “How is it different? You sharing a bed with two men who love each other?”

I hid a wince. She probably didn’t realize she’d hit a nerve. As Varick had unkindly pointed out when he and I argued atop the Serenity Tower, he’d known Varick since before I was born. I harbored no illusions that either man loved me, but part of me had thought it might come with time. But the prophecy had come between us.

“You don’t have to answer,” Igrith said. “It’s none of my business.”

I squared my shoulders. “I took vows when I wed Laurent. I knew Varick was part of the promises I made before the gods.” I didn’t add that I wasn’t at all certain Laurent had taken his vows seriously. I wasn’t even certain I knew my husband. Or Varick, for that matter. Both men were enigmas I might never unravel. But as long as I was Laurent’s wife, I wouldn’t betray him—or Varick. No matter how good it might feel in the moment.

Igrith pushed away from the bales. I held my breath as she came to me, but she stopped a safe distance away. For the first time since I’d met her, she seemed unsure of herself. “I mean it when I say I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I should have asked if you like...”

“You?”

Her wry smile flickered. “Women.” She cleared her throat. “It’s just that you bit me and it was...” She shook her head. “I wasn’t expecting that. Now I know why the Sithistrans fear vampires.”

“Feeding isn’t normally quite so intense, but arousal is part of it.”

She tilted her head. “Do you, though? Like women?”

“I...don’t know.” Heat crept up my neck. “I guess I never thought about it until now.” Maybe I just wanted to be touched. I knew what the Brotherhood taught. Women were to be modest, devoted wives and mothers. In the eyes of the Lord of the Mir, a woman who loved another woman was an abomination. But the faith of Sithistra also taught that men should take two wives. Women were expected to share and keep their complaints to themselves, while men enjoyed a double helping of everything without consequences.

Igrith’s smile had faded. Her mouth tightened, and I could almost see walls spring up around her.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “I may not know exactly what I want, but I know that wanting a woman isn’t wrong. If anyone made you feel like it is, that person is a fool.”

Her shoulder relaxed under my hand. “I’ve always been this way.” She snorted softly. “My father spent years trying to match me with every eligible young male in our

village. But I could never do it. I'd rather be alone than suffer a man in my life."

I offered a wry smile of my own. "Try two."

She sobered. "One piece of advice: if you see an elf, don't look away. They can manipulate the world around you. Make you see things that aren't there. Staying focused on them blunts the effect of their power. Also, try to picture something impenetrable in your mind. A brick wall should do it."

I swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. "All right."

"I wish I could tell you this task of yours has a happy ending. I've tried to see it, but the only thing I perceive is mist. However, it's not unusual for visions to be like this when another person is involved. If the general is strong-willed, he could upset what Fate has in store for him. It makes his future more difficult to see."

I pictured Varick—his warrior's body and the uncompromising scowl he often wore. "He is certainly strong-willed," I murmured.

"All I know is that you'll leave Eldenvalla alive, and that you and I will meet again." She sighed. "I wish I could give you more."

On impulse, I hugged her. "You gave me your power. That's not a small thing."

She returned my embrace. When she pulled back, her hazel eyes were shaded with worry. "Let's hope it's enough."

Chapter Five

GIVEN

The Thicket was eerily silent.

But I knew I wasn't alone. I'd been walking for hours, my horse hobbled at the barrier that divided the Wesyfeddan forest from the towering trees. I hadn't felt right taking the animal, especially when I wasn't sure I'd be able to return it. Or keep it alive.

Apprehension tingled through me, making my skin feel like it was stretched too tight over my bones. I'd repeated Igrith's words over and over in my head. "All I know is that you'll leave Eldenvalla alive..." I clung to that promise like it was precious treasure. No matter what happened to me in these trees, I wasn't walking into my death.

Then again, there were worse things than death.

I stopped, one hand braced on a tree trunk as thick and round as a castle tower. The bark was unblemished, with none of the gouges deer left when they smoothed out their antlers. None of the trees I'd passed bore the usual signs of forest life. No woodpecker markings or trails of ants. Even the snow had stopped, leaving nothing but cold air behind. The absence of life was unsettling. I hadn't realized how loud the world was until I entered the void.

Shadows clustered among the trees. If I didn't look directly at them, they appeared to shift at the edges of my vision. But when I stopped and peered into them, I saw nothing but black branches and gray leaves. The shapeless, colorless masses reminded me of nights alone as a child, when I lay in my bed and stared at clothes draped over the back of a chair. My child's mind had conjured up all sorts of monsters, eventually prompting me to cry out. Helen had come running with a candle in hand. "Light chases away fear, Princess," she'd say. "Especially the light we carry inside us."

Helen of the Southern Sea, now revealed as Helen of Wesyfedd. In all the years we spent together, she never so much as hinted at her true purpose for being in Beldurn Castle.

And now I'd come full circle, walking through shadows with light inside me. Igrith's power burned in my veins, offering reassurance. It was like a sword at my back. All I had to do was draw the blade. Although, I hoped I wouldn't need to.

Snow dusted the ground, making every step I took echo like a giant's footfall. I'd long since tuned out my heartbeat, which pumped erratically. It didn't matter how much I told myself I had nothing to fear—that Igrith had seen me emerge from the trees in one of her visions. The only thing I could see right now was an endless expanse of colossal trees staggered across a dark forest floor.

This deep in the Thicket, the roots were treacherous. They bulged from the ground, some reaching as high as my head. Black and twisted, they stretched over the forest floor like gnarled fingers. Several times, I'd had to navigate around them, following the long stretches until the ground grew more even and I could continue forward.

Not that I knew where I was going. I'd told Igrith I hoped I wasn't being stupid. That hope had long since turned to ash. It was the height of stupidity to venture into the Thicket alone, especially when I knew what lay within it.

But I couldn't abandon Varick. And I wouldn't be held against my will in Aberwas. A comfortable prison was still a prison.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

After a few minutes of rest, I pushed away from the tree and continued walking. Igrith had given me a pack with food, water, extra clothing, and blankets. She'd also tucked a knife in my pocket. Her hazel eyes had tipped toward green as she said, "If anyone threatens you, don't hesitate. Kill first and feel bad about it later, but at least you'll be alive to feel bad."

A smile tugged at my lips. I touched my fingers to my mouth, remembering her kiss—and the way she'd tensed when she confessed her attraction to women. I didn't know if I shared her attraction, since desire was a byproduct of feeding. But I admired her strength—and her unwillingness to bow to the wishes of Rhys and her father.

Not unwillingness. Arrogance.

I froze. Because the thought was loud and clear, but it wasn't my own. Was it? I didn't feel that way about Igrith. I liked her.

Hate her. The thought came quickly, like a thunderclap after lightning.

My mouth went dry, and my heart started a frantic dance. I stifled my thoughts, struggling to empty my head even as my mind wanted to spin with speculation.

Leaves rustled behind me.

I was afraid to turn. Afraid to run. Afraid to stand still.

With my heart in my throat, I slowly turned.

Three elves stood shoulder to shoulder a short distance away. They were male, and each one was as beautiful as the others I'd seen. Long hair spilled over their shoulders. Each wore rich-looking cloaks. Their eyes glowed in the darkness, bright gems that sparkled in pale, angular faces.

Stupid. I was so stupid to come. I had no plan, just borrowed power that would run out eventually. I reached for it, willing the light to flow under my skin and into my palm. It came so much easier this time—and I knew it was Igrith's blood that made it so. The small sphere dazzled in my cupped hand, its light spilling onto the forest floor.

I lifted my chin. "I come for Varick of Lar Keiren."

The elves said nothing. The one in the middle had dark-blond hair. He gave the light a withering look before meeting my gaze.

I looked at the elf to his right—and remembered too late that I shouldn't have looked away from the first one.

Behind me, something growled. The sound started low, rumbling the ground. Then it climbed...and climbed, going so high-pitched it sounded like a whistle. My ears ached, and I fought the urge to hunch my shoulders in a bid to block the sound. It didn't seem to bother the elves, who remained utterly still. When it cut off at last, my ears felt like they'd been stuffed with cotton.

Sweat trickled down my back. The light on my palm dimmed. Over my shoulder, a branch snapped. Something was coming—or it was already there.

The trio of elves watched me. The one in the middle flicked his gaze to a spot behind me.

“If you see an elf, don’t look away.” I couldn’t turn around. Desperation rising, I tried to picture a brick wall. But black wings of panic battered me, and the only thing I could picture was my dead body on the ground. The sphere of light shuddered and almost winked out. However, more hovered under my skin. I could always summon another ball.

Always?

Maybe not forever.

No, not forever.

I whimpered. The thoughts weren’t mine, but the voice inside my head sounded like me. If the elves could make me see things that weren’t real, maybe they could tamper with my head.

The growl sounded again. Hot breath coasted over my nape. I screamed and spun around.

And came face to face with the blond elf who, just seconds ago, had stood before me in the opposite direction. Impossible. He couldn’t have moved that quickly.

His mouth stretched in a wide smile. The corners of his mouth curved up, stretching far too high. His teeth changed, shifting into serrated spears that glinted in the forest’s dim light. He lunged forward and snapped his jaws an inch from my face.

I screamed again and stumbled back. Rough hands gripped my arms and wrenched them behind my back. Without my hands, I couldn’t call up Igrith’s light. High-pitched laughter rang in my ears.

The blond elf’s face returned to its former state. “You come for Varick of Lar

Keiren?” He shook his head. “No, little sister. You come here with stolen power.”

Terror clutched me in sharp claws, but I didn’t miss his words. “I’m no kin to you, demon.”

Rhys’s features smoothed over his face, and when he spoke, Rhys’s brogue colored his tone. “Aye, and more than you know.”

The laughter echoed in my ear again.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

The blond's face shifted back. His fist flew.

Darkness swallowed me.

* * *

I blinked my eyes open. I was flat on my back, and I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there. For a long moment, my eyes wouldn't focus, and the world remained a blurry mix of shadow and light.

And pain. My jaw throbbed.

Immediately, the events from the Thicket rushed back. The unnatural silence. The three elves. The ominous presence at my back. And finally, the blond-haired elf who mocked and then struck me.

I probed the edge of my jaw. He must have knocked me out. The fact that I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious—and whether I'd been alone during that time—made nausea burn my throat.

Unable to stay in such a vulnerable position a second longer, I sat up. My head spun, and I had to take shallow breaths through my nose to keep from vomiting. Eventually, the nausea subsided and the room stopped spinning. I sat on an upholstered lounge—the kind of elegant sofa a lady might keep in her bedchamber. A light blanket draped over my legs. I stared at it, confusion like fog in my still-woozy head. I couldn't imagine the elves from the forest covering me.

I took inventory of my body. Aside from my aching jaw, nothing seemed broken or abused. My back was stiff, which was likely due to my long walk through the Thicket.

I touched my jaw again. It was only slightly swollen, but I was probably going to have a nasty bruise.

Slowly, my vision improved, and I examined my surroundings for the first time—and stifled a gasp.

I was in a Great Hall, but I'd never set foot in a hall as impressive as this one. Not even the Sanctum in Lar Katerin compared. The Sanctum was obsidian, its shiny black floor and walls grand but ominous. By contrast, this was a palace of light.

Everything sparkled. Massive white pillars rose from the stone floor as if they'd sprung up naturally. Sunlight streamed through big, arched windows set high on the walls. A long, stone banquet table spanned the length of one side of the Hall. The table was empty, but the wall above it bore a painted coat of arms. Something about it drew me.

Ignoring my shrieking muscles, I stood and walked to the table so I could peer up at the design. The coat of arms was a slender tree with silver branches. Above it, a crescent moon was tipped on its side, its elegant curves painted a deep, shimmering gold. Something about it was so familiar...

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a deep voice asked behind me.

I spun and felt my eyes go wide. "You," I croaked. The elf from my dream—from a lifetime of dreams—stood steps away, his gaze on the coat of arms. But he was no dream this time. He was flesh and blood, his beauty more dazzling than the Hall around us. His dark-blue mantle was the same as usual, but now I could see the

embroidered tunic and black trousers underneath it. He was brawnier than I'd previously thought, his height topping mine by nearly a foot. White-blond hair streamed over his shoulders like reams of silk. His handsome features were both youthful and ageless. A pointed ear peeked from among the gossamer strands of his hair.

He lowered his gaze to mine. "Given," he said warmly. "I thought we might meet soon. And here you are." His sapphire-blue gaze moved over my jaw. "I apologize for the brutality you endured in the woods. Rest assured, the one who struck you has been punished." For a split second, his features appeared contorted in rage. Then I blinked, and his face was normal, making me wonder if I'd imagined it. I was still slightly dizzy. I couldn't trust my head right now.

"Who are you?" I blurted.

He stepped back and bowed, his movements fluid. When he straightened, I could have sworn I heard the faint tinkling of bells. "I'm Midian, King of the Shade."

Shade. Fir. The name didn't matter. Either way, the place was the same. My mind traveled back to the day I left Sithistra, when I'd watched my niece Cathrin at lessons with a brother from the Towers of the Mir. They had stood at a large table covered with a colorful drawing, and the brother had explained the differences between the spiritual and mortal planes. "This is the Fir," he said, pointing to a pit of orange flames at the bottom of the illustration. "The underworld where demons dwell."

Midian watched me, a patient expression on his handsome face.

My knees loosened. "Am I dead?"

"No." He looked like my question amused him. "Your towers teach that only the most depraved souls end up in the Shade. Are you so depraved that you deserve to

spend eternity burning?” He made a soft, disapproving sound. “What nonsense. Simple stories invented by weak men who seek to control their followers by treating them like children.”

Relief swirled through me, and I let out a shaky breath. Abruptly, I realized I agreed with him. I couldn’t imagine any depravity bad enough to justify neverending torment. It was one of many reasons I’d never felt any desire to worship the Lord of the Mir.

But that didn’t change the fact that Midian stood before me. If we weren’t in the Shade—and I wasn’t dreaming—then we had to be somewhere deep inside Eldenvalla. Judging from the opulence of our surroundings, we were in Vai Seren. And Midian wore the skin of an elf whose body he’d stolen.

His eyes gleamed. “You mean the elf who imprisoned me,” he said softly.

Fear rooted me to the floor. Even if I’d known where to run, I couldn’t have moved. I stood in frozen trepidation and waited for him to continue rooting through my mind. Because now I understood where those random, unwelcome thoughts in the Thicket had come from. The elves who captured me had pawed inside my head and then fed me twisted perversions of my feelings. But unlike the elf I’d bound with Rhys, I hadn’t even felt their presence in my mind.

I hadn’t felt Midian’s, either, and it was horrifying to know I had no way of stopping him from ravaging my head.

He sighed. “You’re determined to cast me as a thief. I suppose I can’t blame you, considering the lies you’ve been told.” He looked up at the coat of arms. “The truth is a lot less dramatic, which might explain why the scribes who recorded your histories chose to embellish it. My kind didn’t come here voluntarily. We were summoned.” His voice softened. “And then we were enslaved.”

I followed his gaze to the painted wall. The tree's silver branches gleamed in the light that poured through the windows.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“We served for a millennium,” Midian said. “Your stories never mention that part. A thousand years of doing the elves’ bidding. Enhancing their magic and spying on their enemies. We gave them power because they didn’t give us a choice.” He met my gaze. “I believe you know how that feels.”

I did. I’d felt it when Rolund pledged me as a thrall, but I’d also felt it long before that. Every day in Sithistra, I’d been without choices. Queen Amantha had banned the castle staff from speaking my mother’s name. And when my father died and Rolund became king, he’d forced me to bury my vampire instincts. As a result, I’d arrived in Nor Doru knowing next to nothing about my heritage. It had put me at a disadvantage with Laurent, who was probably the most powerful vampire alive.

As Midian waited for my reply, the air between us shifted. It was subtle but noticeable, like a gentle current rippling across still water. Some of my fear abated, and curiosity sprang up in its place.

“What happened during the Fall?” I dared to ask. “When the elves died and Vai Seren was destroyed—”

“Does it look destroyed to you?” He spread his arms. Turned and moved away from the table, his mantle flowing around his long legs. “Where is all the damage your histories record? The toppled buildings and buckled roads?”

I turned with him, once again jarred by the surreality of speaking to him after seeing him in my dreams for so long. I wanted to ask him about it. I waited for him to pluck the desire from my head, but he continued his stately progress up the center of the Hall, his boots echoing in the cavernous space.

And it was cavernous, I realized. And empty except for the long table at our backs. Most castle halls were beehives of activity, with fires roaring, servants bustling, and animals constantly underfoot.

But this Hall was as silent as a tomb. The opposite end was dominated by a huge hearth, but it was spotless inside, with not even a stick of firewood to mar its white perfection.

Midian stopped in a shaft of sunlight, then turned and lowered his arms. His voice was soft, but it carried easily, reaching my ears as if he stood at my side. “Demons didn’t destroy Eldenvalla, Given. The elves destroyed themselves. They ruled the most prosperous kingdom in Ter Isir, but they lusted for empire. Already blessed with so many gifts, they wanted more. So they called up old, unstable magic. They summoned my people and bound us inside them, stealing our freedom and condemning us to endless servitude. From generation to generation, they did this, passing us down like property. And when the opportunity to invade their neighbors arose, they marched us to battle.”

I moved closer as I absorbed this. His words had the ring of truth. What if Rhys was wrong? What if he had it backward, and it was the elves who refused to release the demons and not the other way around? Every part of me recoiled at the idea of being trapped inside another’s body. It wasn’t hard to believe the demons had struggled for their freedom.

The moment that thought surfaced, another tried to push to the fore of my consciousness. Something about bright eyes that pierced the night and jaws that snapped near my face. The thunder of hooves and mocking, high-pitched laughter.

Abruptly, bells tinkled. I turned my head toward the sound, but it cut off so suddenly I wondered if I’d heard it at all. When I looked at Midian, he appeared undisturbed.

I cleared my throat. “So the elves wouldn’t release you?”

He shook his head. “No matter how much we warned them. Avenor wanted a victory, and he ordered his warriors to keep us locked inside. Eventually, he ordered all his people to hold us this way. His victory was within reach, but it was too late. The elves’ souls died and we remained.” Midian tilted his head back, letting the sun strike his face. When he lowered his chin, his smile was sad. “We are spirits. We were never meant to be trapped this way.”

Sorrow swept me. In the back of my head, another emotion lingered. Or maybe it was a memory. Something I was forgetting. I felt as though I’d misplaced something important and needed to find it. I struggled to recall it, but it was like grasping at smoke. The harder I tried to remember, the more quickly the memory slipped away.

But it didn’t matter. Midian was a prisoner here, the same as I had been in Nor Doru. It was a grave injustice.

“I wish there was some way to free you,” I told him.

He studied me a moment. “Perhaps one day we’ll find it.” He came to me and gestured over my shoulder. “For now, I believe there’s someone you came here to see.”

I turned, and I forgot how to breathe. Because the table under the coat of arms was no longer empty.

Varick sat there.

And he looked furious.

Chapter Six

VARICK

Given was fully under Midian's sway.

And I was helpless to do anything about it.

The devious fucker had watched her from the moment the other demons dragged her into the Great Hall. In those moments, I'd dared to take my eyes off him—and my blood had boiled when I spotted the darkening bruise on her jaw. There was no reason for them to strike her. They didn't need to resort to physical violence. They could simply pull a person's worst nightmares or most disturbing memories from their mind and terrorize their victims into submission.

No, they struck her to get under my skin. They wanted to rile me up until I lost concentration and gave them access to my head. Once that happened, I had little chance of forcing them out again. And then Given and I would both be helpless to stop Midian from doing whatever he had planned for us.

He'd smiled at me with my father's face while Given slept. When he spoke, it was with my father's voice. I wasn't sure when Midian had pulled Valen from my head. Probably, one of the other demons had plucked the bastard from my consciousness when they took me in the Thicket. I'd been weak in those moments, worried about Laurent and desperate to get Given away from the shadows. The demons intended to take us both that night. Otherwise, they would have shown us different illusions. But judging from Given's reactions, she and I had seen the same things and heard the same sounds. The fact that Midian wanted both of us was more terrifying than seeing my father again.

I kept my eyes locked on the demon king as he drew Given to the table. She was a blurry splash of beauty at the edge of my vision.

And she was such a brave little fool. I wanted to vault over the table and shake her for not listening to me. I'd warned her as best I could in the few minutes she'd pulled me into her clearing. I had no idea if Midian could venture there, but I wasn't taking any chances.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

But it didn't matter now, because Given was here, in the ruins of Vai Seren, and now Midian had her mind.

"Varick?" she asked, shock in her voice. But her tone wasn't quite right. She was surprised to see me, but she obviously wasn't registering how bizarre it was for me to suddenly appear out of thin air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her turn to Midian. "Is he all right?" Fear shaded her tone. "He's not speaking, and he won't look at me."

My father flickered over Midian's features. "He's just being stubborn."

"Stubborn?" Given sounded confused. She moved away from Midian's side. "Maybe if I sit next to him—"

"NO." Midian's deep voice boomed off the walls, halting Given as surely as if he'd grabbed her. At the edge of my vision, her form trembled. I resisted the urge to look at her. She was fine for now. Nothing was hurting her. But Midian might if I let my guard down. If I tried to reach her—physically or mentally—he would retaliate, showing her devastating things I may or may not be able to see. I wasn't going to let that happen, so I stared at him and pictured the obsidian walls of the Sanctum in my head.

I'd never been particularly religious. That was Laurent's domain. But I'd prayed to the gods more over the past three days than I had in my entire life. If I made it out of Vai Seren alive, I was going to erect a fucking shrine at Lar Keiren. Maybe finance an expansion of the Sanctum. For now, the mental image of the big, ancient building

was the only shield I had against the demons' mind tricks. So far, it was working. But I was growing weaker.

"Forgive me," Midian said smoothly. "It was rude of me to shout." He went to Given, and I held my breath as he took her arm and escorted her to the far end of the table. They were close enough together that I could see more of her face without looking away from him.

My heart sank. Her expression was serene, Midian's outburst clearly forgotten. She let him seat her, murmuring her thanks and smiling when he touched her shoulder.

My skin crawled. He sat at the table's head with Given to his right. Now she was parallel to me and a dozen seats down, putting her almost completely out of my range of vision.

The demon king smiled at me. "I think perhaps the general is just hungry." He turned to Given. "What about you, my dear? You must be famished after your journey." On his last word, the Hall's big double doors flew open. In my peripheral vision, several demons entered. The scent of roasted meat hit my nose.

My stomach groaned, and my mouth watered. Hunger gnawed at my insides until I wanted to weep. I'd eaten little over the past few days. At first, I'd vowed not to eat or drink at all. But once I decided it was too dangerous to sleep, I knew I couldn't go without food. So I'd eaten handfuls of whatever the demons put in front of me, swiping at my plate as I kept my eyes on theirs. They'd laughed as I choked down raw animal meat crawling with maggots, the flesh still warm from the kill.

But this food was cooked, and I breathed a sigh of relief that Given wouldn't be subjected to the same treatment. As the demons served us, I stared at Midian and listened to him feed her more lies. He spoke of showing her Vai Seren, promising he'd take her around the city so she could see what the elves had built.

She listened politely as he spoke. When he asked her questions, she responded with charm and wit. She had beautiful manners, which had never surprised me. She'd been born a princess. High-class social skills came with the title. But as I listened to her now, a bittersweet ache lodged in my chest. Midian had ensnared her mind, but he couldn't control how she acted. He was a manipulator, not a puppet master.

Given behaved this way because she was this way. She was polite and attentive and so trusting I wanted to yell at her for thinking people were good when most were selfish and cruel.

And, really, she had every reason to agree with me. I'd studied Rolund of Sithistra. He was Nor Doru's main enemy, and part of my job was knowing everything I could about the human king. I knew what he liked to eat for breakfast, and I knew which one of his wives he preferred over the other. I knew his favorite color and that he dropped his shoulder just before he swung his sword.

And I knew he'd started out as a decent enough brother, only to become a harsh and emotionally distant guardian when he ascended the throne. His mother certainly hadn't shown Given any affection. Baylen of Sithistra had lost the will to live—and to parent his daughter—when Vessa of Lar Satha died. Given's nurse and only source of affection passed away years ago. The princess had crossed the Rift alone, sold into blood servitude by her only living relative.

There was no reason at all why Given of Sithistra should be polite. Or kind. Or brave. But she was all of these things, particularly the last.

She'd come for me. I didn't know how she'd managed it, but maybe I should have expected it. After all, the first thing she'd done when our eyes met across the Bleak Pass was lift her chin.

I stared at Midian as he continued to act like everything was fine and this was a

normal dinner in an ordinary kingdom. In the farthest edge of my vision, Given lifted her fork to her mouth. She didn't appear to notice that Midian didn't eat, or that the grand table was coated in a thick layer of dust. She gave no sign she saw the fat vines that wrapped around the pillars and dangled from the crumbling ceiling high overhead. A human skeleton slumped in one of the chairs between us, remnants of dried tissue and sinew preventing it from tumbling apart. A treasure hunter, most likely, or maybe a Wesyfeddan who'd wandered too close to the edge of the Thicket. The bones didn't scare me. Before Given arrived, I'd prepared myself to join them shortly.

But now that she was here, death was no longer an option. I had to stay alive so I could get her out—and then maybe put her over my knee and spank her ass until she swore never to make me this terrified again.

A demon emerged from under the table near my knee. He unfolded his long body and trailed a fingertip up my arm as he rose to his full height. When I first arrived, the demons had tried to make me lose focus. I'd lock gazes with one just to have another step into my line of sight. I'd slipped up a few times, dropping my guard as I tried to adjust. Staring contests worked well when there was only one demon about. But eye contact was less effective with a swarm. The trick was to figure out which demon was the most powerful and never look away from it. In a weird way, it was easier when Midian was in the room, because I didn't have to think about it. I knew exactly where to look.

But that didn't stop his minions from messing with me.

"Another elven-born," the demon at my side murmured. He moved behind me and sank down, resting his chin on my shoulder as he watched—or pretended to watch—Given and Midian talking. "She looks like the elves, doesn't she?"

I stayed still, my attention on the demon king.

“Except for the ears.” The demon sighed. “Human ears. Boring, don’t you think? Then again, you probably weren’t interested in her ears.”

In my head, the Sanctum’s walls glittered in the muted sun of the Deepnight. The demon was going to turn to sex. They always did.

The smell of dust and decay filled my nostrils. The demon moved a hand to my inner thigh. “I bet you’re still not interested in her ears, are you, General?”

Nausea burned my throat. I continued to stare at Midian, even though the demon king wasn’t looking at me.

“No,” the demon on my shoulder said in Laurent’s voice. When I tensed, Laurent’s low chuckle caressed my ear. I knew what was coming, but that didn’t lessen the impact as he repeated what Laurent said to me after I escorted Given from the Rift. “You want to fuck Given of Sithistra, and it makes you furious.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

At the head of the table, Midian turned from Given and smiled at me. “Is that so?”

“What?” Given asked, her tone confused, almost sluggish. If they’d drugged her, I wasn’t sure I could control my rage. But drugging her didn’t make sense. They couldn’t break into her thoughts if she was unconscious. Sleeping had always been the safest way to spend time around my father. As long as I slept alone.

“Nothing, dear,” Midian told her without breaking my stare. “Do you want dessert?” When Given murmured something, he smiled. “Of course. I pride myself on being a good host. I want you to have everything you want.”

Foreboding dripped down my spine. The demon on my shoulder laughed again in Laurent’s voice.

“You too, General,” Midian said, and I knew then why he wanted Given and me alive. His blue eyes gleamed with malice. “You can have everything you want. Even the things that make you furious.”

Chapter Seven

GIVEN

The rest of the castle was as impressive as the Great Hall. I walked beside Midian and took it all in, gazing wide-eyed at pristine hallways and marble floors and grand staircases with carved banisters that stole my breath with their beauty. Vai Seren was as spectacular as the histories claimed. It was a shame no one ever got to see it.

There was a reason for that, but it escaped me at the moment. I frowned as we moved into a broad hall lined with statues. Once again, I had the strongest sense I was forgetting something, and that it was really important I remember it.

“Did you enjoy dinner?” Midian asked.

“Yes.” I pushed my worries aside and smiled up at him. “It was lovely, thank you.” But even as I said it, the nagging feeling tugged hard. Was the dinner lovely? My stomach was full, and I was pleasantly drowsy from the wine I’d drunk. Midian was an entertaining host. He’d held my attention with his stories about the castle and its architecture. He even promised to show me all of Vai Seren during my stay. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that not everything at dinner had unfolded perfectly. Something was missing.

And did I really want to stay?

“Of course you do,” he said.

I stopped. “I beg your pardon?”

He swung around, a question in his eyes. “Is anything wrong?”

“No, I just...thought I heard you say something.”

“The hall echoes.” He gestured around. “Do you enjoy art? These statues are ancient. Several date to the earliest days of the elven empire.”

Obediently, I swept my gaze down the statues. They lined both sides of the long, narrow room, their bodies carved from solid pieces of white stone. Each one stood on a pedestal, so I had to crane my neck to see their faces.

“They look solemn,” I said.

He laughed softly. “Well, most of them were nobles. I suppose they were trying to look impressive.”

I wandered down the line. There were males, of course, but quite a few females, as well. Like the men, they wore their hair down, letting it flow over proud shoulders. Pointed ears were visible among the stone strands. “It must have taken forever to carve these,” I said, drifting farther down the line. A female loomed above me, her face aching beautiful. Her arms were outstretched, her palms turned up like she was offering something. But her hands were empty. Her gown was carved to look like it spilled over the edge of the pedestal. I brushed the edge of the smooth stone, tracing a curve of what I imagined had been velvet.

My vision flickered. It lasted just a few seconds, but the hall changed completely. The statues were tumbled and broken, marble body parts strewn across a dusty floor. A jagged path cut through the dust, as if someone had swept it—or dragged something heavy between the crumbled statues. Thick vines draped over the remains of the pedestals, which were stained black and covered with cobwebs. The pungent, slightly sweet smell of rot assaulted my nose.

I blinked, and everything returned to normal. The change was so disorienting, I might have fallen if not for my grip on the statue’s gown. When I looked up, she lowered her chin and met my eyes. Her lips didn’t move, but a feminine voice spoke in my head.

“See the brick wall.”

I jerked away from the pedestal, half expecting to stumble over debris. But the floor was smooth and whole, the statues unblemished. Unbidden, an image of a brick wall sprang into my mind. I saw it just as the statue had commanded.

Except statues couldn't speak. Of course, they couldn't move, either, but this one had.

Hadn't she?

Midian strolled ahead, his hands clasped behind his back. If he'd noticed the statue turning its head and talking, wouldn't he have said something? The brick wall stayed in my mind. I looked up at the statue again, but she gazed straight ahead, her marble eyes unseeing.

I followed Midian, moving down the statues toward an arched doorway. But now my heart pounded, and tension tightened my shoulders. The sensation was familiar—like my skin didn't quite fit over my bones.

It was familiar because I'd felt it before, I realized. When I ventured into the Thicket alone, looking for Varick.

Varick.

I stifled a gasp as clarity rushed back. I was in Vai Seren to find Varick. He'd stared at Midian all through dinner, never once looking at me. Anger had blazed in his eyes, but his face had been pale, his hair tousled and unkempt. He was in danger here. We both were.

A few steps ahead, Midian turned.

I slammed the brick wall to the front of my mind.

The demon king considered me. "Are you well?"

"Yes," I lied, and I forced myself to walk forward. I tapped a long-buried memory of attending feast day services with Queen Amantha. Once a month, the royal household would walk from Castle Beldurn to the Tower of the Heart for public prayers. No matter how carefully Helen washed and brushed and dressed me, Rolund's mother always found fault with my appearance. My palms would sweat and my stomach would twist into knots. But displaying my nerves only made things worse, so I learned to bury my anxiety. I hid my feelings with a clenched jaw and a smile fixed in place with cement.

I did the same now, except I plastered what I hoped was a dreamy, somewhat stupid look on my face. I glided toward Midian like I didn't have a care in the world. "I was just admiring the way the clothing is carved," I said, the brick wall pinned to the inside of my forehead. "It's very realistic."

He glanced at the nearest statue. “Yes,” he said absently. “Come. You must be tired.”

I followed at a distance, and I touched every pedestal I passed. The hall didn’t flicker again, but as I brushed my fingers over the final piece of marble, the woman’s voice flowed into my head once more.

“Fire in your hand.”

Igrith’s power. I’d forgotten it the same way I forgot Varick. But I remembered now. I squeezed my hand into a fist and kept walking, the brick wall foremost in my mind.

Midian led me down more beautiful but austere hallways to a pair of double doors. He flung them wide, revealing a luxurious bedchamber decorated in white and gold. Clearly designed for a noblewoman, it boasted a canopied bed, vanity, and a reclining sofa like the one I’d woken on. As in the Great Hall, the marble hearth was empty. I didn’t see any windows, but a candelabra perched on a stand in the corner offered ample light.

“I hope everything is to your liking,” Midian said.

My smile stayed firmly in place. “It’s perfect.”

“I’ll leave you to your rest. Call for me if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

He touched my jaw, his fingers over the spot where I’d been struck. “We’re all so pleased you’re here.”

I smiled as he left, and I didn’t move when the lock clicked behind him, indicating I was well and truly a prisoner. I stood in the center of the room for a long time

afterward, listening for footsteps as I finally allowed fear to climb through me. My heart thumped painfully, but I didn't dare move. Not just yet. I stared at the double doors and waited for Midian or one of the others I'd seen at dinner to crash back inside and...do what, I didn't know. Harm me, I guessed. Punish me for entering Eldenvalla and trying to free Varick.

Except I'd failed miserably. Not only had I not rescued Varick, I'd gotten knocked out and beguiled. And now I was having visions and hearing statues. I cocked my head, straining for the sound of the woman's voice. But of course it didn't come. I had no idea what was real and what was illusion.

With a final, nervous look at the doors, I turned and headed toward the cold hearth.

My vision changed. So did the room.

Like the hall of statues, it was a crumbled, dusty ruin. The bed was broken, its canopy collapsed and tossed in the corner. The sofa was so dusty, the cushion looked gray. The vanity's mirror was cracked, the jagged lines resembling a spiderweb that showed me dozens of copies of my pale, frightened face.

I rubbed a shaking hand over my eyes. When I lowered it, the room remained a ruin. Vines covered the walls and floor. The twisted, vicious-looking lengths were the same as they'd been in my dream. The clinging, sour-sweet scent of rot coated my lungs.

This was real. Vai Seren was a dead city, its castle a decaying husk. And now I was trapped inside it, held prisoner by the demon king who had haunted my dreams my whole life. What did Midian want with me?

Rhys's words in the forest flowed back, his deep, urgent voice filling my head. "...every elven-born carries darkness inside him...or her. It is knitted onto your

souls.”

It wasn't too far off from what Varick claimed when he called us “dangerous.” If Varick and I were truly part demon, maybe Midian meant to keep us here.

Tears of fear and frustration pricked my eyes. I had no hope of fighting Midian and the others. The “fire in my hand” was temporary—a borrowed gift with an unknown expiration date.

But I had another gift. My gift. I could farsee.

My breath quickened. I'd only done it once, and the experience had been both enlightening and terrifying. Ever since, I'd been wary of it happening again. But this was an emergency. I was trapped in Eldenvalla. According to Rhys, the mages were charged with protecting me. I'd seen Rhys beat back a group of demons. And Igrith was a force to be reckoned with. Who better to rescue Varick and me than the mages of Wesyfedd? I couldn't get a message to them, but I could go to them—even if only in spirit.

The problem was, I didn't really know how to farsee. I'd done it by accident in Nor Doru.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Except...maybe it hadn't been entirely accidental. I thought back to that night, gnawing at my bottom lip as I tried to recall everything I'd done before I left my body. I'd been worried about the solstone dagger, which Rowena had delivered along with the cryptic message "the south is with you." My brother Rolund was the south. I'd wondered why he would put me in danger by placing solstone in my hands. The metal was poison to vampires, who couldn't heal its wounds. Having one in my possession around Laurent was a death sentence.

I'd gone to my balcony with fear and anger swirling in my head. I'd been desperate to speak to Rolund. Had wanted to see his face when I asked him if he sent the solstone—and just what he expected me to do with it.

I'd wanted to see his face.

Could it really be that easy?

The bed looked too unstable, so I went to the sofa and sat gingerly. Dust puffed around my hips. I waved the motes away and folded my hands in my lap.

Rhys. I needed to speak to Rhys. Or maybe I should start with Igrith. Although, it didn't really matter. If I landed in Aberwas, I could speak to both of them.

I frowned. But maybe farseeing didn't work with two names.

Gods, I should just pick one and stick with it.

Igrith, I decided. Rhys was probably angry with me for leaving. Not that he had a

right to be. He wasn't my brother or guardian. Or husband.

Gaze on my lap, I huffed. If I could speak to Laurent about my predicament, he'd probably find a way to blame me for putting Varick in danger. But I couldn't help wondering what my powerful husband would look like facing off with Midian. What happened when a demon king encountered a priest-king?

Rhys, I thought. I need to speak to Rhys. The only king I wanted to see at the moment was the "bandit king."

I bowed my head. "Rhys," I mouthed, too anxious to whisper. Take me to Rhys. I wasn't sure if my plea was a prayer or a command. Maybe both.

Take me to Rhys.

Goosebumps lifted on my arms. Excitement rushed through me. This was it! I embraced the feeling, no longer afraid. Goosebumps turned to shivers. When the bedchamber began to rock, I closed my eyes. I have to be willing to let go, I realized. The bedchamber wasn't unsteady—I was.

Good. I released the breath I was holding and surrendered.

The air changed. I dropped to the ground, landing hard on my ass in a tangle of skirts. My eyes flew open.

Laurent of Nor Doru whirled from the table he'd been standing over. "Given?"

I kicked my skirts out of the way. "Fuck."

Chapter Eight

LAURENT

Seeing Given pop out of nowhere was the surprise of my life. Hearing her drop profanity with the fluency of a knight on Gate Street was a close second.

She stared up at me with disbelief in her eyes. “You can see me?”

“Obviously.”

She scowled at that. Then she looked bewildered. “Last time I was invisible. The men-at-arms I saw in Castle Beldurn walked right past me.” She darted a look around.

“We’re alone.”

One slender brow arched. “Obviously.”

I tried to smile at the dig, but that particular expression hadn’t worked for me lately so I went to her and extended my good hand.

She looked at it like I’d offered her a poisonous snake. “I’m farseeing. You can’t throw me into your dungeon.”

“Then it’s fortunate I have no desire to do that,” I said evenly.

For a second, it seemed she might refuse my help. But then she sighed and took my hand. Dust billowed from her gown, which fit her a bit too snugly across the chest. More dust coated her hair. She was beautiful as always, but there were purple smudges under her eyes. A faint bruise shadowed her jaw.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I grasped her chin, careful to keep my thumb away from the discoloration. Anger swept me, turning my voice to ice. “Rhys the Fair?”

She tugged her face from my grip. “No. And don’t pretend it bothers you. Or if it does, it’s only because you don’t like having your property damaged.”

“Where in the blazes did you get that idea?”

“I don’t know, maybe from the temper tantrum you sent Rhys—”

“Temper tantrum?”

“—calling yourself my rightful lord under the law.”

“I am your rightful lord under the law! The bandit king has no claim on you.”

She snarled. “Don’t call him that. He’s far more than that stupid title.” She shook her head, her brow furrowing as she made a frustrated sound. “He’s the one I wanted to see. I need his help. I can’t fight the—” She clamped her lips together.

My senses sharpened. “Fight what?”

She stared at me, her blue eyes wary like she was trying to decide if she should trust me. Then she let out a shuddering breath. “I came from Eldenvalla. I’m in Vai Seren as we speak, imprisoned by Midian, the demon king. Varick is with me.”

My heart flipped over. I barely stopped myself from clutching at my chest. Dramatics

are unbecoming a king. One of my father's favorite sayings. But the past three days had been a nightmare. I hadn't slept, just sat and waited for reports from the search parties who rotated back and forth between Lar Katerin and the Thicket. Varick had trained his knights well. They refused to permit me to ride to the Thicket myself. One of the knight captains had threatened to summon Petru if I tried.

The High Priest couldn't stop me—at least not without a great deal of effort. But I was rational enough to know how stupid it would be for me to plunge headlong into the Thicket. I had no heir. If I died, the Deepnight would fail. All of it.

And now I knew what lived in the Thicket.

“The elves have Varick?” I asked Given, surprised at how steady my voice sounded.

“Not elves,” she said grimly. “Demons.” Fear flickered in her eyes. “Varick doesn't move or talk. He just sits in the Great Hall. I believe Midian is keeping him prisoner, too, just in a different way. Or maybe Varick is fighting back.”

“I can almost guarantee that's what he's doing,” I said, pride and affection rushing through me. But sorrow followed just as swiftly. “His mind is just as strong as his body.”

“What do you mean?” Given asked, some of the wariness fading from her eyes.

Varick loved his secrets, but this wasn't the time to guard them. The only thing I cared about was bringing him home. Alive. If he wanted to bitch at me for sharing his past, so be it. I'd take the grumbling and be happy he was around to do it.

“My father was an asshole,” I said. “And like a lot of assholes, he preferred to surround himself with other assholes.”

“Valen of Lar Keiren,” Given murmured.

“My father’s general,” I confirmed. “Valen was from the warrior class, and most of Nor Doru knew him for his size and strength. Good qualities to have in a general. But that wasn’t why my father liked him. Valen was also cruel. My father enjoyed that trait, too, but that still wasn’t the reason he kept Valen by his side.” We were alone, but I lowered my voice anyway. “Valen of Lar Keiren was rumored to have certain abilities. He knew things about people. He could describe events he had no business knowing about in vivid detail.”

“Because he was a farseer.”

I nodded. “My father called him his ‘ghost.’ He kept Valen’s ancestry a secret, and Valen reciprocated by spying on my father’s enemies.” I hesitated. “But Valen had other gifts. It took me a long time to get the truth out of Varick.”

She sighed. “He’s so damn stubborn.”

“He is,” I agreed on a shaky laugh. As quickly as it came, my humor faded. “But in this case, I think he was afraid to admit some of the things his father did. Varick worried people might think he was crazy if he told them Valen was capable of forcing his way into others’ minds. When Varick was a boy, Valen would pull thoughts from Varick’s head and whip him when he read ones he didn’t like. And...” I cleared my throat. “When Varick got older and developed an interest in men, Valen read his mind and punished him for it.”

Fear flared anew in Given’s eyes. “I think Midian does the same.”

“You called him the demon king.”

She wiped at her forehead, smearing dust that became a streak of dirt as it mixed with

sweat. “It’s what he calls himself.”

“And he’s spoken to Varick?” The thought of another demented being cracking open Varick’s mind threatened to make me lose mine.

“Yes—” She stopped. Frowned and shook her head. “I can’t be sure. Nothing is as it seems in that place. I feel like I’m missing bits and pieces of time.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I took her by the shoulders. “What can I do to get the two of you out of there?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Well, think!” Fear made my voice sharp.

“Let go of me!” She fought my hold, managing to free one hand and slap at my shoulder. When I adjusted my grip, her gaze fell on my gloved right hand. Suddenly, she stopped fighting. “You’re still hurt.”

An understatement. “Hurt” was a weak word invented by someone who didn’t know the first thing about pain. But agony? That one worked. Excruciating? Another winner.

I released her, then held my right hand level before her eyes. Tiny tendrils of smoke wafted from the black velvet. The fabric was undeniably ostentatious, but it was the softest the palace glovemaker had come up with. I felt ridiculous wearing one fucking glove, but I could now state with hard-earned experience that two were worse.

Fuck.

Given’s gaze followed the trail of smoke. “Does it pain you?”

“What do you think?”

All traces of softness fled her expression. “I didn’t put the dagger under your pillow,” she snapped.

“I believe you.”

She frowned. “You do?”

I lowered my hand—and ignored the blistering agony that moved under my skin like lava. “I don’t know that I ever believed you put it there,” I said. “But you kept it a secret.” I started to rake a hand through my hair, realized I wore the stupid glove, and lowered my arm with a curse. “You should have told me about farseeing to Sithistra.”

“You would have declared war on my brother. You would have killed Rowena.” She paled. “Did you kill Rowena?”

“No.”

Her shoulders sagged with obvious relief. Then her gaze sharpened. “Because you can’t find her?”

“I have bigger problems right now.”

She pointed at me. “You always do that! When you don’t want to answer a question, you change the subject or make some pithy remark.”

“You don’t think getting you and Varick out of demon-infested Vai Seren is a bigger problem than some human spy?”

“You just did it again.”

I almost smiled. Few people dared to call me on my bullshit. Varick was one. And now Given. My wife. I’d messed up with both of them. I’d messed up everything.

Given stared, waiting for my pithy reply. But I didn’t have one. I had nothing at the

moment because I'd thrown it away. I took in her ragged hair and tired eyes. Her bruised chin and dirt-coated gown. She was still so lovely. Dust couldn't dim her beauty.

"I'm sorry," I said through a tight throat. "You and Varick are in Eldenvalla because of me. I drove you from Nor Doru."

Silence stretched. I waited for her to respond. For her eyes to tear up and her face to crumple. Aching hand or not, I was prepared to fold her into my arms just as soon as she threw herself into them.

When she remained quiet, I said, "I just apologized."

"I heard you. You're sorry you believed the prophecy forced you to lure me into marriage so I could sleep with Varick and give you an elven-born child to throw into the Rift."

"That's—" I narrowed my eyes. "You don't understand the kind of pressure I'm under." I turned, flinging an arm toward the massive stone table behind me. Some long-dead ancestor had built it, commissioning every sculptor in Nor Doru to carve a perfect map of Ter Isir. The Rift carved a jagged furrow across the stone, dividing north from south. Wesyfedd nestled among a nest of cast iron trees.

She peered past my arm. "It's a map," she said stiffly.

"Look more closely." I went to the table and pointed at an iron marker cast as a night-blooming rose. I pointed out another...and another. "All the places the Deepnight is disappearing."

She flicked her gaze to me. "Varick told me the canopy is failing." Her mouth tightened. "The night we fled the dungeon you lied about having."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I rounded the table and touched a marker positioned close to the Wastes. “This one is new. My knights reported it just this morning. A farmer found his wife and child burned to ash in his fields.”

Her lips parted. “I... That’s horrible.”

“Yes, it is. And it will keep happening.” I caught myself lifting my hand to shove at my hair again. Instead, I raised my left and rubbed at my eyes, which felt like someone had sprinkled sandpaper under my lids. Something brushed my sleeve, and when I looked down, Given was beside me.

“You should rest, Laurent. You look exhausted.”

“So do you,” I said softly.

We stared at each other, a world of problems between us.

I swallowed hard. “Tell me how to help you. I’m the most powerful priest who’s ever lived.”

The hint of a smile touched her lips. “I forgot you’re not one for false modesty.”

“Not when it comes to power, I’m not.”

She looked at the map, her gaze falling on the barren expanse of Eldenvalla. Her brow furrowed. “Soldiers won’t work. But if they escorted the mages—” She brought her head up sharply, her blue eyes wide with fear.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I feel one of them.”

“Where?” When she didn’t answer, panic gripped me. “Given?”

“I have to go,” she whispered.

I reached for her—

But she was already gone.

Chapter Nine

GIVEN

There was no void this time. No colorless, shapeless nothingness to get lost in.

This time, I slammed into my body so hard I cried out as my eyes flew open. I lay half-reclined on the curved, dusty sofa.

And a demon stood over me, his eyes fully black in his beautiful face. As I gasped, he recoiled with a hiss.

I shot to my feet. “Wh-What are you doing?”

“You were gone.” He stepped toward me, menace rolling off him in thick waves. “He never gave you permission to go.”

“I was sleeping.”

The demon gave me a nasty smile. “He’ll punish you for this. He has ways.” The demon nodded vigorously, the movement so overdone and manic I stumbled back. My legs collided with the sofa, and I sat down hard.

The demon swooped down on me, seized my arm, and hauled me up. “He has ways,” he repeated, hustling me to the doors, which stood half-open.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded, although I had to assume that “he” meant Midian. Icy fear wrapped around me, numbing my lips and making me stumble. It didn’t help that the hallways were littered with debris. My vision didn’t flicker to the pristine, elven palace of before, but I was grateful for it. I wanted to see the truth, no matter how ugly.

But I couldn’t let Midian know. Quickly, I pictured a brick wall in my head. No matter what happened, I had to keep that image intact. And I had to act like everything was fine. I’d pretended often enough in the past, whether it was with Queen Amantha or my brother or even his wives. Elissa was mostly kind but she was unhappy in her marriage. She couldn’t express her discontent with Rolund, so she took it out on others. As his sister, I was sometimes a next-best target. My brother didn’t like dealing with troubles that arose in his wives’ courts, which meant Elissa got away with her bad behavior.

Yes, I could smile and pretend. My whole life had been preparation for this moment. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that.

We entered the hall of statues, and I lost any urge to laugh. The woman who spoke to me was a shattered mess, her head severed from her body. Dust swirled as the demon pulled me along, his boots clicking over the marble floors.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

The Great Hall loomed ahead. After more scuffling and dragging, the demon pulled the massive doors open and yanked me inside.

And I saw the Hall from my dream in Aberwas.

The glittering, white perfection was no more. Now, the once-glorious Hall was as dusty and decrepit as the rest of the castle. But here, vines covered everything. They wrapped around the pillars and tangled on the floor.

Varick sat in the same chair at the stone table, but now the Hall was full of demons—male and female—twirling around the room in pairs. They moved in some kind of dance, only there was no music.

Midian stood on the opposite side of the table from Varick, his back to me. Varick looked more haggard than I remembered from my first visit, his eyes red-rimmed and his jaw covered in several days' growth of blond beard. He stared up at Midian as though Midian was speaking to him. Whatever Midian was putting in Varick's head, Varick didn't like it. His cheeks were flushed, his lips compressed in a thin line.

Midian turned as my captor dragged me forward, dodging the dancers who swooped into our path.

“What is this?” Midian demanded, his noble features darkening.

I pinned the brick wall to the front of my mind and let my face go slack, a dreamy smile plastered on my face. A skeleton slumped in one of the chairs a few places down from Varick. I jerked my gaze away from it and tried to pretend I didn't see the

vines I was stepping over.

“She was gone,” my captor said, jerking me to a stop before the table. “She left, just like they used to do.” He tightened his grip on my arm, and I fought back a wince as his fingers dug into my muscle. He nodded toward Varick. “She’s stronger than that one. You should kill her.”

My gut clenched, my insides turning watery.

“You court danger,” the demon continued, his voice climbing. “She’s Avenor’s—”

“Enough,” Midian barked. Behind me, I sensed the dancers go still. Midian looked me over, and I stared at him with the wall in my mind and my smile fixed in place. I didn’t look away as he shifted his gaze to the demon holding me. His voice went low and silky. “Why were you in her room?”

My captor stiffened. “I was just checking—”

“You disturbed our guest. This displeases me, Arrol.”

Somewhere deep within the castle, bells rang. Not the tinkling sound I’d heard before. This was a deep, mournful clang, like the great bells that hung in the Towers of the Mir. The ringing cut off abruptly, and I held my breath as I waited to see if anyone reacted to the noise.

“You named me,” the demon holding me said, outrage in his tone. He twisted around like he meant to address the demons behind us. “I’ve done nothing to deserve this. I merely warned—”

“Out!” Midian shouted. “Get him out of my sight and show him the error of his ways.”

Arrol screamed. “No! No, please, not that—” His voice cut off as another demon swept forward and slung an arm around his throat. More swarmed him, ripping him from my side and dragging him from the Hall. They moved quickly but...oddly. I’d seen both Varick and Laurent move so fast they were little more than a blur.

But this was different. Similar to the jerky, exaggerated nodding Arrol had done in my bedchamber, it wasn’t quite right. When I was a child, a brother from the Tower of the Mind showed me a series of drawings he’d made. Each one was of the same image but just a little bit different. When he stacked the pages and flipped through them, the drawing appeared to move.

This was similar, only the demons weren’t drawings. They were very real, and as the doors of the Great Hall slammed behind them, a cold sweat broke out across my body.

Midian glared at the doors for a long moment before settling his gaze on me. I was ready for him, the brick wall solid in my head and my stupid smile intact.

“You probably think I’m an ungracious king,” he said, coming to me and extending his hand in a courtly gesture. “Kings shouldn’t shout when guests are present.”

I took his arm. “Did you shout, Your Grace?” It was something Laurent might have said. Maybe my husband was onto something with his evasions. It was an excellent way to keep enemies guessing.

Midian gave no reply as he led me to the chair I’d occupied before. He seated me and then settled at the head of the table. “We were just about to begin our feast.” He glanced at the demons scattered throughout the Hall.

And that was when I realized they hadn’t moved. Aside from the two who removed Arrol, the others had remained perfectly still from the time Midian said “enough.” No

one blinked. Their chests didn't rise and fall. On impulse, I listened for their heartbeats.

Nothing. The Hall was deadly quiet, the only sounds Varick's heartbeat and mine.

I thrust Varick firmly from my head. I kept my gaze on Midian, not daring to so much as turn my head in Varick's direction.

Midian clapped his hands. "Let us feast!"

The dancers began twirling as if they'd never stopped. The women's skirts flared out and folded around the men's legs. The big doors flew open again, and demons dressed in servants' clothing brought food to the table in a steady stream.

There was no music, just the swish of skirts and the clatter of boots on stone. The demons kicked up dust as they spun in neat circles, their long hair flying. A servant placed a silver bowl in front of me. It held a watery soup with bits of pinkish meat bobbing on the surface. A damp, gamey smell hit my nose.

My stomach lurched, and nausea burned my throat.

“The food doesn’t please you?” Midian asked.

I smiled. “Nothing pleases me more.” Praying my hand wouldn’t shake, I dipped my spoon in the meat-water and brought it to my mouth. He tracked my movement, and an intense look entered his eyes as he watched me swallow. When he didn’t look away, I continued eating, spooning water and undercooked meat into my mouth and hoping I didn’t choke.

Midian observed this like he found it fascinating. He leaned an elbow on the table, the look in his eyes almost lustful. “What’s it like?” he rasped.

What would Laurent say? I nodded toward Midian’s untouched plate. “Won’t you try some?”

His eyes went black, and his handsome face twisted in unmistakable rage. For one brief, terrifying moment, he looked like a decaying, grimacing corpse. A beat later, he was back to normal, and he waved a languid hand. “I enjoy watching you.”

My face was beginning to hurt from smiling. I took another bite so I could switch to chewing. The demons continued their silent, disturbing dance, and I wondered if I was supposed to hear music or if this was just another trick. Varick’s presence pressed against my side like a warm, solid weight. Instinct urged me to turn to him, to make eye contact with someone alive and familiar, but I didn’t dare. Sweat soaked the back of my gown, and my stomach threatened to revolt. But I couldn’t show any discomfort. Our lives depended on me keeping it together.

I looked down at my bowl just as an insect skittered up the side and over my hand. A scream ripped from my throat before I could stop it. I jerked backward in my chair, upsetting the bowl and sending my spoon clattering to the ground. Water and meat sloshed over the table, weaving tiny rivers through the dust.

As one, the demon dancers stopped.

Cold dread descended over me as I stared at the mess on the table. Slowly, I lifted my gaze to Midian.

He rose from his chair, a cruel smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “How unfortunate,” he murmured. “It seems you’re not enjoying the feast, after all.”

My heart dropped into my roiling stomach. “I-I am,” I said, trying to salvage my act, but it was too late. Black bled over his eyes, obscuring the whites and his brilliant blue irises. He swept behind me and headed straight for Varick.

“No!” I cried. “Don’t touch him!”

Varick spoke for the first time as he watched Midian approach. “Be quiet, Given.” His voice sounded scraped from the back of his throat, as if he hadn’t used it in months.

Midian chuckled, the sound low and vicious as he stopped before Varick. He gripped Varick’s jaw and hauled him out of his chair. Midian was slightly taller, and he forced Varick’s head back, putting him in a clearly uncomfortable position.

“Please don’t,” I gasped.

“Given, be silent,” Varick growled.

Midian looked at me over his shoulder. When he spoke, it was in Varick's low, gravelly voice. "Yes, Given. Please do be silent." He turned, taking Varick with him. Varick bumped into his chair and sent it toppling over. Midian paid it no mind as he positioned himself and Varick in profile, giving me a clear view of both of their faces.

"The princess doesn't like our entertainment," Midian said, his gaze locked with Varick's. "And that simply will not do, will it, General?"

Varick glared at him but said nothing.

Midian gave an exaggerated sigh and turned his attention to the demons spread throughout the Hall. "So disobedient, these children."

The demons laughed—a sudden burst of raucous jeers that quickly cut off, leaving an eerie silence that made my heart pound harder and sweat prickle under my arms. The meat sat like stones in my stomach, and my mouth watered uncontrollably as I tried not to vomit.

Midian turned back to Varick. He leaned in like he meant to kiss Varick, not stopping until their lips almost brushed. "We'll have to find something else to entertain our princess, won't we?"

Varick jerked. Squeezed his eyes shut. A low-pitched sob escaped his lips.

"No, no, no," Midian crooned. "Don't be afraid to look." He peered at Varick the same way he'd watched me eat. Like he was fascinated. Almost greedy.

Varick strained in Midian's grip, his lower half shaking. He cried out again, fighting some invisible foe.

Midian laughed. “Oh, how you love having a king on his knees. Such a naughty general, turning your sovereign over your knee.” Midian’s voice changed, growing darker until it reached a growl that sent shivers down my spine. “You revel in it, don’t you, boy? Your disgusting, unnatural, filthy habits.”

“I did nothing wrong!” Varick cried, his voice cracking. He sounded so young. And utterly lost.

I lurched forward, clutching at the back of a chair. “Stop it!”

Varick opened his eyes, but he didn’t look away from Midian. “Stay back, Given!”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Midian smiled, and his voice shifted to Laurent's. "She would have loved Valen. And Valen would have adored her." He tilted his head. "Should we introduce them?"

"Don't," Varick said hoarsely. "D-Do anything you want to me, but not her. Please. Gods, please, not her."

"Oh, your gods aren't here," Midian said. "They've abandoned you."

Something touched my shoulder, and I screamed and whirled around. My forehead bumped something hard, and I stumbled back. And looked up...and up. An enormous vampire in full armor stood before me, his golden eyes gleaming in a handsome, cruel face. The night-blooming rose of Nor Doru covered his breastplate, and a crimson cloak streamed from his shoulders.

Varick shouted behind me. "It's not real, Given! Look at something else!"

The vampire's hand shot out and wrapped around my throat. He bent his head low, giving me an eyeful of bright eyes and bloodstained fangs. "Do I look real to you, little doll?"

I couldn't breathe. I clawed at his hand, but it was like scratching at a rock. I gagged, tears running down my face as black leaked into my vision.

"Please!" Varick cried. "I'll stop! I won't fight you anymore. You can take whatever you want, just leave her alone."

My tears flowed faster. Hearing him so broken and helpless was gutting me. It didn't

matter that the vampire in front of me wasn't really Valen of Lar Keiren. I couldn't make myself see anyone else. And I couldn't get to Varick. But I wanted to. Desperation clawed at me, leaving bloody furrows across my heart. If I could get Varick away—just for a moment—the two of us could talk. I had things to tell him, like how I'd seen Laurent and how Laurent was clearly suffering in Varick's absence. And I wanted to tell him we were getting out of here because I refused to let us die.

Because we wouldn't. Igrith had seen me emerge from the Thicket. She hadn't seen Varick, but it didn't matter because I was taking him with me. Midian had no power over our future. I was getting Varick out.

Valen squeezed my throat.

Now.

I blinked, and Varick and I stood in the middle of a clearing surrounded by tall grasses.

Chapter Ten

VARICK

At first, Given and I just stared at each other.

Then she let out a wild cry and rushed to me, her skirts flying. I caught her and buried my face in her hair, inhaling dust and the scent of cloves that always clung to her.

“Are we safe?” she croaked.

I squeezed my eyes shut and wished I could lie. I would have given just about anything to tell her what she wanted to hear. “We can't stay.”

She pulled back, her face streaked with dust and tears. “Why? You said this place is my creation. I used to think it was a dream, but you spoke to me here. It’s the whole reason I came to Eldenvalla.”

“I know.” I gripped her shoulders. “You brave little fool. I told you there was no hope for me. Why couldn’t you just listen?”

“Because I’m not letting you die.”

My chest tightened. I had about a hundred things I wanted to ask her, everything from how she got through the Thicket to what, if anything, Midian had forced her to see. But there was no telling how long this interlude would last, so I shoved my curiosity aside.

“Listen to me,” I said. “This is no dream. It’s the Middling. As far as I know, every farseer can reach this place. You can manipulate it to look as you wish. It was the same with my father, although his didn’t look like this.”

She glanced at a white blossom that drifted past us. “What is it, exactly? Are we...here? Physically?”

“Our bodies are in the Great Hall. Farseers are rare, so my knowledge is shaky. From what I’ve read, this is an in-between plane only those with the gift can access. Although, you can bring others here if you wish.” Normally, I would have stopped there, before old memories could surface. But this time, I let them come. “When my father wanted to punish me without a lot of noise, he pulled me into his Middling.”

Her face fell. “Oh, Varick.”

“We can’t linger here. It’s as I told you before, if we stay outside our bodies for too long we’ll die. We have to go back, and when we do, Midian will probably force me

to see a lot of things I don't want to see. I need you to look away and stay quiet, do you understand? No matter what I say or do, I need you to ignore it, sweetheart. For your own good. And mine. All right?"

"All right," she whispered.

I took a deep breath. "Midian might try to show you things, too. That's his power. He reads minds and he creates illusions. It's the only real power demons have."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“Lies as a gift,” she murmured, her exhaustion-smudged eyes distant and solemn. She shivered and refocused on me. “Rhys the Fair rescued me from the Thicket the night we fled Lar Katerin. I spent time in Aberwas before I came here looking for you. Rhys and his cousin are mages. They claim the elves who escaped the Fall passed on parts of the demons inside them. That you and I aren’t really elven-born but—”

“Demon-born.” I finished grimly. “I’ve long suspected it, but I’m not sure I really believed it until now. Or maybe I just didn’t let myself believe it. But sitting in the Great Hall these past three days has convinced me. Midian and the others never eat, but they can’t help but watch us when we do.”

“They’re jealous.”

Surprise flitted through me. She’d been paying attention. That didn’t make what I was about to tell her any easier. “They’re not alive. They never will be, and they know it. Everything about them is a lie, including the bodies they’ve stolen.” I hesitated. “I worry that Midian wanted us for a specific reason.”

She paled. “What?”

For a moment, I almost backpedaled. Considered making something up or telling her to forget it. But I couldn’t leave her vulnerable. It was bad enough that I couldn’t protect her. Sending her back to the Hall unprepared was worse than leveling with her.

And maybe I was wrong. I hoped I was wrong.

“The demons are jealous of the living,” I said. “The histories of Ter Isir say as much if you read between the lines. But I don’t have to. I’ve seen it in my father...and my sister.”

Given’s eyes widened. “Lady Evelina? I don’t understand.”

“My family’s estate in Lar Keiren is hidden away in the north, at the edge of the Wastes. My ancestors must have thought it was safe to keep records there, because they left testimonies warning of a spirit of lasciviousness in our line. My father kept dozens of mistresses. Always, he sought to sire more children.” Old pain surfaced, and it tightened my voice. “He made my mother’s life miserable in every way possible.”

“And you believe Evelina is this way?”

I shook my head. “My sister isn’t violent, but she’s...” I struggled for words that didn’t want to come. Because I’d failed Evelina. It was another shame on top of a mountain of sins I carried. I took a deep breath and tried again. “Evelina is cruel to the males she pursues, and she pursues every male she can. It’s like she’s driven by lust she can’t control.”

“But she’s wed now,” Given said.

I grimaced. “I don’t know if I did the right thing by forcing her hand. But Evelina is only a small part of what I’m trying to tell you. The darkest traits of the elven-born run in my family. The viciousness and the cruelty and the insatiable drive to spread our seed. It doesn’t come from the elves, Given. It comes from Midian, and I worry he sees you and me as tools to create what he can’t.”

Her lips parted. The blood drained from her face, making the smudges under her eyes more prominent. “You think he wants a child from us.”

“I don’t know if I’m right. But I worry I might be.”

She closed her eyes on a long blink. “It’s like a twisted version of the prophecy.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. Cryptic words had never held any appeal for me. Always, I’d resented the “child of prophecy” label the Brotherhood had bestowed on me. What use did I have for a title awarded by males who worshipped a god I didn’t believe in? But I’d been careless in my arrogance. I had forgotten one important fact: Whether it was the prediction of my birth or the prophecy that spoke of the savior of the realm, my beliefs were irrelevant. It was enough that other people believed in it—and were willing to do terrible things to make the events it foretold come to pass.

Given’s eyes were stark. “What do we do?”

I didn’t know—and I didn’t get a chance to tell her.

Because the next time I blinked, we were back in the Great Hall.

Chapter Eleven

GIVEN

The first thing I saw when I arrived back in my body was an enraged Midian.

He picked up where Valen had left off, his hand wrapped around my throat and his black eyes narrowed in fury. “You think you’re clever, hiding and taking the priest’s lover with you. Tell me, Princess, does it hurt knowing your husband prefers his general over you?”

Slow learner that I was, I didn’t hide the pain his words produced. It was a devastating error, because once he saw it, his rage twisted into something far worse.

Between one breath and the next, Laurent stared into my eyes.

“Does it bother you, my queen?” Midian said in Laurent’s voice. He shoved me into a chair, tangled a hand in my hair, and forced my gaze to the vine-covered Great Hall. Except now it was Laurent’s bedchamber, and the dancers were gone. “Let’s just have a look.”

Laurent and Varick stumbled into the chamber, ripping at each other’s clothes like they couldn’t strip fast enough. After a few fumbling seconds, Varick growled, grabbed Laurent around the thighs, and hoisted him up. His big hands squeezed Laurent’s ass, his knuckles turning white. Laurent swore, wrapped his legs around Varick’s waist, and nipped at Varick’s mouth with his fangs.

Varick grunted and spun them around. He took three strides to the bed and tossed Laurent down. It took him about two seconds to rip away the rest of Laurent’s clothes, and then he put a knee between Laurent’s thighs and took Laurent’s lips in a savage kiss.

Laurent arched, a deep moan rumbling from his smooth chest. He spread his legs wide, making room for Varick’s big body. Varick’s trousers still clung to his hips, but they were open in the front, and the leather slid down, exposing the hard, muscular curves of his ass.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Laurent's hand moved between their bodies. He wrapped his fingers around his dick and stroked.

Varick reared back and seized Laurent's wrist. "Did I tell you to touch yourself?"

"Please, baby," Laurent gasped, silver eyes glowing. "You've got me so fucking hard."

A rough hand in my hair yanked my head back, and Midian's black eyes and malicious smile filled my vision. "They're passionate together, aren't they?"

I stared, tears smarting in my eyes as I felt individual strands of hair ripped out by the root. If he pulled too much at once, he might take scalp with it. My heart fluttered, skipping beats.

He shoved his face in mine, and his mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth as he screamed, "I. ASKED. YOU. A. QUESTION."

"Yes!" I whimpered, and if I'd had anything in my bladder, I would have wet myself. My neck ached from the unnatural angle. "Yes, Y-Your Grace. They are."

He withdrew slightly, and when a crafty little smile played around his mouth, his teeth were normal once more. "A little bird told me you like watching them together. That it makes you so very wet."

Varick's warning from the Middling tripped through my mind. Belatedly, I pictured a brick wall, but I knew it was too late. Midian had already been in my head.

“And what a simple little head it is,” he said. His face stayed his own as his voice shifted to Laurent’s. “Tell me, princess, how does it feel knowing the men in your life could never want you like they want each other?” He forced my head down again, and Laurent’s bedchamber became a room I’d never seen before.

It was round and small, hardly big enough for a bed. In fact, the bed was the room. There wasn’t space for anything else. Candles burned in holders on the walls.

And Laurent and Varick made love. It was slower this time, the violence of before given way to something deeper and more intense. Laurent was on his back, his knees drawn up as Varick thrust between his legs. Varick had Laurent’s arms pinned over his head, but Laurent tugged and Varick released them.

Laurent reached a hand up and palmed Varick’s chest, caressing the hard, round muscle sheened with sweat. White sheets tangled beneath them, as if they’d been making love for a while. Candlelight played over Varick’s back.

Which was covered in scars. Abruptly, I realized I’d never seen his back. When we were together that one time in Laurent’s bedchamber, he’d never once turned away from me.

Now I knew that was probably deliberate.

Midian leaned down and spoke in my ear, his cheek brushing mine. “Theirs is a bond you’ll never understand. They have so much history together. No wonder they don’t think of you as their equal.”

I held my breath as I watched the vision of Laurent and Varick together. Now, Laurent touched Varick’s cheek. Still thrusting deeply, Varick turned his lips into Laurent’s hand and kissed his palm.

“You’re a means to an end to them,” Midian said. “Just a convenient womb to give them what they want.”

Laurent pulled Varick down, and they kissed as their bodies rocked together. Varick hooked a thick arm under one of Laurent’s thighs and pressed it higher, deepening the angle of his thrusts.

“They don’t want you,” Midian murmured. “How could they? Just look at them.”

Laurent threw his head back and cried out. The sound of his ecstasy was like a knife twisting in my heart. Midian was right.

“Of course I’m right,” he said.

Laurent didn’t want me.

“No, he doesn’t.”

He never had. He only wanted me because of the prophecy.

Midian chuckled. “The savior of the realm.” Cool lips touched my cheek, brushing away a tear. “Such a lofty title for one so unworthy of it. Really, Given, how could you save anyone? You can’t even save yourself.”

It was true. A sob warbled in my throat, which was thick with unshed tears. Defeat settled over me, and I didn’t resist as Midian put a hand under my elbow and pulled me from my chair. Laurent and Varick melted away, and I walked in a fog, my head full of Midian’s deep voice telling me how I was a disappointment in every sense of the word. A daughter when my father had wanted another son to shore up his line. A halfling reviled in both north and south.

“The wicked product of unholy lust,” Queen Amantha hissed. She dipped into my path as I walked with Midian. Others appeared, too, forming a gauntlet that jeered and heaped scorn.

“Rebellious and troublesome,” my brother said, casting me a dour look before turning away.

“Simple,” Crasor the Prelate said, “an empty, pretty vessel, just like her whore of a mother.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Rowena raked a dismissive gaze down my body. “Not as beautiful as the rumors said.”

“A halfling,” Varick spat. “Stupid little girl.”

Laurent bent in a low bow, then straightened with gleaming silver eyes. “You were a fun tumble, princess, I’ll give you that.” He opened a door and stepped back, his arm stretched along the panel. He winked and lowered his voice. “But I never really wanted a wife.”

The voices cut off. The room was another dusty, ruined chamber, but the bed in the center of it looked sturdy. Varick stood beside it wearing his dust-covered clothes and the haggard expression I was used to seeing. But I couldn’t be sure it was really him. I couldn’t be sure of anything.

Midian glided to a chair next to the bed. He sat and angled himself so he faced it. He made a show of arranging his heavy mantle and smoothing his long hair. Then he raised his hands in an expectant gesture. “Well?”

Varick hadn’t taken his eyes off Midian since the demon king entered. He stared at him hard now, so much anger on his face he practically vibrated with it.

Midian slid a slow, taunting gaze from me to Varick, and the demon king’s face became Laurent’s. “This is what I want, baby,” he said in Laurent’s voice. “You’re not indifferent to her. We’ve shared women before. We’ll share a wife.”

Dread dropped like a rock in my stomach. Bile burned a fiery path up my throat. I

swallowed convulsively because I was not going to vomit and give Midian the satisfaction of doing something abhorrent with it.

“I won’t do it,” Varick said hoarsely. “I won’t—”

“You’ll do it here,” Midian replied, “or we’ll return to the Hall and you can fuck on the table in front of my court.” He shrugged. “Your choice.”

Varick was going to do something brave and stupid. I could sense it like a storm gathering on the horizon. But there was nowhere to shelter. We were both too exhausted to fight Midian’s illusions. We could either give him what he wanted now, or refuse and end up giving it to him anyway—but only after he made us suffer.

“All right,” I said, and I went to the bed and started unbuttoning my gown. Varick stood at my side and watched, his golden eyes flooded with pain and outrage. I couldn’t risk speaking to him, so I tried to coax him into going along by showing I was all right. We would get it over with and we would be alive. Nothing else mattered. My fingers were steady as I pushed my dress down my hips and let it fall to the floor. I went to work on the silky garters that held up my stockings.

At last, Varick moved. He undressed before I finished, and when I pulled my chemise over my head, he took it from me and set it aside.

I climbed on the bed and lay on my back, my nipples puckered with fear and humiliation. He came down on top of me, his warrior’s body a warm, heavy weight. He covered me completely, shielding me from Midian’s gaze. His fingers found my hip that was farthest from Midian and impossible for the demon to see. Varick stroked me there, a caress that could have been sensual to anyone watching us. But I knew it wasn’t. It was reassurance. A promise.

I have you, it said. Even in this, the worst of all possible circumstances, he had me.

We would endure, and we would live.

Midian was a heavy, malevolent presence at my side, but Varick was heavier. His hips nestled between mine, and his lips found my temple. Warm breath stirred my hair. Our hearts thudded together. His body pressed me deeper into the bed, his flesh and bone and blood against mine. I turned my face into the side of his neck and breathed him in, feeling my lungs expand. Letting him fill me up.

His fingers stroked my hip. I have you.

I had him, too. I could take us somewhere else. It was so much easier than I thought. Like Igrith's fire in my hand, all I had to do was reach for it. But this gift was mine. My birthright. It was right there on my fingertips. I closed my eyes and seized it.

Grass tickled my back. Varick rose above me, sunlight over his shoulder. Our gazes locked, and I saw myself reflected in his eyes, my pale hair spread over the grass and my blue eyes wide with wonder. Tiny white blossoms drifted around us. I'd been coming here all my life, I realized, escaping to this place I'd mistaken for a dream. There was no dust or degradation here. We were safe in the grass under the bright blue sky.

But Midian had been here before.

A gray cloud swept over the sun. The temperature dropped.

"No," Varick's deep, rough voice said in my mind. "You don't have to be afraid."

Yes. I remembered that now. The Middling was whatever I wished it to be. I could protect Varick here, and I didn't need fists or weapons to do it. There was power in that. It flowed from me, brightening the sky and setting the grass swaying.

And it flowed through me, concentrating in the lick of heat that danced low in my belly. Instinctively, I reached for that, too, holding it in my mind and letting it grow.

It swelled rapidly, becoming far too much for me to contain. So I released it, letting it flow where it willed. It rushed to my nipples and the apex of my thighs. I gasped, my hips rolling as damp heat flooded me.

Varick's fingers continued stroking my hip, grounding us in the sweet-smelling grass. His eyes burned, twin suns surrounded by thick lashes. He held himself still, the muscles in his broad shoulders tensing with the effort. Tendons stood out in his neck, and strain showed in the tight set of his jaw and the lines between his brows. He was strength and power poised above me. The ground was hard and unyielding beneath me. And yet, I wasn't crushed.

And I wasn't helpless. Not here, in this in-between place I could make and unmake. I could pull power from the grass and the sky and the sun, and I could keep the darkness out. There was no life in that other place. Only death and pain. But I could make pleasure. Somehow, I understood that the life pulsing in the clearing and the tingling in my breasts and between my thighs were the same—and that one fueled the other.

The power built and flowed faster. I welcomed it, opening my legs and letting the air kiss my hot, aching entrance. Varick's eyes burned brighter. His stroking fingers moved up my ribs and hovered near my breast.

"Touch me," I whispered, taking his hand and guiding it to my taut nipple. My command joined the flow of power, my whisper repeating and overlapping until it became a soft breeze that teased my heated skin. It slid up my legs and teased between my thighs, stroking over my clit and making me moan and spread my legs wider. More cool whispers touched my nipples. The hard points tightened further, the tips turning a dark, dusky pink.

Varick shuddered as he plucked at one eager peak. He was hard and hot against my thigh, and I remembered how thoroughly he'd filled me before, his thick cock giving no quarter as he stretched me to the limit. I wanted that heat and stretch again. More than that, I needed it. Some long-forgotten knowledge ascended, rising from the depths of my being to hover at the very top of my mind. It spread through me the same as the heat, telling me without words what I needed to do. There was power in pleasure, the same as there was power in blood.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

The breeze circled us, carrying a thousand whispers and making the grass sway and bend like graceful dancers.

A vein fluttered in Varick's neck, but my fangs stayed dormant. Hunger didn't stir, but my body ached, my breasts and pussy throbbing. I lifted my hips, seeking Varick's dick. Begging soundlessly as I dragged my sodden lips up and down his round, smooth tip.

With a groan, he squeezed my breast in one sword-callused hand. He leaned his golden head down and licked my nipple, stroking his tongue over the straining peak. He moved to my other breast and did the same, squeezing the tender globe so my nipple poked higher. He sucked and tongued his way around my nipple until I whimpered and thrust my hips shamelessly.

The whispers climbed higher, my command swirling in the warm wind. Touch me, touch me, touch me. I writhed in the grass, crushing it beneath me so the clearing filled with the scent of rich soil and the forest after a spring rain.

"Cloves," Varick said in my mind. He released my nipple and pulled back, something like agony in his eyes. "You smell of cloves," he said hoarsely, "and I can't hold back." He buried his face in my neck and thrust his cock inside me.

Heat. Fullness. Rapture. I was so slick, there was no discomfort. Just our hot, perfect joining. His cock filled me so completely, I had nowhere left to go. No space of my own, even in this space I supposedly controlled.

And that was the point, I realized. The ancient knowledge hummed brighter, offering

reassurance that this was right and true and needed. There was no greater power than this, the making and unmaking. But to gain it—to control it completely—I had to lose myself. Caught between the unyielding earth and the hard muscle of the warrior above me, I had to surrender.

Varick kept his face turned into my neck as he began to thrust. His lips moved, although his voice remained silent both inside and outside of my head. He made no sound, the words he mouthed like unspoken prayers against my skin. He gave me slow, rolling strokes, his shaft dragging over my pulsing clit.

Surrender. I had to let everything go.

I arched, my hands finding their way to his rounded shoulders. He gave me another steady, measured thrust, and I dug my fingers into his skin as I stared up at the sky, one breathless moan after another spilling from my lips. I arched and moved with him, lifting so my breasts mashed against his rock-hard chest. My clit buzzed, all my desires concentrated in the tiny, throbbing bud.

His breath against my neck turned to harsh pants, and his thrusts grew harder. Faster. More heat flooded me. My nipples raked his chest. Every deep thrust drove my hips into the ground, soaking the air with the scents of spring and my desire. Pleasure coursed through me, welling up from the ground and spreading through my limbs. His shoulders under my hands grew slick with sweat. I smoothed a hand up his neck and squeezed his nape, holding him against me as ecstasy swept closer.

“Come for me,” he said in my mind.

Yes, the knowledge echoed. I had to give everything away.

Our movements grew wilder. We rocked together, gasping and grinding, our cries and sweat mingling. Varick’s cock rubbed my clit ruthlessly, shoving me to the very

edge. Power rushed me. Now, it reached for me.

I caught it.

And then I came.

My scream echoed around the clearing, joining the chorus of whispers as my head went back and Varick's hot seed flooded me. I changed the sky because I could, making a new one. Fat clouds rushed across the blue, their shadows rippling over us. And then the sun burst out and flooded the clearing with light.

No, not the clearing. The Middling.

My Middling. It wasn't a true escape, because I couldn't enter it without leaving my body behind. But it was a haven. And there was power here. I wanted more of it.

As Varick's heart thundered against mine, I spoke into his ear. "We have to go back. But I'm going to find us a way out for good."

He stiffened. Nodded.

I took us back to Vai Seren.

When I drew my next breath, Midian stood over the bed, his eyes like midnight and his face slack with the same disturbing mix of hunger and greed. His gaze traveled from my flushed, sweaty face down to Varick's hips wedged between my splayed thighs.

Pleasure fled, but I refused to feel shame. I kept my hand on Varick's nape and focused on his heart beating in sync with mine.

Midian straightened. Laurent melted over him, and my husband smiled at me with eyes that were completely black. “How refreshing that you’re so skilled at doing what I brought you here to do.”

In my arms, Varick tensed.

“What you were born to do,” Laurent added softly. “Rest now. We’ll repeat this exercise later.”

Chapter Twelve

GIVEN

The rush of power didn’t last long, but maybe that was for the best. I didn’t want the demons to know I could slip in and out of the Middling at will. I didn’t fully understand my new power, but I was grateful for it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Although, I would have preferred a swift horse and an army of mages to aid my way out of Vai Seren. The Middling was a refuge—and I sensed it could be even more—but it wasn't permanent. Varick and I couldn't live in an in-between world where my power was limited to creating pretty flowers and changing the color of the sky. But at least we had a safe place to talk—assuming Midian didn't change his mind about bringing us together again.

And assuming Varick stayed alive.

Worry nagged at me as I shivered before the empty hearth in my bedchamber. It was impossible to keep track of time in this place, but I estimated that about six hours had passed since Midian separated us. Hopefully, Varick was sleeping.

But I knew he wasn't. My vampire blood had always afforded me more stamina than full-blooded humans. As a child, I'd often risen well before the rest of the castle, and Helen had despaired of my habit of staying up late. Varick was a pureblooded vampire from the warrior class. He could probably go a week without sleep. However, these were highly unusual circumstances. The stress of fighting off Midian's illusions had to be wearing on him.

It was definitely wearing on me. Exhaustion hung like two weights on my eyelids. My scalp was starting to itch, and my gown looked like a cleaning rag. Varick hadn't hurt me in the Middling, but I felt sticky and sore between my legs. More than anything, I wanted a bath, but I knew I wasn't getting one anytime soon.

Tears burned my throat. I braced a hand on the ancient, dusty mantel and bowed my head.

Awareness prickled down my spine. Slowly, I turned my head.

A demon stood against the wall, his body the same pattern as the filthy gray stones behind him. Only his eyes, wide open in an exaggerated expression, were “normal.” The rest of him blended into the wall.

I screamed and stumbled away from the hearth. My control deserted me, and I flung a hand toward the door. “Get the fuck out!”

The demon stepped forward, and his clothes shifted into typical court attire. But then he kept coming, charging toward me like he meant to tackle me. Heart racing, I screamed and careened backward. My foot caught on debris, and I started to go down.

Suddenly, I was across the room.

But my body remained by the hearth. Flailing, it crashed to the floor.

Disorientation swept me as I stood by the door and watched myself sprawl on my back on the ground. My eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling. One arm was flung out, my palm turned up. Panicking, I looked at my chest—or my body’s chest. It rose and fell steadily, and some of my alarm subsided.

But my panic flared back to life as the demon stood over my body. He swung his head toward me before peering back down at my crumpled form. For a moment, he just stood there.

Then he lay on the floor beside me.

I lurched from the corner. “What are you doing?” Abruptly, a strange sensation assailed me. An invisible force pushed me, blocking my path to my body.

On the ground, my arm twitched. The fingers of my upturned palm curled, closing my hand.

No. Gods, no...

He was possessing me. Stealing my body. By farseeing, I'd left my body unattended, and now he'd decided to take it—or at least try it out.

I rushed forward, anticipating more resistance, but the invisible barrier was gone. Its unexpected absence tripped me up, and I almost tripped in truth as I ran to my body's side. Later, I could lose my mind over how weird it was to see myself from the outside. Right now, I had to figure out how to get back in. My heart lodged in my throat, my pulse fluttering so wildly I felt lightheaded.

Except could I feel lightheaded? I didn't have a body!

On the floor, my hand curled into a fist. My eyelids fluttered. The demon was almost fully in control.

No. No way was I letting this happen. Anger took the place of panic. I knew how to do this. I'd done it just hours ago when I seized full control of the Middling. The rushing, bubbling spring of power hovered nearby. All I had to do was reach for it. I closed my eyes. Deep within my mind, I stretched out a hand...

I blinked my eyes open and stared at the blackened, cobwebbed ceiling above me. As I sucked air into my lungs, something dark and oily darted from my chest to my stomach—from the inside.

With a cry, I sat up and clawed at my midsection. But it did no good. Not when the demon was inside me—its thick, viscous presence like slime on top of my soul.

On the floor, the elven body jerked, drawing my attention. How was it moving when the demon was clinging to me? But it wasn't moving, I realized. It was disintegrating. Panic flooded me, but this time, the emotion wasn't mine. I couldn't explain how, but I sensed the demon inside me jerk its attention to the elven body. In my mind, the demon darted forward.

And I slammed the brick wall to the front of my head. In the fraction of a second it took me to picture it, I wasn't sure it would work. But it did. The demon crashed into the wall and howled, furious at being thwarted. Deep within me, it thrashed violently, bashing itself against the bricks repeatedly.

On the floor, the elven body decayed rapidly, its skin graying and then flaking off. The process accelerated, chunks of flesh dropping to the floor, landing, and turning to dust. The nose went. Then the cheeks sunk in and collapsed completely.

I propelled myself backward, scooting on my palms and butt as the elf's skin sloughed off and its skeleton appeared. Inside me, the demon wailed in despair. Gone! The cry racketed around my brain. The demon knew it had gambled and lost.

I held the wall in place until the elf was nothing more than a pile of dust. With a shiver, I couldn't help wondering if some of the dust in the castle was exactly what I saw before me now. All this time, Varick and I had been walking over corpses.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Without warning, rage enveloped me. It shoved my musings away, and before I realized what was happening, I was on my feet and halfway to the door. I had to tell the others what happened here.

Except no. I stopped and clenched my fists at my sides. The rage wasn't mine. But the demon inside pushed harder, breaking through my resolve and propelling me closer to the door. Three steps and I was there, my fingers brushing the latch.

I dropped the wall in my head and pushed. The dark, oily presence fought harder this time, scratching at my consciousness like a trapped animal. Because it had nowhere to go. Its previous body was a heap of dust, so now it intended to squat inside mine.

The panic that surfaced now was all mine. I planted my feet wide and braced myself, pushing with my mind. If I failed to oust the entity from my body, it would eventually consume me. That was the mistake my elven ancestors made.

Suddenly, the compulsion to leave the bedchamber vanished. The resistance in my head disappeared, too. Power rushed through me, dark and beautiful. I waved a hand, and tall grasses sprang up along the wall. Making and unmaking, I thought.

I could do it right here in the real world. What was truth, after all? Most people believed what they saw and failed to dig deeper.

I waved my hand again, and a knight of Nor Doru appeared before me. Another wave, and two more just like him materialized. They bowed, their crimson cloaks sweeping forward. They looked so real.

I can make more just like them.

I could make a whole army. If I'd had this power at the Rift, no one would have dared enslave me.

So much power.

Why not keep it?

Strength flooded me, erasing all my pain and fatigue. I was better this way. Independent this way. I didn't need any others, especially those who didn't really care for me. The one I'd found here certainly didn't. Varick. He wanted me gone. As soon as he had the chance, he meant to kill me.

But that wasn't right. I frowned, and the dark power within me ebbed like a candle shuddering in a breeze. As it wavered, other thoughts rushed in. Varick didn't want me dead. He'd begged Midian not to hurt me. Had offered himself in my place, his voice cracking in desperation.

The dark, beautiful power snuffed out, and rage thundered back. But I was prepared for it this time. I pushed as hard as I could, grunting with the effort that was of the mind and not the body but nevertheless required every bit of breath and focus I possessed.

Get out, I told the demon, pushing harder. In my mind's eye, I swung the brick wall toward it, ramming it with all my might. The awful, oily presence flew from my body. For a moment, the room darkened. An icy-cold wind blew back my hair and ripped at my clothes. I felt more than heard an ear-splitting shriek.

And then nothing.

Shaking, I sank to my knees. I looked at the pile of dust that used to be the elven body. The demon was gone, its body dead. I'd killed it. If I could lure the other demons from their bodies, I could kill them, too.

I could kill Midian.

Chapter Thirteen

LAURENT

"I have news from Sithistra, Your Grace."

I jumped at the sound of the soft voice behind me. I turned from the stone map of Ter Isir to find Jordan of Twyl standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing in here?" I demanded. My Council chamber was hardly a secret, but I was doing my best to keep news of the Deepnight's disappearance from spreading. Although, that was undoubtedly a lost cause. Word of the deaths in the Wastes would trickle throughout the kingdom. Once the gossip reached the capital, the public would start demanding answers. I needed to be ready, but I couldn't bring myself to give a shit while Varick and Given were still missing.

Except, I did give a shit. That was the problem. I was pulled in opposing directions. Spread too thin. Worried about watching my kingdom burn while my wife and general were trapped behind the Thicket. Any number of unpleasant descriptors.

Jordan hesitated in the doorway.

"Never mind," I said, leaning against the table. "What news do you bring?"

He came forward, his hands folded over gray robes. "King Rolund's First Queen has

lost the child she was carrying. His heir, Cathrin, is also rumored to be quite ill. Rolund is trying to keep both events a secret, but stories have already spread. He'll have to address the speculation soon."

"Sounds familiar," I muttered with a sour smile. By all accounts, Rolund was a joyless brute, but I took no pleasure in another man losing his children—and even less so in a king struggling to cement his legacy. My lack of an heir had been a weight around my neck for years.

The ex-brother held my stare, his boyish features inscrutable. I knew he invested considerable effort in ensuring people saw the "boyish" part and dismissed anything else they might have noticed about him.

"And how did you come by this information?" I asked. "No, let me guess. You have mages embedded in Castle Beldurn as well as the Brotherhood's towers?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Displeasure flickered in his blue eyes, but his reply was as smooth and deferential as usual. “We have people where we need them.”

I smiled. “No doubt hidden among my staff.”

“I don’t need to hide, Your Grace. I serve you openly.”

The sound of boots interrupted my reply. A knight appeared in the doorway, his helmet under his arm. Snow dusted his shoulders. “Your Grace, we have a situation—” He cut himself off, his eyes going to Jordan.

“Speak freely,” I said. The gods knew Jordan of Twyl would eventually learn whatever the knight had to say.

“A patrol caught Rowena of Lar Kessa attempting to cross the Bleak Pass into Sithistra.”

I tensed. “Where is she now?”

“In the dungeon, Your Grace. Her husband has been informed. The knights who spoke with him report he had no idea his wife was involved with the south. Sir Harald says he’s loyal to the crown and won’t share hearth or board with a traitor. He leaves his wife’s fate in your hands.”

Harsh. But then Sir Harald had trained his whole life under Varick. The warrior class wasn’t known for its forgiving nature.

Before I could think too hard about that, I nodded to the knight. “Thank you. And give the patrol my thanks.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

As his footsteps retreated, I sighed. “Are you afraid of dark, enclosed spaces, Brother Jordan?”

“Not at all, Your Grace.”

“I didn’t think so. Come. Let’s find out what Rowena of Lar Kessa has been hiding.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, a bedraggled Rowena of Lar Kessa watched me warily from a wooden chair in the center of her cell. Her red hair streamed over her shoulders in damp clumps. The normally vibrant color looked dull in the dim lamplight.

It was freezing in the dungeon, and my breath puffed in small, white clouds as I paced in front of her and repeated myself for the fourth time. “Did King Rolund order you to give the queen the solstone?”

“As I already told you, Your Grace, I don’t take orders from King Rolund. My handlers in the south instructed me to deliver the dagger to Queen Given. That’s all I know.”

“Yes, but you’re lying.”

Her pupils dilated. She swallowed.

I stopped my pacing. “That’s why I keep asking, you see.”

She'd folded her hands in her lap. She squeezed them together now, and she didn't look at me as she said, "I'm telling the truth."

In that moment, I knew how the interrogation was going to end. Although, maybe I'd known from the moment the knight informed me Rowena was in the dungeon. I just hadn't wanted to acknowledge it.

Weak, my father's ghost whispered. And he was correct. He would have bled her, my father. Nicolae of Nor Doru had never hesitated to punish his enemies. But I wasn't so certain Rowena was my enemy. Under the sour, acrid stench of deceit was another, far more powerful scent.

Despair.

It clung to her clothes and puddled in her pores, the smell of rain on a cold day. The interrogation had but one ending. I knew that now. And I was weak, but I wasn't a coward. My father had been wrong about that.

I had Rowena against the wall before she even registered that I'd moved. While she was still reeling, I pinned her to the stone with my bad hand on her shoulder. Fiery agony shot up my fingers, making me grimace as I used my teeth to tug the glove off my right hand. I nicked my thumb and pressed it between her lips, smearing my blood on her tongue.

"Sabet," I said. "Answer me truthfully when I ask you questions."

Power flared, and she gasped. "I won't—"

"Did Rolund give you the solstone dagger?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“No—” She seized, a gurgling sound in her throat. After a few seconds, she slumped, panting heavily. Blood trickled from her nose.

I kept her upright with a grip on her shoulder. “It will hurt worse each time you disobey me. So don’t, understand? Did Rolund give you the solstone dagger?”

She clamped her mouth shut. But it didn’t matter. A heartbeat later, she seized again. I waited it out, and when she could speak, I repeated my question.

“Yes,” she whispered. She’d bitten through her bottom lip. Drool and blood coated her chin.

“Did he tell you to deliver it to Queen Given?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t kn—” She jerked, and the back of her head bounced off the stone. Before it was over, her screams bounced off the stone, too. I thrust my hand behind her head so she wouldn’t knock herself unconscious. The smell of human urine hit my nose.

“Rowena,” I said quietly when her head sagged, “we both know you’ll tell me everything eventually.” I used the corner of my mantle to wipe the saliva from her chin. “You can’t tolerate much more pain. Answer my questions with the truth, and you won’t hurt anymore. Why did Rolund send the dagger?”

She mumbled something, but her head was angled down too much for me to catch it. I cupped her under the chin and forced her head up. “Why did Rolund tell you to give the solstone to Queen Given?”

“Save the realm,” she gasped.

The prophecy. Rolund thought Given and Varick’s child was meant to save Sithistra, not Nor Doru. “Rolund wants to stop the Deepnight from shifting south,” I said.

“Yes.”

“He wants Given’s child.”

“No.”

I waited for the blood magic to punish her lie. When it didn’t, confusion swept me. Her eyelids drooped, her chin dipping toward her chest. I pulled her head back up. “Rolund believes the savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift.”

“Yes.”

“Given’s child, born of elven blood.”

“No.”

“Then what?” Exasperation and the searing pain in my hand made my voice sharp. “Why did your king send his only sister to Nor Doru and then follow it up with a fucking solstone blade?”

“Not Given’s child,” she slurred. “Given. The Brotherhood believes Given must

perish in the Rift to save the south.” She drew a deep breath, then rushed on like she worried the bly’ad would punish her again. “Crasor and Rolund assumed you would take her into your bed. They wanted you to find the solstone and carry out the prophecy. That’s all I know. You can torture me all you want. There’s nothing else.”

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. A dozen questions formed in my head, but I knew I’d get no more answers from Rowena.

Except perhaps one.

“Why?” I demanded. “By all accounts, you love your husband.”

Her lips trembled. “I do,” she whispered.

“Then why? Why betray his people?”

She reached a hand up, and I stepped back enough to let her work a chain from her bodice. She pulled out a small mirror pendant. “I love Harald,” she said, “but I serve the Lord.”

The mirror showed me a tiny version of myself. The followers of the Brotherhood believed they gazed upon their god every time they looked in a mirror. But I saw only my flushed cheeks and retracted fangs. My unshaven jaw and tired eyes. I saw no god. Just the weak vessel my father had always seen.

“One more question, Lady Rowena. If I let you live, will you stop spying for the south?”

“No.” Her breathing was labored, but her voice shook with vehemence. “I will never stop fighting the north. Your court is a decadent, wicked place full of dark magic and blood sacrifice. You’ve turned away from the one true god.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I curled her fingers around the pendant and gave a slight nod. Her brown eyes filled with resignation. And acceptance. She nodded back.

“Eshto.”

She died instantly.

I eased her body to the ground, then doubled over, fighting the burn and the waves of nausea. Given had accused me of lying to her about how my power worked. She was right, but she was also wrong. The language of priests was rooted in blood. Speaking the bly’ad without it—especially the command for death—was draining. Dangerous. I avoided it as much as possible, but sometimes necessity demanded it. Like when I didn’t wish to send a devout follower of another faith to her death with the blood of a Nor Doruvian priest on her tongue.

When I could stand without puking, I left the cell. Jordan stood against the wall, his face as unreadable as it had been in my Council chamber.

“You lied to me,” I said. Anger rose, and I embraced it, letting icy rage flow through my veins. “You showed up in my court and you told me the prophecy was the key to saving everything. You urged me to ask for Given as a thrall. You said Rolund would surrender her without a fight because he believes the prophecy will repel the Deepnight. You said Varick had a role to play and it would all be worth it.”

“I never lied to you,” he said quietly.

“Oh, fuck you.” I turned and pointed to the cell where Rowena’s body was cooling.

“Blood doesn’t lie. Rolund thinks Given needs to die to stop the Deepnight. Did you know that?” I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t have to guess what Jordan knew. I could find out right fucking now.

Moving fast, I went for him.

He sidestepped just as swiftly, his robes swinging away from his body as he whirled and put distance between us. We faced off in the narrow corridor that separated the rows of cells. He held his right hand out from his side. Light burst from his palm and formed into a ball.

I glanced at it. “That won’t work on me.”

His eyes were steady. “We’ll find out.”

Arrogant little shit. I could almost admire him.

“You don’t want to use power words on me, Your Grace,” he said. “I’m the only one who can help you save Lord Varick.”

My gut clenched. “How can I trust you now? You stood in the Sanctum beside Petru when he said he’d studied the prophecy. You heard him speak of Varick and Given and the child. You told me the mages of Wesyfedd took the prophecy from the Tower of the Mind to keep it safe, and that you studied it yourselves and agreed it spoke of Varick and Given. You said nothing about Given dying.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” he said again. “Sithistra has obviously known about the prophecy from the beginning. I leveled the playing field by giving it to your priests. They used their blood rites to decipher its meaning. You know I wasn’t involved in those ceremonies. I told you Rolund believes in the prophecy. I never said anything about how he interprets it.”

“So he wants his sister dead? He’ll kill his only living relative to reclaim a strip of land along his northern border? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” It wasn’t, though. One of the most depressing things I’d learned since I became king was how much people loved to fight over property. Not a week passed that I wasn’t mediating a land dispute between two farmers arguing about the placement of a fucking fencepost. Rolund was losing land every year to the Deepnight. His problem was the opposite of mine. If Sithistra lost the sun, its crops would die and its people would starve.

Jordan’s expression turned grim. “It’s not stupid to Prelate Crasor and the rest of the Brotherhood’s leadership. They believe Baylen brought a curse down on Sithistra when he wed Given’s mother. The Brotherhood doesn’t want its followers to believe in magic, but it knows damn well what endures behind the Thicket. Crasor didn’t want an elven-born queen sitting on the southern throne, but Baylen wed Vessa of Lar Satha anyway. The brothers most well-versed in the histories of Ter Isir whispered that he was overcome with lust. Lured by a spirit of lasciviousness, he defied the Brotherhood and his First Queen and wed a vampire he couldn’t resist. And then the Deepnight began to drift south. And now neither of Rolund’s wives have conceived a son.” Jordan cocked his head. “I believe you know the lengths people will go to if they believe their god is telling them to do something. Or if the thing their god is telling them to do conveniently aligns with something they already want to do.”

My nape prickled as a silent understanding passed between us. I didn’t like being outmaneuvered, but I had to acknowledge the intricacy of planning it must have taken for him to appear in my Council chamber moments before I learned of Rowena’s capture.

Jordan of Twyl had wanted her dead. And he’d neatly arranged for me to kill her—and all without saying a word.

“Go on, Brother Jordan,” I said softly.

“Queen Elissa will probably never carry another child, and Queen Lidia is most likely barren. Crasor believes the Lord of the Mir has spoken through the prophecy, telling the south exactly what it needs to do to remove the taint of Vessa’s blood.”

“A blood sacrifice?” Fucking hypocrites. The Brotherhood denounced the blood rites of Nor Doru. I knew what the Towers of the Mir said about vampires. Every feast day, Crasor railed against the “decadent, godless north,” and yet he urged Rolund to see his own sister tossed into the Rift. Assuming Jordan was being truthful. Maybe this was just another maneuver by a man who was clearly no rank-and-file mage.

I shook my head. “If Rolund believes Given has to die to save his kingdom, why not just shove her into the Rift himself?”

“Because she had to be bound in blood.”

I went completely still. The blood rite in the Sanctum. When I’d bound Given to me with a power word in front of the priests and priestesses.

Jordan nodded, obviously seeing the realization spreading over my face. “She had to wed you first. And then she could die, the last elven-born in Ter Isir. The Deepnight would retreat. Rolund would have his heir at last.”

I clenched my jaw. “You could have told me all of this.”

“Could I? Or would it have influenced your actions?” He closed his fist, snuffing out the ball of light. “Wesyfedd had its own language once. In that ancient tongue, the word for mage is ‘watcher.’ Our name has changed, but our role has not. We observe. We protect. We don’t interfere unless we believe it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Why?” I said flatly.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

He frowned. “Why don’t we interfere? Because it would—”

“No. Why do any of it?” I strolled forward, not stopping until we stood nearly toe to toe. “People are motivated by all sorts of things, Brother Jordan. Money, sex, power. What motivates you?”

He blinked, and the aura of boyish reserve fell away. He was still a slight, unassuming young man, but now his blue eyes brimmed with otherworldly power. I’d felt similar power while standing in the Sanctum, although this wasn’t blood magic. It was more primitive. Wild and ancient. He held it within him, all that energy leashed in his sky-blue eyes.

“The Thicket was never meant to stand forever, Your Grace. It bought us time, but the evil it contains wasn’t fully destroyed. Now, the barrier is failing, its magic weakening. The land is unsettled. Everything is connected—the Thicket, the Rift, and your Deepnight. If one falls, the rest fall with it, and there will be nothing to stop the evil of Eldenvalla from spreading throughout Ter Isir. If the demons are loosed, there is no fighting them. Weapons are useless against something that can reach into your head and make you see your worst nightmare. Your family disemboweled before your eyes. Your friends tortured. Your village burned.” He stared at a point just beyond my shoulder, and his eyes took on a faraway, unfocused look. “I’ve seen the possibilities. Streets running with blood. People clawing their own eyes out. Parents murdering their children because the monsters are coming and they’d rather bury their child than watch it scream before it dies.”

The way he described it, I couldn’t help but see it, too.

He flicked his gaze back to mine. "I serve Ter Isir, Your Grace. I defend the light against darkness. Why, you ask? Because someone has to. That's what motivates me."

The silence that fell was brittle, like the slightest sound might shatter the dungeon and us with it. But this wasn't a time for quiet.

"You know Varick and Given are prisoners in Vai Seren?" I asked.

He nodded. "And before you accuse me of withholding that information, you should know I only came by it today."

"The same day you received word of Queen Elissa's miscarriage and Rolund's sickly heir. Quite a web of informants you command, Brother Jordan. It almost makes me think you're no ordinary mage at all."

His lips twitched, a there-and-gone flash of humor that made him look like an unassuming young man once more. But I wasn't fooled this time.

"Is this one of those rare occasions you deem it necessary to interfere, or do we need to go back to finding out which one of us is more powerful?"

"Your knights will have to remain on the Wesyfeddan side of the forest," he said. "It's mages we need, not soldiers."

"You won't get any complaints from my men about that." I motioned for him to walk with me. As we passed Rowena's cell, a flash of light caught my eye. Her pendant lay against her breast, the mirrored surface reflecting the flame from the lamp.

Jordan stood at my shoulder.

“She told the truth about loving her husband,” I said, “and yet she dedicated her life to killing others just like him.”

“When you believe in your own righteousness, it’s easier to justify your actions even when they hurt other people.” Jordan looked at me. “Perhaps she thought her god would forgive her the sin of love.”

My hand throbbed at my side. We both knew he wasn’t speaking of Rowena anymore. “And what of your prophecy? Is it righteous to kill one child to save thousands?”

“It’s not my prophecy, Your Grace. And I believe Lord Varick will come to understand why you acted as you did.”

“You swore an oath to him. You sealed it with your blood on his dagger.”

Sky-blue eyes widened slightly.

“You’re not the only one with spies, Jordan,” I said gently. “If you’re going to swear a blood oath, next time do it somewhere less conspicuous than my library.”

He looked away. “I swore to serve him, and I meant it.”

“Varick sees the world differently than you and I. For him, things are very much black and white. He may decide to kill you for not telling him about the prophecy.”

Jordan drew an even breath and looked at me. “I know. I’m prepared for that possibility.”

“Are you?” I angled my head down as I adjusted my gloves, pulling the leather more snugly over my wrists. “Even though he promised your death would be neither quick

nor easy?" I looked up to find Jordan watching me with a new appreciation in his gaze. Good. I would tolerate his maneuvering because I needed his help. But my tolerance had limits. And now he knew I had my own way of killing without getting my hands dirty.

I raised my brows.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "If that's what the future holds, I accept it."

"Ah." I went to the door and lifted the lamp from its hook. "Well in that case, I suppose we both have to hope the general is more forgiving than the Lord of the Mir. I'll have the servants ready our horses. We leave for Wesyfedd within the hour."

I left, hope chasing the exhaustion from my limbs. But as I made my way to my chambers, I couldn't help wondering if Jordan was right to believe Varick would understand why I'd kept the prophecy from him. Ultimately, he might decide my silence was unforgivable. If that happened, he wouldn't kill me. I was the king, and Varick would never draw a blade against me. No, he'd simply leave.

And that would be worse than dying.

Chapter Fourteen

VARICK

Midian didn't bother with dinner this time. He took Given and me straight to the bedchamber and ordered us to strip.

Hunger and lack of sleep played games with my mind, making me wonder if the illusions that danced on the edges of my vision were Midian's doing or merely the product of my weakening body. My father was there, but so was Laurent. I wanted so badly to look at him, to tell him I was sorry for...everything. For always being so afraid of what we were to each other. For wanting more than he was prepared to give. He'd given me so much. A place at his side despite pressure to marry. A place in his bed. The obedience I craved because I couldn't control my memories but I needed to control something. He never complained. He never denied me.

I wanted to tell him all these things, but mostly I just wanted to look at him. He'd always been the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But I couldn't risk it. It was bad enough that I lacked the strength to hold Midian's gaze. I was too tired to keep him out of my head. If he knew how much I longed for Laurent, he'd use it against me. Seeing Laurent on Midian's face would only make the situation worse.

And it could get worse.

I held this certainty close to my heart as I covered Given's shivering body. Midian was undoubtedly in her head, too, and the fact that I couldn't stop him from ravaging her thoughts was harder to swallow than the hunger, fatigue, and hopelessness that threatened to crush me. I did my best not to crush Given as I rested my fingertips on her hip. I stroked her soft skin, trying to communicate as much reassurance as I could under the demon king's salacious gaze.

Remorseful to the depths of my soul, I buried my face in her neck as I pushed inside her body. To my surprise, she wrapped her legs around my waist and cried out.

And then we were in the Middling.

I reared back, the scent of spring in my nose. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she said quickly. "I wanted him to think I was enjoying it."

"We should return." It was dangerous to linger, since I had no idea how we appeared to Midian back in the bedchamber. Time in the Middling didn't always align perfectly with the real world, but I wasn't knowledgeable enough about Given's version of the in-between plane to know how hers operated. And this wasn't the right time to find out.

"I need to talk to you," she said, levering herself onto her elbows in the grass. She was different now, I realized with a start. She looked rested here, whereas she hadn't in the bedchamber. And she glowed, her pale skin limned in soft light.

"What happened?" I demanded, touching a strand of her white-blond hair. It twined around my finger like it had a mind of its own. What in the name of all the gods?

"I killed one," she said.

I forgot about the hair. “A demon?”

She nodded, and then she spoke in a breathless rush. “In my bedchamber. One came out of the wall and then it just kept coming, and then I was across the room but my body was by the hearth. It jumped inside me, Varick. I could feel it, and then I forced it out. By that time, its body was falling apart. It had nowhere to go, so it died. Or at least fled our world.”

“But you aren’t certain.”

She frowned. “As certain as I possibly can be. But listen. If I did this once, I could do it again. I could kill Mi—”

“Don’t,” I said, covering her mouth. To my shame, my hand shook. “Don’t say it, Given, and promise me you won’t try.”

She pulled my hand away and then cupped hers around my jaw. Her thumb brushed my whiskers. “I have to do this,” she whispered. “I have to get us out.”

Fear tried to close my throat. I pressed my forehead against hers and used my Voice. “There are things worse than death. If you try this and fail, he could split your mind open and make you believe anything. Think of the most horrific thing you can imagine and multiply it a hundredfold. It’s not worth the risk. We’ll find another way.”

“What other way?” Our hearts thudded against each other. My cock was still buried inside her, but it wasn’t sexual this time. It was something deeper—a connection we’d forged in two separate worlds. Gently, she pulled my head back, forcing me to meet her sapphire eyes. “You are the strongest male I’ve ever met.”

“I’m not,” I rasped, shaking my head.

She held me fast, stilling the movement. “You are, but you can’t fight lies with your fists. I’m a farseer. I have to believe I received this gift for a reason. What good is power if I don’t use it?”

Something struck me hard in the back of the head. A cry of pain broke from me as the Middling vanished and my body spun through blackness. I hit the bedchamber’s dusty floor with a grunt, my eyes flying open in time to see Midian drag Given from the bed by her hair. She screamed and kicked frantically, dislodging the rumpled sheets.

“NO!” I bellowed, springing to my feet. An arm wrapped around my throat from behind, and my father’s deep voice grated in my ear. “Don’t interfere, son. You’ll make it worse for your whore.”

“Don’t you ever fucking call her that!” I yelled, fighting his grip. It’s not real, I reminded myself. He wasn’t real. None of this was real.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“No?” he taunted, tightening his grip until I choked. He hauled me against him, and I recoiled at the feel of his hard, cold armor pressing against my bare skin. He turned us so Midian and Given were in full view. “Looks plenty real to me.”

Midian thrust Given away from him, then slapped her across the face hard. She staggered but stayed on her feet. When she tossed her hair from her eyes, her blue eyes were defiant.

Midian’s were solid black. “You think you’re clever, child, hiding in your pretty little head when I told you to fuck.” He glanced at me. “What were you two discussing?”

“Nothing,” she spat, her eyes locked on him. Her chest heaved, and her pink nipples were tight with obvious fear, but she didn’t cower. “We just wanted to get away from you.”

He splayed a hand over his chest. His handsome features shifted to mock offense. “It pains me to hear you say that. We are, after all, family here.”

Given’s voice trembled. “No part of you lives in me.” She threw her shoulders back, every inch a queen despite her nudity and unkempt state. Her voice went low, and her eyes blazed with challenge. “You’ll never be inside me, in any way.”

Midian’s black eyes narrowed.

“You can’t eat,” she said, “and you can’t make love. You can’t make anything. Because you’re not alive.”

No. No, no, no. Too late, I realized what she was doing. The arm around my neck disappeared, the illusion of my father vanishing as Midian focused fully on Given. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed to stand there and keep my mouth shut. But I had to. If she pulled this off, I needed to be available to help her in any way I could.

“But I am,” she said. Slowly, she swept her hair off her shoulder. She turned her head, exposing the pulse in her neck. “All you can do is watch. So watch, Midian. Look at what you can never have.”

Pressure filled the room. Swift and overpowering, it knocked me backward until my shoulders scraped stone and dust swirled around me. A high-pitched whine filled my ears. Midian shot to Given and gripped her throat. He hoisted her off the floor and brought her head level with his. Immediately, her eyes bulged. She grabbed at his hand.

I surged forward. Vines sprang out of nowhere and flung me back. I hit the wall, and they rushed around me, wrapping my limbs. Not real. Not real, not real. Frantically, I tried to make myself believe it.

The vines disappeared.

I shot off the wall.

The bedchamber turned into a beach.

I stumbled and landed on my knees in the sand. Ice-cold wind whipped around me. Waves crashed at my back. Male laughter rang in my ears. A cold sweat broke out over my body. Not real. But it was. It was as real as the memories I’d never been able to exorcise from my mind.

Footsteps, and then Midian threw Given to the sand in front of me. She gagged on her hands and knees, dry-heaving as she sucked air into her lungs. Midian knelt behind her and forced her head up. He looked me in the eye as he put his lips to her ear.

“You’re wrong, child. I can be inside you.”

The laughter swelled. Torchlight bounced across the sand, and a shadow fell over me. Given’s eyes went wide. The blood drained from her face, and I knew she saw the vampires and the sea. A belt buckle clinked. Rough hands shoved me, sending me sprawling. I scrambled up, and the males swarmed me, pinning me on my stomach. Hot breath seared my cheek. Someone groped my ass.

Bile burned my throat. I vomited in the sand.

“Varick!” Given cried.

“Varick!” the vampire behind me mocked. “Oh, Varick!” The others joined him, mimicking her higher-pitched voice.

Midian spoke again. “They raped him here, after he tried to kill his own father. Did you know?” He looked at Given, who sobbed as she clutched handfuls of sand. Midian shrugged and turned back to me. “I guess not.”

A booted foot kicked my feet apart, and a heavy male body landed on my back. Not real. I vomited again, bile and sand smearing my mouth. Given’s sobs drowned out the taunts of the males behind me. Dimly, I heard Midian speak.

“I can be inside you. Drink from me.”

I reared up with a wild howl, throwing off the males who restrained me. “No! Given, don’t—” A hand on the back of my head shoved my nose and mouth into the sand. I

sucked it in, gagging and struggling. More hands pinned me. Touched me. Oh gods, they were touching me everywhere. My mind slipped, my grasp on sanity unraveling.

“I’ll do it!” Given screamed. “I’ll do it, just leave him alone. Please, I’ll do it!”

“No!” I shouted, my cry muffled by the sand.

And then the beach was gone. The weight on my back disappeared. I scrambled up, gasping, but it was too late.

Midian stood several paces away, a triumphant look on his face as Given fed from his neck. She gagged and shuddered, black blood spilling down her breasts. He cupped the back of her head, holding her mouth to his throat.

“Now I’m inside you, child,” he crooned, stroking her hair. “And this way, I won’t ever have to leave.”

Chapter Fifteen

GIVEN

I couldn’t stop shaking.

I lay on the floor in my bedchamber and willed myself to vomit up Midian’s blood. I must have lost consciousnesses after drinking from him, because I had no recollection of returning to my room. All I remembered was waking in a puddle of sweat with Midian’s dark blood squirming through my veins. Someone—Varick, I assumed—had dressed me, so at least I wasn’t nude.

The horror of the beach spun back, making me shake harder. My hatred for Midian burned like a brand. But my searing anger was secondary to the guilt that pummeled me. My stupidity had landed me in this situation, and now Varick and I were in more danger. And I was inundated with demon blood.

My throat was raw from trying to force myself to vomit. I’d gone to my hands and knees and stuck my fingers down my throat. I’d coughed and gagged and kneaded my stomach. But nothing worked. The blood stayed down, and now it was everywhere—a thousand tiny rivers of fire spreading rapidly through my body.

As ignorant as I was about my vampire half, I knew I wasn’t supposed to drink dead blood. Midian’s body had been dead for five hundred years. Maybe he’d meant to kill

me by forcing me to drink. But then why did he say he would never leave?

A dry sob burst from my throat. I wanted to cry, but no tears would come. Thirst plagued me. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and my throat burned every time I swallowed.

Varick. What was Midian doing to him? It couldn't be worse than what he'd already done. I hugged my knees to my chest and tried to block out the images from the beach. My fault. It was all my fault. Varick had tried to stop me. He'd warned me that attempting to lure Midian from his body was too dangerous. I'd been so, so stupid. I got lucky one time and accidentally repelled a demon, and now I thought I could take on the demon king who'd tortured us for days? Now Midian had been inside my head, and he knew what I could do. I'd failed, and I'd made everything so much worse.

I squeezed my eyes shut as I wept dry, silent tears. If only I could undo my mistake. Or find another way to defeat Midian. But I wasn't strong enough.

Something cold and wet touched my cheek. I opened my eyes, and I was in the clearing in the Middling. Except now, the grass was covered in a blanket of snow. As I breathed in crisp air, another snowflake landed gently on my cheek. More flakes drifted from the sky, which was the dull gray of winter. A trail of bright-red blood started at my body and trailed across the clearing, where it stopped at Midian's feet.

He stood tall and beautiful, his blue mantle a rich burst of color against the stark shades of winter. My breath caught as I met his gaze. His blue eyes were twin pools of sorrow.

"I wasn't strong enough," he said, the ache in his voice like a bruise.

I got to my feet. Snow dusted my gown, but I wasn't cold. Or maybe I was just too

riveted to care. Because the tall, elven male wasn't Midian. He'd never been Midian. Not in this place.

"You're Avenor," I rasped. "The last king of Eldenvalla."

The scene changed, the clearing giving way to the hall of statues. Everything was dazzling white, all the elven lords and ladies intact on their pedestals. But the air smelled of smoke, and the sound of bells drifted from somewhere, the ringing insistent and unceasing. Avenor stood at the base of the statue of the beautiful female, only now her outstretched hands held a shimmering broadsword. It was the same unusual gray as Varick's dagger, with waves that appeared to ripple down the blade over and over.

Avenor turned, and I did a double take as a flesh-and-blood version of the woman on the pedestal rushed toward him. Her belly was swollen with pregnancy, her beautiful face streaked with tears. Her hair was a rich, dark brown, and her gown was the same blue shade as his mantle. The tips of her pointed ears emerged from the heavy waves of her hair. A delicate, silver crown nestled on her head.

Something compelled me to look at the ground. When I did, the snow was back—a light dusting this time, but now it showed two trails of blood. One still ran from me to Avenor, and now the other ran from me to the elven female.

"Vara," Avenor rasped, bringing my head up. He grasped the woman's hands as she came to his side. "Vara." He pulled her against him and brushed the tears from her cheeks. "You have to go."

The ground shook, and the entire hall seemed to tremble. I staggered and caught myself against the base of a statue as dust sifted from the ceiling. Distant screams joined the muffled sound of the bells. The stench of smoke grew stronger, and the air grew warm.

When the shaking stopped, the woman cried out and clutched at Avenor's mantle. "I won't leave you, husband. We'll endure whatever comes together."

"No," he said sharply, his blue eyes flaring with power that brushed my bare skin. He splayed a big hand over her rounded stomach. "You carry our future with you."

She gripped his mantle more tightly, and her voice emerged as a terrified whisper. "It still dwells within me."

"The babe?"

"The other."

He dropped stricken eyes to her belly. "But...it was gone. We drove it out."

She placed a shaking hand atop his. "Not in me. Within me, my king."

The room rocked again, harder this time. More dust fell. One of the statues farther down the row tumbled from its pedestal and smashed to pieces on the marble floor. The queen staggered against Avenor, who braced himself with a hand on the marble folds of her statue's gown. Before the shaking ceased, he pulled her into a tight embrace and spoke in her ear.

"Get to the barrier the watchers raised," he said, urgency in his voice. "The others can't cross it. Once you pass through, you'll shed the one who clings to you. Go now, Vara, and save our child. I command it."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

She shook her head against his shoulder. “Not without you. What of the realm?”

Hands on her shoulders, he set her away from him. “You carry the realm. Hide somewhere no one will look for you. Someplace small and insignificant. I’ll send for you and the babe when it’s safe to return.”

The bells clanged louder. From far away came the sound of steel on steel, along with terrified screams. When I strained, I thought I could hear the crackling of a nearby fire.

With a choked sob, the queen rose on tiptoe and pulled Avenor’s head down, crushing her lips to his. He kissed her back, his long fingers threading through her hair before he broke away. Then he took her hand and led her to the wall behind the statue. He bowed his head and murmured foreign words.

The hair on my nape lifted as I recognized the language I’d heard in my dreams my whole life.

A rectangle of blazing light appeared on the wall. Something clicked, and the rectangle swung inward, revealing a tunnel. Avenor guided his wife inside with a hand on the small of her back.

It was an escape tunnel, I realized, similar to the one Laurent showed me the day we rode to Lar Satha. Every castle had one, in case the residents needed to flee a siege.

Avenor rested his hand on his queen’s pregnant belly once more. With his other hand, he tipped her chin up and kissed her forehead. A tear streaked down his sculpted

cheek. “If I fail here—”

“No,” she whispered fiercely. “Please don’t say that.”

“Listen to me.” He pulled back, and now his blue eyes burned with authority. “If this is the end, you must tell our child what happened here. You have the gift of Memory. Use it, Vara. Teach our child how we erred...and the price we paid for power.”

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. “I will,” she choked out, “but this isn’t the end. Speak it into being, my king. Use your gift.”

He shook his head. “I give the last of it to you.” He clasped one of her hands in both of his. His eyes glowed like sapphires set aflame, and power tripped from his voice. He touched her forehead. “See the brick wall.”

Light flared around them, blinding me. I winced and threw up a hand. When I lowered it, Avenor stepped away from Vara. “This door stays open until you return. Do you understand? It doesn’t close until you and our babe are safely home again.”

Vara nodded. “And when I come back, you’ll be waiting.”

He stepped back. “Go, my love. Quickly.”

With a final, desperate look, she turned away.

“Vara!”

She spun back in a swirl of deep-blue skirts.

“Fire in your hand,” Avenor gasped.

A great boom shook the hall, and a massive crack zigzagged along the floor.

Vara turned and disappeared into the tunnel.

Avenor watched her go, and then he slumped against the doorway.

For some reason, my gaze was drawn upward, to the wall high above his head. As earthquakes rocked the room and dust sifted from the ceiling, my heart thumped faster.

Because painted on the wall was the same coat of arms in the castle's Great Hall, only now I knew why it was so familiar. I'd seen it before, at my mother's ancestral estate at Lar Satha. The tree's silver branches stretched toward a crescent moon tipped on its side. Here, as in the Great Hall, the colors were brilliant. At Lar Satha, the only color that remained was a bit of gold on the moon. And there, the tree was set aflame.

But everything else was the same. Exactly the same.

Avenor turned and staggered from the tunnel. Bells clanged. The room shook violently, toppling more statues. Smoke billowed into the hall. Men's voices followed. Seconds later, boots rang out and a group of elven knights entered, their swords drawn. Their eyes were black. The one in front stepped forward, his gaze locked on the king.

Avenor straightened to his full height. He didn't flinch even as the statues continued to shatter around him. His voice boomed with power. "You are not welcome here, Midian." Anger blazed in his blue eyes, and contempt dripped from his tone. "Go back to the Shade from whence you came."

The elf strode forward. His black eyes glinted. Slowly, he extended his sword, the tip

pointed toward Avenor's chest. "I would, Your Grace, but I much prefer it here." He closed his eyes. His body dropped to the floor. A thick, black shadow rose from his crumpled body. It hovered in the air for a moment, seething and roiling and folding in on itself. Then it shot toward the king.

Avenor thrust both hands out, and power burst from his palms in a shock wave that disturbed the air.

The shadow went straight through it and struck Avenor in the chest. The king went to his knees, one hand lifting to clutch at the spot over his heart. "I wasn't strong enough," he gasped, shock and horror glazing his eyes. "I wasn't—" He choked. Black veins traveled up his neck...and then his cheeks, until his face was covered in a dark web. His jaw dropped, and blood poured from his mouth. His eyes fluttered shut.

The bells stopped ringing.

At the same moment, Avenor's eyes flew open.

And they were fully black.

The air shifted, and the hall of statues disappeared. The snow-dusted marble under my feet turned to dust-covered floors, and I stood in my bedchamber once more.

My heart raced, blood pumping hard in my veins. Midian's blood, yes, but now I knew there was something stronger inside me. The blood of kings. Avenor told his queen to hide somewhere small and insignificant. A place where no one would look. She'd followed his orders, hiding in tiny Lar Satha, where she'd painted the royal coat of arms on the wall with the tree of Eldenvalla set on fire.

And she'd never returned to Vai Seren. Neither had her child.

But I had. Five hundred years later, I'd entered Vai Seren.

And now I knew the way out.

Chapter Sixteen

VARICK

I walked down the line of squires, my boots ringing against the stone floor of the Serenity Tower. The faces all looked the same—earnest and terrified and

unbelievably young.

Had I ever been that young? I knew I had, of course. Every vampire in the warrior class began training as soon as he could lift a sword. But this group looked young.

Or maybe I was just getting old.

I raised my voice as I cast a cursory glance over each male's attire, checking for loose straps or gaps in pieces of armor. "It's going to be cold out there today. We'll be gone for at least ten hours. I'm from the Wastes, so it won't bother me. But you Lar Katerin lads better hope you followed directions and packed proper gear."

Several of the squires exchanged nervous looks.

I stopped and stared one of them down until he faced forward again, the tips of his ears reddening. I continued walking, my cloak fluttering behind me. "I know for many of you, this is your first trip to the Thicket. So I'm going to give you one last opportunity to speak up. If you're missing gloves or anything else to keep you warm, now is the time to say so. Otherwise, the castle surgeon will be happy to amputate your frostbitten fingers upon your return. We'll send them to your mother for a proper burial." Behind me, where my knights clustered, came the sound of someone smothering a chuckle by pretending to cough.

"I'll also remind you," I said, "that failure to pack the proper gear will earn you two lashes in the courtyard."

There was a long moment of silence. Just as I prepared to tell the group to disperse and make ready to depart, a tentative hand went up.

Behind me, one of my knight captains muttered, "Oh fuck me, here we go."

I went to the hand-raiser and stopped, the toes of my boots almost touching his.
“What.”

“Uh...well—”

“You can put your hand down.”

“Oh! Apologies, my lord.” He jerked it down, nearly striking the squire next to him in the process. “Sorry,” he whispered to the other young male.

“Squire!” I barked.

He jumped. “Yes, my lord?”

“Did you forget your gloves?”

“No, my lord.” His eyes bounced all around my face, like he wasn’t sure where to look and couldn’t find a safe spot to land.

“But your hands are bare.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said, misery coloring his tone. “They are.”

Behind me, a few knights snickered.

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I turned my head and made eye contact with the group. “I’ll have silence.”

Immediately, the laughter cut off. The offenders bowed their heads, contrition on their faces.

I faced the squire. “Where are your gloves, lad?”

“I don’t have any, my lord.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “My father wouldn’t purchase them, sir. He said a strong warrior doesn’t need them.”

The silence from my knights and the other squires was deafening now. I could almost sense the thoughts rising from the group, reactions ranging from mockery to sympathy. My response would determine which one followed the boy to the Thicket. Sympathy might do more harm than good. The boy was already embarrassed, but he’d decided humiliation was preferable to the lash. How many times had I faced the same decision? How often had I gone without something because my father decided I didn’t deserve it?

Too often.

I turned and gestured to the knights behind me. “Tell me, lad, do these males appear weak to you?”

The squire’s gaze moved over the knights, each one packed with muscle and nearing seven feet tall. The squire shook his head. “No, my lord.”

“And they’re all wearing gloves, are they not?”

“Yes, General.”

I nodded. “That’s settled, then. Strong warriors wear gloves.” I pulled mine off and handed them to the boy. “You’ll wear these for today.” I turned to go.

“But...”

I swung back. “What is it, boy? We’re running late as it is.”

“What about you, my lord?” He held the gloves out, as if he meant to return them.

I shook my head. “I told you, I’m from the Wastes. I’m used to the cold.”

“Varick.”

The sound of my name brought my head up. I’d been dreaming, but now I slumped on my knees in Given’s Middling.

She knelt before me and took my hands. “Are you all right?”

It took me a second to get my bearings. I looked around the clearing with its tall, swaying grasses. “You brought me here.” She was getting better at it. Even as weak as she was, she’d pulled me into her space.

“Where are you right now? In the real world, I mean.”

“Same room,” I rasped. “They haven’t moved me to the Hall since the first time we...” I swallowed, reluctant to remind either of us why I was in that room.

“Is there a guard?”

“Not that I’ve seen.” That didn’t mean one wasn’t present—or at least nearby. But the line between reality and illusion was so blurred for me now, I couldn’t be certain of anything anymore. “I think Midian knew I would stay down for a while. I was passed out when he left.”

She squeezed my hands. “I know a way out of the castle, but we have to move quickly. There’s a door that leads outside. I promise I’ll explain later. Right now, we need to leave before Midian shows up again. Do you know the hall of statues?”

“Pedestals,” I said. “Everything is smashed and broken.” I’d passed through it when the demons dragged me from the Great Hall to the bedchamber.

She nodded. “That’s where we need to go. When I release us from this place, I want you to leave your room and meet me there. Will you do that?”

My gut clenched. “If he catches you—”

“He won’t. I’ll be careful, and so will you.” She stood and tugged on my hands until I stood, too. Her blue eyes were tired but determined. “Do you trust me?”

She was tall for a female, but she was still so small compared to me—and even more so now that she was starved for sleep, food, and blood. And yet she’d never given up. Throughout our entire ordeal, she’d shown as much strength and resolve as any knight.

No, as any warrior.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“Yes,” I heard myself say, “I trust you.”

The determination in her eyes shone brighter. “I’ll see you in the hall of statues.” She hesitated, then went on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “Now,” she whispered.

I landed in my body slumped on my knees in the middle of the floor. The room was empty. I lifted my head and looked at the door.

I didn’t know what Given had planned, but I was ready to get the fuck out of Vai Seren.

Chapter Seventeen

GIVEN

Sweat stung my eyes as I crouched behind the pedestal that once held Queen Vara’s statue.

My great-great-grandmother. Probably, there were several more greats in there, but it didn’t matter. The line between us was long but unbroken. I’d seen the blood that connected us in the snow.

I wasn’t just an elven-born. I was Avenor’s direct descendant. He’d told Vara the door he opened would remain that way until she and their child returned. I had to believe I’d seen that vision for a reason. I had to believe the door was still open, and that Varick and I could use it.

Just as soon as he showed up.

Sweat trickled down my forehead and into my eyebrow, tickling the skin underneath. I didn't dare wipe it away. I stayed perfectly still, my tattered gown puddled around me and my breath sawing in and out of my chest. The corridor outside my chamber had been quiet, but sounds of revelry had drifted from the direction of the Great Hall.

I didn't allow myself to wonder what Midian and the others were doing. I didn't care, just as long as they stayed far away. But maybe they hadn't left Varick unguarded. As worry gnawed at me, my heart rate picked up. What if Varick couldn't leave his room? I wasn't sure we'd get another chance to use the door. And if Midian pulled the vision of Avenor speaking about it from my head, he would make sure I never ventured near it again.

A hand covered my mouth from behind. Before I could scream, Varick's voice rasped in my ear. "It's me."

I turned as he lifted his hand, and then I was shaking in his arms. "I worried you weren't coming," I whispered.

He eased back enough to look at me. Weary golden eyes gleamed with faint humor. "Just doing a little last-minute packing." He glanced around. "Where's this door?"

"This way." I grabbed his hand and led him to the spot where Avenor had spoken in that strange, powerful tongue. The wall was blackened with soot and blocked by debris and chunks of marble from the statues. Varick and I cleared it, our breathing quickly growing labored. My head swam, and my muscles screamed from the effort. Just as I began to think I'd been mistaken, the wall moved inward.

Varick and I looked at each other. He stepped forward and pushed hard. Stone scraped stone, and the section of wall swung wide, revealing a tunnel covered in

cobwebs.

He motioned me in. “Come on, sweetheart.”

A deep growl had us both spinning around. The demon Midian had punished for entering my room stood a short distance away, his noble features dripping with contempt.

“You,” he said, pointing at me. “I told him you were dangerous. His plan could destroy us. Better to kill you than take the risk.”

“What plan, Arrol?” I asked, stepping around Varick.

The demon hissed. For a moment, his elven features contorted in rage, and I didn’t think it was illusion. “You don’t use my name.”

Varick caught at my arm, but I darted away before he could grab me and force me behind him. “Why shouldn’t I use your name, Arrol? Does it hurt you?”

He craned his neck, the movement exaggerated and unnatural. “They called us,” he panted. “They called us, and Midian wanted to come.”

Varick moved around me in a blur. Fangs bared, he rushed Arrol.

The demon staggered back, then caught himself and waved a hand. Varick staggered to a stop. He spun and swung a fist through the air.

“Given!” he shouted. He spun and swung again. “There are too many! Get to the tunnel!”

It was an illusion. I darted a look between Varick and Arrol. The demon was smiling,

his eyes narrowed as he watched Varick fight invisible opponents.

Frustration pounded through me. If I got too close to Varick, he could knock me out with a single blow, and then we'd both be at Arrol's mercy. But we'd made a lot of noise. Any second, more demons were going to appear. I had no hope of fighting them.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Arrol!"

The demon's gaze flicked to me.

I left my body, farseeing across the hall. Near the door, my body crashed to the ground, my head bouncing on the stone. Varick stopped fighting and swung toward my body. Then he jerked his gaze to where I stood on the other side of the room.

I braced myself against the base of a pedestal. My fingers closed over cool marble—the familiar fold of a gown. I looked up to find Queen Vara's statue intact above me, her solemn eyes gazing straight ahead. Her arms were extended, the shimmering sword in her hands.

I leapt into the air and grabbed it. When I landed, the hall was a ruin once more, and Arrol charged toward me. Varick's mouth opened on a bellow.

Everything slowed.

My body. I willed myself to it, landing inside as easily as stepping from one room to the next. I was on my feet in a flash—the elven sword still clutched in my fist.

Across the room, Arrol stumbled to a stop. He whirled, spotted me near the door, and charged.

The sword was light as air in my hand. Perfectly balanced, it seemed to swing back of its own accord. I flew across the hall, my feet kicking up dust, and decapitated Arrol in a single blow. His head spun through the air, black blood spewing. His body collapsed, and a black shadow burst from the stump of its neck.

It came for me.

I opened my arms.

“NO!” Varick’s anguished cry filled my ears at the same moment the shadow filled my chest.

But I was ready for it.

See the brick wall. I slammed it into place, locking the demon and his power behind it. The dark, oily presence thrashed, but it couldn’t move.

Good. I needed it.

More demons skidded into the hall. I drew on Arrol’s power, weaving illusions with a wave of my hand. What do demons fear?

Nothing. The answer came to me as clear and true as an arrow finding its mark. Demons feared nothing, in the most literal sense of the word. The Shade was an abyss—a void so black and all-consuming, it crushed even the tiniest hint of light or joy. And I knew it because I had Arrol inside me, and Midian had punished him by showing him the Shade after the feast.

I ripped the abyss from Arrol’s head and threw it into the hall. It was a mockery of the making. The antithesis of creation. Arrol fought, his resistance a scream in my brain, but I kept the wall in place as I drove the other demons back.

Varick grabbed my hand. “Now!” he yelled. “Come on!”

We sprinted to the door and entered the tunnel. He released me long enough to put his shoulder to the marble and push it shut behind us. Then he took my hand again and

pulled me into a run. The tunnel was pitch black. We ran blindly, gasping and stumbling. My toe struck something hard, and I cried out as I lost my grip on Varick. Stone scraped behind us, and then growls and shouts echoed down the narrow passage.

Fire in your hand.

Igrith's power. Avenor's last words to my great-great-grandmother five hundred years before my birth. I clutched the elven-steel sword in one hand. With the other, I reached for Igrith's light. Instantly, a sphere appeared in my palm, its glow filling the tunnel. I spun and threw it behind me.

Light burst, and a shriek split the air.

I summoned more light.

"Given," Varick said, a tremor in his voice. "Your eyes..."

Arrol. The demon's dark, oily presence smashed into the wall in my head. I couldn't hold him forever. If he broke through my defenses, I wasn't sure I could force him from my body. But there was no time to shed him right now.

Pounding footsteps.

Varick and I took off again. We sprinted, the tunnel illuminated by the ball of light I held in my palm. I clutched the sword in the other and prayed the tunnel hadn't collapsed with the passage of time.

But it had been built by the elves at the height of their empire, and its construction was solid. After several long minutes, we reached a set of stone steps bathed in soft blue light.

I let Igrith's power wink out, and Varick grabbed my hand. Together, we raced upward and reached a stone door carved with the tree and crescent moon. It swung open as smoothly as if it had just been hung, and we burst into a moonlit forest.

We ran. My lungs burned, and my skirts threatened to trip me up. The ground was uneven, which made every footfall jarring. But neither Varick nor I let it slow us. We raced into the night and didn't look back. Moonlight splashed among the snow-dusted leaves and fallen tree trunks. Varick's breathing was more even than mine, and I knew he could have run faster. I was slowing him down.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

He wanted to get to Laurent. And why wouldn't he? The two of them were so passionate together. I was a nuisance. An interloper. I had come between them—in their lives and their bed. Varick didn't want me. Laurent only wanted me to save the Deepnight.

I stumbled as the intrusive thoughts paraded through my head.

Varick stopped, his chest heaving. "We can't slow." He reached for me.

"I'm fine." I snatched my hand away and started off again, my feet flying over the dead leaves. He fell in beside me, but I felt his glances.

He didn't trust me. He never had. It was because he feared I would steal Laurent away from him. Varick liked the power he held over Laurent. It was evident in the way they fucked.

I shook my head to clear it. None of this was important right now. The only thing that mattered was getting clear of the Thicket.

But it did matter. What was I really running to, anyway? More manipulation by two men who would rather sleep with each other than share my bed? Laurent bought me dresses to keep me happy and under his thumb. He was no better than Rolund, who ignored his wives and resented his duties as a husband. How long until Laurent treated me the same?

I kept running. But as I dodged branches and leapt over fallen logs, I knew I could never trust Laurent again. I'd never been able to trust anyone. My brother had sold

me into blood servitude, and then my husband had plotted for his lover to impregnate me.

I tightened my hand around the sword. Always, men sought to serve themselves. They ruled everything, and look at what their rule had wrought. Centuries of warfare. All of Ter Isir divided. Laurent couldn't even control the Deepnight and yet he thought he deserved to control me?

My head pounded with rage. I growled under my breath.

Varick glanced at me again.

I just stopped myself from snapping at him. We had to keep going. Keep running.

But he made me so angry. Always, he made me angry. Of all the men in my life, he was the worst. Cruel and uncaring and quick to lash out. He blamed me for his problems with Laurent, which was ridiculous. Their relationship had been twisted and unhealthy long before I arrived.

In my head, Laurent stumbled against a bed's footboard. His silver eyes flashed with anger and heat as he bared his fangs at an enraged Varick dressed in full armor. "That's how it works, General. I give the orders. You follow them."

In my mind's eye, Varick blurred. Between one breath and the next, he had Laurent's back against the wall. Varick pressed his forearm across Laurent's throat and flashed his own fangs. "Oh, that's not at all how it works between us. Maybe I should remind you."

Laurent's eyes shot sparks as he gasped for air. "I could have your head for this."

They stared at each other, sexual tension boiling between them.

Varick dropped his gaze to Laurent's mouth. "Fuck you," he said under his breath, and then he crushed his mouth to Laurent's.

They kissed like they were desperate for each other. Like they would die if they were forced to part. Varick shoved both hands through Laurent's hair and attacked his mouth, groaning deep in his throat as they clashed in a tangle of tongues and fangs. He pressed his whole body against Laurent's, his hips rocking.

Laurent hissed and sucked at Varick's tongue. When blood appeared on Varick's bottom lip, Laurent licked it away. His silver eyes fired, and he thrust his head forward and tried to control the kiss, but Varick used his superior height to shove Laurent harder against the wall. His crimson cloak swayed, and he spread his legs as he continued grinding his hips against Laurent's.

It couldn't feel good being pinned between the rough, unforgiving stone and Varick's armor, but Laurent didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, he appeared to revel in it, kissing Varick like he wanted to climb inside him. As Varick deepened the kiss, Laurent gave a masculine whimper. He thrust his hand between their bodies and unlaced Varick's pants with a quick, practiced movement. When Varick's cock sprang free, Laurent gripped it and immediately began to stroke, his rings sparkling in the room's dim candlelight.

More images flashed through my head—scenes between the two of them. Sex and friendship and quiet moments they shared when no one was watching. They were young, and Varick taught a grinning Laurent how to string a bow. When Varick stood behind Laurent and showed him how to aim it, Laurent turned his head and quickly kissed Varick on the cheek.

The scene changed, and they strode through the snow together, cloaks swirling under a brilliant winter sun. Laurent stooped and grabbed a handful of snow. He packed it in gloved hands when Varick wasn't looking and then chucked it, nailing Varick in

the face. Varick retaliated, and their snowball fight ended with Varick on top of Laurent, the two of them gasping and laughing. Varick brushed snow out of Laurent's hair, then leaned down and kissed him.

Scene after scene flashed through my head. Dozens. Hundreds. Tangled, sweat-soaked nights and stolen moments during the day. Laurent winking at a stone-faced Varick from across the Great Hall at the Midnight Palace, and Varick turning away to hide his reluctant smile.

They loved each other.

They would never love me.

Varick ran at my side, matching my pace though he was capable of much greater speed. He'd never have to slow down for Laurent. They were both full-blooded vampires. I was just a halfling. Rolund's sister. Kin to Laurent's blood enemy. And the priest-king worshipped blood. My brother knew this, but he'd handed me over anyway.

Because Rolund wanted me dead. Crasor's voice echoed in my head. "Stabbing him with the solstone will be enough. Laurent will brand her a spy and order her execution."

"So be it," my brother answered.

More men plotting and conspiring. They would burn the world to get their way.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Maybe it was time for a new way.

YES.

I could make a better one. I wasn't just a halfling. I was heir to the throne of Eldenvalla. Queen Vara's sword was warm in my hand.

YES.

But it belonged to me now.

YES.

And it would deliver cold vengeance.

YES.

The time of kings was over. Nor Doru would burn under Laurent, but with me on the throne, the people would flourish.

YES.

Power flared in my mind. There was so much of it. The light I'd taken from the seer was nothing compared to this.

“Given!”

I stopped running and looked down at the sword in my hand. I could let the power flow from my mind to the blade.

YES. Such a good idea.

“Given!”

At the edge of my vision, something moved frantically. Like a bothersome insect, it flitted back and forth. But it couldn’t reach me. I was too powerful.

“You could be even more so,” a voice said smoothly in my head. “They want you to save the realm.”

They did, I thought, staring at the steel that appeared to ripple down the blade. Everyone wanted me to save the realm.

“They want it for themselves.”

“Given!” Dimly, I heard someone shouting my name. I turned away from the sound. The power in my head swelled. Like water behind a dam, it pushed, longing to flow past the barrier that held it back.

I should let it.

“You should let it,” the voice agreed. “And then take the realm for yourself.”

I could. No, I should. Not for myself, but for the people. I would be a good and just queen. No one would suffer under my rule.

“GIVEN!”

Something hard struck my shoulder. I flew backward as agony exploded inside me. I hit the ground hard and writhed as fire licked through my veins. Daylight flooded the forest, turning the leaves green and the sky overhead a bright blue.

Varick appeared over me, his eyes wide with fear. “Given! You must release it!” The daylight faded, as if the sun had plunged below the horizon.

“He wants your power for himself,” the voice said. “For himself and Laurent.”

The agony faded, but fury remained. I glared up at Varick, and then I slipped inside his mind. And there was Laurent, front and center. So beautiful. The most beautiful thing Varick had ever seen. “I want so badly to look at him,” I said, the words spilling forth without my permission.

Above me, Varick’s face went white. His jaw clenched. “Get the fuck out of my head, you foul perversion.”

Light blazed around us again. Somewhere nearby, men shouted. But there were other sounds, too. Growls and the sharp crack of branches splitting. Something big was coming, and it was coming fast. A sphere of light streaked past Varick’s shoulder.

Fire in your hand.

Tears flooded my eyes. Power—different than the kind in my head—swelled in my chest. This power was as light as the sword I still clutched. I turned my head and saw the blade glowing among the dead leaves I'd landed in.

“Fire in your hand,” a woman's soft voice whispered. In my head, I saw a marble statue look down at me.

Varick pulled me up, and his eyes were stark as he gave me a little shake. “Come on, baby. We're so close. But we can't cross unless you let it go.”

In my head, the dark, oily presence recoiled. The crack of branches grew louder, like something huge was barreling through the trees. A horse whinnied. A high-pitched cackle followed. When I jerked my head toward the sound, a green fog rolled swiftly over the forest floor.

As I watched, a ball of light streaked toward it, struck an unseen target, and exploded. Something deep within the fog screamed.

Doors in my mind unlocked.

I held Arrol within me, and I couldn't leave the Thicket until I released him.

Light flared. I jerked my head in the other direction. Men's silhouettes moved among the trees. One swept an arm back and released another sphere. It sizzled over my head, and I followed its arc as it landed in the center of the fog, driving it back.

Varick shook me again, forcing my eyes to his. “Now, Given! Before it’s too late!”

I closed my eyes and pushed. I’d done this before. I knew how to do it. See the brick wall. Yes! Like the last time, I swung it toward the darkness hovering in my mind. But instead of ousting the demon, the wall crumbled.

Horses’ whinnies filled the air. The snapping of branches and the thunder of hooves grew louder.

Varick’s fingers bit into my upper arms. He stuck his face in mine, his golden eyes as bright as the spheres sailing past us. His voice flowed into my head, the tone rich and pure and so deep it vibrated in my chest and touched my heart. “You are my queen, in both Nor Doru and Eldenvalla.”

I gasped. He knew. “How did you know?” I asked hoarsely.

“The fire in your hand.”

Instantly, heat built in my hand that still gripped the sword. But it didn’t burn. It blazed up my arm and joined the thrum of power swelling in my chest.

“His name is Arrol,” Varick said in my mind. “You called him in. Now cast him out.”

Arrol. Yes. I knew his name.

Horses’ screams joined men’s shouts. Balls of light smashed on the ground inches from where Varick and I stood. He turned me in his arms, putting his back to the fog and the demons racing toward us. If they crashed into us, they’d hit him first. Even to the end, he would protect me.

I closed my eyes. “Arrol,” I said in my mind. “GET OUT,” I screamed, and I pushed

with every fiber of my blood, bone, and soul.

The dark presence burst from me and spun into the night.

Varick swept me into his arms. He ran, and the world became a blur. Seconds later, the air changed so suddenly that my ears popped. Exhaustion rushed at me like a tidal wave. I turned my face into Varick's chest and let the world go black.

Chapter Eighteen

GIVEN

I opened my eyes and saw a dusty ceiling. Instantly, a scream gathered in my throat.

"I'm here." Varick's voice rumbled, and then he sat beside me on a small but comfortable bed. Everything was comfortable, I realized. The air was warm, and soft daylight surrounded us. A fire crackled merrily over Varick's shoulder. The smell of roasted meat teased my nose.

And a clean blanket nestled under my chin.

"Where are we?" I rasped.

"Safe. Well away from the edge of the Thicket." He reached out like he might cover my hand with his. But then he rested both of his on his knees. A line appeared between his sandy brows as his eyes searched my face. "How do you feel? Are you...?"

I knew what he was asking. "Good. It's gone." My mind was my own, Arrol's dark presence no more. "I can't feel Midian's blood. That's a good sign, right?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“I think so.” He hesitated. “As we neared the barrier, you read my mind.”

The memory of those last few moments in the Thicket flashed before me. Uneasiness settled over me like a thick blanket. “I couldn’t tell which thoughts were mine and which were his.”

“That’s part of the problem,” Varick murmured. “I think it was Midian in your head, not Arrol.”

My uneasiness grew. “Why do you think that?”

“The thoughts you pulled from my mind were things only Midian could have known. Thoughts he read from me when I was at my weakest and couldn’t fight him off.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, my throat tightening.

“I wish I knew. Maybe he could only connect with you because you were still inside the Thicket.” His frown deepened. “But I think we have to acknowledge there’s a possibility his blood could affect you somehow, even beyond the barrier.”

I didn’t want to acknowledge it. I didn’t want anything to do with Midian—or Eldenvalla—ever again. Because that heritage was tainted. Knitted onto my soul, as Rhys had put it. But how could I deny it when I’d seen Avenor and Vara in the Hall of Statues? “It still dwells within me,” she’d said. A demon. And she’d passed it onto her child—and all the way down to me.

And now I carried Midian’s blood.

“Hey,” Varick said. He leaned forward, his golden eyes steady. “Whatever you’re thinking, get rid of that thought.” He drew a deep breath. “For a long time, I believed I was...wrong inside. I based that belief on a bunch of old books and the garbage I dealt with growing up with my father.” He lowered his head for a moment, his gaze on his hands. When he looked up, regret shaded his eyes. “And then I met you and knew we were the same. But I judged you unfairly. I expected you to be wrong inside, too, and I refused to accept anything else.”

I sat up. “Oh, Varick,” I murmured. “You’re not wrong inside. If you were, you wouldn’t have been so repulsed by Midian and the others. Don’t you see that now?”

Another deep breath, this one ending with a weary-sounding exhale. “I think maybe I’m starting to.”

I smiled. “Well, that’s a start.”

A hint of a smile touched his lips. “We can figure the hard things out later. Right now, you’re safe, and I’m going to make sure you stay that way.”

He would. His big, solid presence had never been more reassuring than it was right now. “I know you will,” I said softly.

We stared at each other. His gaze dipped briefly to my mouth, and then he cleared his throat. “If you’re feeling up to it, you should eat something.”

My stomach growled, prompting me to look down at myself for the first time. The blanket had dropped to my waist when I sat up, and now cool air touched my shoulders. I wore my thin chemise and nothing else. My nipples puckered against the flimsy, see-through fabric.

Varick glanced away.

I couldn't blame him. I was a mess, with twigs in my hair and dirt-encrusted fingernails. The chemise was as grubby as the rest of me. I plucked the fabric away from my skin and ran my gaze down my body. "Ugh. I need a bath."

"Do you want one?"

I jerked my head up. "Do you have one?" I breathed.

Golden eyes crinkled at the corners, and I experienced the full force of a genuine smile from Varick of Lar Keiren. "I might. But I want you to eat something first."

Right on cue, my stomach growled like a wild beast. His smile became a grin, the tips of his white fangs framed by several days' worth of golden beard that made my stomach do odd flips.

"Give me a minute." He rose and went to a small, stone hearth, where meat was cooking over the fire. My gown and stockings were stretched over a drying rack next to the hearth. As he turned the spit, I took the opportunity to study our surroundings.

We were in a one-room hut. Its sod walls were primitive, but the floor was made of solid wooden planks, and someone had obviously taken care to make the inside comfortable. The bed I sat in boasted a carved footboard, and the single window was fitted with wavy glass. Through it, blurry trees and snow were visible.

"How long have we been here?" I asked.

"About twelve hours based on the position of the sun." Varick turned from the hearth with a plate and a wooden cup in his hands. His clothes were ripped and rumpled, but they looked clean. His hair was clean, too, the thick waves glinting with winter sunlight as he hooked a foot around a nearby chair and pulled it over. He sat and handed me the cup. "Blood first."

“Did you sleep?” It occurred to me that the bed was far too small for both of us.

He grunted an affirmative. “I caught a few hours on the floor.”

“The floor?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“I’ve slept on far worse.” He nodded his chin toward the cup I held. “Drink that before it congeals.”

I sniffed at the dark-red liquid and wrinkled my nose.

“It’s deer blood,” he said, “and you need it, so drink it.”

“It smells terrible.”

He cocked a brow. “Since when are you so picky, halfling?” A soft smile played around his mouth.

I couldn’t help but return it—and I didn’t miss how the word he’d once hurled at me as an insult had become something of an endearment. I downed the blood, then thrust the cup at him with a grimace. “That was as gross as I expected.”

His grin flashed again as he handed me the plate. “This will be better. I found herbs in that little cabinet over there.”

It was better, and I had to force myself to slow down so I didn’t get sick. I was never taking food for granted again. He waited until I’d swallowed several bites before asking, “What made you leave Aberwas and come looking for me?”

I told him everything that happened between Rhys saving me in the Thicket and me setting out for Eldenvalla alone. I explained how Igrith had shared her power with me, although I omitted her kiss. By the time I finished, my stomach was full and a warm, contented feeling was spreading through my limbs.

Varick took the plate. “I can’t believe you went behind Rhys’s back like that.”

I tilted my head. “You can’t?”

His lips twitched. “Well, maybe now I can.”

We smiled at each other. After a moment, he coughed into his fist. “I’ll, uh, get the tub. You can bathe in front of the fire.”

“All right.”

He rose and pulled a round metal tub down from a hook embedded in the sod. He was so tall, he had to stoop as he moved around. He hauled buckets of snow from outdoors and heated them over the fire before dumping them into the tub. He worked fast, filling it quickly. When that was done, he pulled a bar of soap from the cabinet and placed it on a little stool next to the fire. He rolled up his sleeve and crouched next to the tub, stirring the last of the snow until it melted.

I flung the blanket back and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. Someone had applied wax over the floorboards, and they were heaven against my bare feet. I wiggled my toes as I watched Varick. A flash of silver caught my eye, and I noticed the elven-steel sword I’d carried from Vai Seren leaning against the sod in the corner.

I stopped wiggling my toes. “What happened to the mages who helped us in the Thicket?”

Varick’s jaw tightened. He didn’t look up as he answered. “Dead. They ran past me as I carried you out. I saw one trampled by a demon’s horse. The other fell to his knees and tore at his eyes. If he lived, it wasn’t for long.” He paused briefly, a muscle in his cheek twitching. “And I’m sure he wished he hadn’t.”

The food I'd eaten threatened to come back up. "There were only two?"

He looked at me at last. "Just two. They wore the mountain and laurel wreath of Aberwas on their leather armor. The first chance I get, I'll try to find out who they were so we can notify their families."

After we left the hut, he meant. But where did he intend for us to go? "Varick—"

"The water is ready," he said, rising. He averted his gaze as he stood in profile. Faint color stained his cheekbone. "There's a chamber pot under the bed. I'll wait outside until you're done bathing. Just knock on the door." He stepped around the tub.

"Wait!" I stood and went to him. "I don't want you to go."

He kept his head down. "I'll be right outside."

"I don't need the chamber pot, and I don't want to be alone." I grasped his sleeve. "Varick, why won't you look at me?"

His golden-brown eyelashes fluttered to his cheeks. He shook his head.

"Varick?"

"Because," he whispered, and he opened his eyes but kept his gaze glued to a spot on the floor. "I forced you... Back...there. I took you a-and I know you didn't want it." He exhaled harshly through his nose, and a violent shudder passed through him. "Gods," he rasped, his voice breaking.

Something inside me broke, too. Without being totally aware what I was doing, I gripped his thick bicep and turned him toward me. When he still wouldn't look at me, I grabbed his face in both hands and pulled his head up. "Varick, I want you to listen

to me very carefully. What you and I did is not the same as what happened to you. It's not the same. You didn't force yourself on me—"

"You're wrong," he croaked, squeezing his eyes shut. A tear leaked from under one eyelid. It raced down his cheek and trickled into his beard.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

I flung my arms around his neck and spoke in his ear. “You don’t get to tell me how I feel,” I said, softening my words by stroking his nape. “You told me once that I could never lie to you. Remember? Use those superior warrior’s senses now and know I’m telling the truth. You didn’t hurt me, Varick of Lar Keiren, and you didn’t take anything I wasn’t willing to give. You saved my life. You don’t owe me an apology. I owe you my gratitude.”

He made a choked, negative sound. “You owe me nothing. You saved both of us.”

“Then we’re even,” I whispered, placing a soft kiss under his ear.

Slowly, strong arms came around me. He hesitated, and then he squeezed me against him. He buried his face in my neck and wept. We held each other, our hearts beating fiercely between us. His big body shook with sobs so wrenching they tore at my soul. Tears filled my eyes, and I let them go, weeping with him as we stood in the quiet hut with the crackle of the fire behind us.

And when he quieted at last, I took a risk and spoke again, my voice pitched as low as I could make it. “You are a worthy male,” I said, knowing how significant the words were to a vampire from the warrior class. “The worthiest I have ever known. What happened to you on that beach doesn’t make you any less of a warrior. Quite the opposite. It wasn’t your fault, Varick, and it does not diminish you.”

He moved a hand to the back of my head. I let him hold me that way, my cheek pressed to his heart. He rested his chin on the top of my head. After a minute, his big chest expanded under me in a deep sigh.

“I love you,” he said in my head, and I stopped breathing. “You don’t have to say it back. But I wanted you to know.”

I lifted my head. “I love you, too.” I touched his cheek, and he captured my hand and pressed it against his beard. I wasn’t sure when it had happened, my falling in love with him. Maybe when he’d begged Midian to hurt him instead of me. Maybe when he’d held my hands in the Middling and told me he trusted me. But I didn’t need to know the precise moment. And anyway, maybe there wasn’t one. We’d gone through a trial by fire together and emerged as tempered steel. I knew the tragic past that had shaped Varick. Despite all the damage done to it, his heart was pure.

And he’d just offered it to me.

Yes, I loved him. How could I not?

“We’ll start over,” he said, “you and I.”

I nodded and spoke through a throat choked with tears. “I’d like that.”

Chapter Nineteen

VARICK

I helped Given wash her hair.

“There’s a lot of it,” I grunted. No wonder ladies needed help with this sort of thing. I was all thumbs trying to rinse soap from the tangled mass. “Let me know if I’m hurting you.”

“You’re not.” She sat patiently while I tugged and rinsed and did my best to separate the tangles. I’d searched the hut for a comb and came up empty-handed. Considering

the place was probably used for hunting, it didn't surprise me. After a minute, I sat back on my heels. "I think I got all the soap out."

She offered me a shy smile over one bare, damp shoulder. "Thank you. I can take it from here."

I stood and promptly smashed my head against the ceiling. "Fuck," I muttered, ducking and going to the hearth. Sitting on the bed was out of the question, since it would give her zero privacy. She didn't want me to leave her, so I stood facing the fire with a hand braced on the hot stones. Behind me came the sounds of splashing as she finished her bath.

Eventually, we needed to talk about what happened when we left this place. But I was reluctant to speak of it just now, and I knew she felt the same. We were both too raw, our newfound safety too fragile.

And she needed more rest. The blood and meat had done her good, but there were still shadows under her eyes. Snow had fallen steadily for the past few hours, and we had no horses. I couldn't march her through the drifts without at least another day of rest.

Eventually, I noticed the splashing behind me had stopped. I turned just enough to catch her eye, and I kept my gaze firmly on her face. "All done?"

"Yes."

I went to the cabinet. "There are no towels, but I found another sheet." I snapped it out and held it up. The tub was tiny, and I'd seen every bit of her while I washed her hair, but I was still stunned anew as she stood. Water ran down her perfect breasts and flat stomach. Bare, creamy skin glistened in the firelight. She was so fucking beautiful, and I'd been hard as a rock since I knelt behind her and watched her tits

bob in the water. A water droplet clung to one pink nipple, and I realized I stood with the towel spread in my arms and my gaze riveted on the dainty, puckered point. As I stared, it tightened further.

I lifted my head and found her watching me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes darkened to midnight blue. Unmistakable lust gleamed there. Her lips parted, and the tips of her fangs peeked out.

Just like that, it was over. I reached for her, and she reached for me, and suddenly I had an armful of warm, wet female. The sheet fluttered to the floor and water sloshed everywhere as I picked her up and carried her to the bed. She clutched at my shoulders as I lay her down, my lips finding hers.

The connection between us flared instantly—that sizzling arc of recognition that had drawn us to each other from the start firing to life. As we kissed, it crackled over my tongue and forked a white-hot path down to my dick. It was still dangerous, but I didn't care anymore. We needed to be dangerous if we had any hope of fighting what we'd left behind in Eldenvalla.

I moaned into her mouth and settled my hips firmly between hers. When she opened under me, I growled, hooked an arm under her knee, and shoved her leg up. I thrust against her center, but it wasn't enough. I wanted her hot, bare pussy wrapped around my cock.

She was just as unsatisfied, her fingers pulling at my hair as she wrapped her other leg around my waist and trapped me against her. She rolled her hips, grinding wantonly over the fabric that covered my straining bulge. Her kiss was as wild as the rest of her. She held nothing back, biting at my bottom lip and thrusting her tongue greedily against mine.

I let her have her way for a moment, and then I jerked my head from her hands and

pinned her wrists to the pillow on either side of her head. “I’m in charge,” I rasped.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Her blue eyes went heavy-lidded, her full lips parting as she tried to catch her breath. Her breasts heaved between us, and I dropped my head and took one ripe nipple into my mouth. I sucked hard, shuddering at the taste of her sweet skin before moving back up and skimming my lips over hers. When she chased my kiss, I shook my head.

“You weren’t listening, sweetheart.” I dipped my head and suckled her other nipple. Only when she was squirming did I release the succulent, tight point. I brushed another featherlight kiss over her mouth. “I make the rules, and you follow them.”

“Please,” she whispered, lifting her hips.

“Not the answer I was looking for.”

She sank white teeth into her bottom lip. There was no fear in her eyes. Just unrelenting need, which was exactly what I wanted to see. She tested my grip on her wrists, and I wanted that, too. Every bit of delicious resistance. I wanted to take her to the edge and hold her there until she hated me for making her wait. Because I wanted her to love it when I finally let her go over.

With a whimper, she gave a small nod.

I rewarded her with a kiss. I poured all the possessiveness I felt into it, nibbling her plump lower lip before thrusting my tongue deep. When she was moaning and pliant, I rose, intending to strip. But as I stood over her, all I could do was stare.

My cock was already painfully hard, and it tightened further at the sight of her sleek body spread open and bathed in the pure winter light that streamed through the

window. I'd seen her before, of course, but never like this. I'd never had her all to myself, her lithesome curves displayed for my eyes only.

She seemed to sense what I wanted, because she stretched her arms over her head and spread her thighs wider. She hid nothing from me, letting me look my fill.

And I did. Her tits were incredible—round and full and crowned with rosy nipples glistening from my tongue. Her delicate rib cage flowed into a sleek stomach and gently flared hips.

But it was her pussy that commanded my attention. She was so pink and pretty there, all dainty folds and shiny desire. A surge of protectiveness flooded me. No one would ever hurt this female again. Anyone who dared to try would never try again. Because I would end them.

My cock pulsed, reminding me I wore far too many clothes. I stripped in record time, suppressing a groan when I finally freed my erection. My shaft was swollen and dark red, a thick bead of precome trembling at the tip. I smeared the moisture over my cockhead. Another bead swelled from my slit, and I gathered that, too, grunting as I stroked my shaft.

Given propped herself on her elbows, her gaze riveted on my dick. She gnawed at her lip again with one little fang as she watched me work myself over. I knew there was plenty to see. I'd been bred to be big, and my cock was an eyeful. I wasn't boastful about it, but I saw no reason for false modesty, either—especially when she clearly liked what she saw. I widened my stance and slowed my fist, giving her a show. My balls ached, the heavy globes tight with come. Blood pumped to my shaft, plumping up the veins and turning my cockhead purple. I licked my palm and carried it back, slicking myself even more.

She sucked in a breath.

“I’ve never had my mouth on you,” I said.

Her eyes shot to mine. “No,” she croaked. She cleared her throat. “You haven’t.”

“We should fix that right now.” My dick swung heavy against my thigh as I climbed over her. I grabbed the pillow from behind her head and sent it sailing into the center of the hut. “That was going to get in my way,” I told her, then I pushed her thighs wide and licked up her center.

“Oh, gods!” Her cry ended on a squeal, and her legs trembled around my head. I pushed her knees flat to the mattress and buried my face in her cunt. Her juices soaked my tongue. She was as sweet as I remembered, like a ripe, juicy peach. I thrust my tongue inside her, hunting for more nectar.

She gave a long, strangled moan, her hips jerking against my hold. She grabbed at my shoulders like she needed something to hang onto.

I eased back a bit, denying her pressure. I stiffened my tongue and traced the tip around her opening. She made a frustrated sound and dug her nails into my muscle.

I responded by trailing open-mouthed kisses down her inner thigh, where her pulse fluttered in a pale blue vein. I returned to her pussy, licking and teasing and sucking at her folds, but I stayed away from her clit. It thrust eagerly from its sheath, a glistening bud ripe for claiming. But that would have been too easy. I didn’t want this to end just yet.

Her breathing grew more labored, each exhale a whimper that tightened my dick. “Varick, please.”

I dragged the tip of my fang down one of her slick, puffy lips. “Please, what?”

Goosebumps rushed over the skin of her inner thighs. She held still, no doubt feeling the promise of my bite. “My clit,” she whimpered. “Please, please touch my clit.”

I looked up. She held her head up, and she fisted the sheets on either side of her hips. Her gorgeous breasts trembled as she practically vibrated with need.

“Since you’ve been such a good girl for me,” I murmured, then sucked her clit into my mouth. I kept my eyes locked on her face, so I saw her tip her head back as she came on a strangled scream. A flush spread down her chest to her breasts, and her nipples stabbed the air. Fucking gorgeous. I tongued her clit as she shuddered through her release, and then I flipped her over, pulled her onto all fours, and ate her from behind.

“Oh! Varick! Oh gods!” Her arms collapsed, and I gave a growl of approval as the position thrust her ass higher. I sucked her clit until she stiffened with another orgasm. As she screamed herself hoarse, I thrust two fingers inside her and lapped up her juices.

“Gods!” She sobbed against the mattress. Her pussy clamped hard around my fingers, and she thrust her ass up shamelessly. I drew back so I could admire the view.

No surprise, her backside was as pretty as her frontside. Smooth, sweetly curved ass. Long, sleek thighs. I pulled my fingers from her pussy and rubbed her juices over her tiny pink asshole. She squealed and jerked away, only to lift her hips higher.

“That’s right,” I rasped, “come back and get it, beautiful.” I teased her hole for a few moments, but my control was frayed to the breaking point. As she came down from her high, I urged her onto her back. She was putty in my hands, offering no protest as I spread her wide and settled on top of her. I positioned myself at her entrance, and I nearly came on the spot when her heat enveloped my cockhead.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. She ran her palms down my biceps, smoothing over the muscle like she loved how it felt. “Please fuck me, Varick. I want you inside me.”

Gratitude filled my chest. She wanted to erase any lingering doubts I had about the sex in Vai Seren. I’d told her she and I would start over. This was her saying yes again. Together, we could reclaim our passion, giving each other pleasure not out of duty, but out of love and mutual respect.

I pushed inside, and she was more than ready for me. Hot and wet, her pussy was a dream around my dick. Tight as a fist, even after everything I’d done to get her ready for me. Fuck. I wasn’t going to last. Testing my control, I eased out a few inches and thrust back inside. Pressure built, rushing me right up to the edge. I tensed, my balls tight and the base of my cock tingling.

“You good?” I asked gruffly.

“I’m perfect.”

“Good, because this is going to be quick and hard.” With a groan, I let go and delivered on that promise. My thrusts were hard and deep, and soon that telltale flush was spreading down her breasts.

“Come for me again,” I ordered, watching her tits bounce. “I want to feel it on my cock.”

She obeyed, reaching between us and stroking her clit.

Good girl. I was too far beyond speech to say it. I could only hold myself over her and drive my dick into her pussy over and over and over. Mind-blowing pressure. Exquisite heat. Her perfect, tight cunt. The narrow bed shuddered and hit the wall, sending little pieces of grass fluttering onto the sheets.

She threw her head back, her pale hair wild around her head and the tendons in her neck straining. Between our bodies, she rubbed her clit furiously. Her hot little cunt strangled my dick as she came yet again.

The pressure was insane. I clenched my jaw and pumped faster. At the last second, I pulled out and spurted all over her pussy. Come landed in thick stripes between her thighs. I shuddered, a hoarse cry ripping from my throat as I held my pulsing dick and let bliss pound through me.

I ended up on my back with her sprawled on top of me. It took us both a long time to catch our breath. As my heart slowed, I stared at the ceiling and tried to stave off reality for a few more precious seconds. But like everything else good in the world, the afterglow couldn't last.

Given lifted her head. "You're worried about getting me pregnant."

I looked at her. "Of course I am. You're Laurent's queen."

She sat up, her features instantly defensive. "Then why sleep with me at all?"

"Because I'm weak," I said readily, sitting up and scrubbing a hand over my face. I scratched at my beard, which was beginning to itch. "And stupid," I muttered.

"So having sex with me was stupid?" She climbed from the bed, jerking her arm away when I tried to reach for her. She marched to the hearth and snatched her clothes from the drying rack.

I got up and dressed quickly, never taking my eyes off her. “That’s not what I meant, Given. You can’t tell me you don’t understand how important it is for a king’s heir to be legitimate. There’s also that savior of the realm bullshit we have to worry about.”

She faced away, pulling her dress over her head with jerky movements. The skirts bunched around her hips, and part of the fabric stuck in her neckline. Love, it seemed, didn’t make a male any smarter. With a sigh, I went to her and tugged the garment into place. Then I turned her around and rested my hands on her shoulders.

“It was a poor choice of words,” I said. “I don’t regret what we did. I think we both know it’s impossible for us to resist each other. But this prophecy hangs over everything, and you and I didn’t leave Lar Katerin on a pleasant note. I don’t know what to expect from Laurent now.”

“I saw him,” she said quietly. “When you and I were in Vai Seren. I meant to farsee to Rhys the Fair, but I ended up in Laurent’s Council chamber.”

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. Then anger swept me. “And you didn’t think to tell me this?”

“I didn’t have an opportunity.” She jerked from my grasp. “When was I supposed to tell you? Before or after I forced a demon from my body and watched it turn to dust? Or maybe I should have squeezed it in while we were in the Great Hall fighting for our lives.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. “You’re right,” I said tightly. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, the tension drained from her. “Laurent and I didn’t speak for very long. He was worried about you.” Her brow furrowed. “He asked how he could get us out.”

Silence fell. Daylight slanted through the window, filling the tiny hut with cheery

light that sharply contrasted with the somber mood that stretched between us.

“We can’t stay here,” I said. “I have my estate in Lar Keiren, but Laurent will never agree to me taking you there. You obviously can’t go back to Sithistra—”

“We could go to Aberwas. Rhys the Fair’s men saved us in the Thicket. He’s on our side. He’ll offer protection if we ask.”

Everything inside me recoiled at that. “I don’t need protection from the bandit king.”

Anger sparked in her eyes. “Now you sound like Laurent. Rhys isn’t a smuggler. He’s a mage.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

A sound outside had me instantly alert. I waved her to silence as I strained for more sound. It didn't come, but my senses fired with awareness.

I looked at Given and drew on my gift. "Can you still make light in your hands?"

She stared down at her palm. After a second, she lifted worried eyes and mouthed "no."

"I'm going outside to look. If anyone besides me comes through this door, hit them in the head with the frying pan and run. Don't look back. Understand?"

Her eyes darted to the corner. "Shouldn't I use the sword?" she asked, her voice a thread of sound.

I shook my head. "An experienced fighter will expect a sword and know how to defend against it. No one expects a frying pan." I moved to the door and listened. Slowly, I reached down and pulled my dagger from my pant leg. The demons hadn't found it when they searched me. Then again, they hadn't looked too hard. In the hours I'd spent struggling to stay awake in Vai Seren, I'd had plenty of time to think about why that might be. It was a weakness, I'd decided. Arrogance, pure and simple. The demons didn't need weapons, and it made them careless. I wouldn't forget it.

Dagger in hand, I cast Given a final look. She'd fetched the frying pan and held it in front of her. "Don't hesitate. Anyone but me, you swing hard and run."

She nodded.

In a burst of speed, I opened the door. A wide-eyed Jordan of Twyl stood on the threshold, his hand raised like he meant to knock.

With a snarl, I grabbed him by the front of his robes and hauled him into the hut.

Chapter Twenty

GIVEN

I clapped a hand over my mouth as Varick slammed Jordan against the wall. Grass fluttered to the floor, and the whole hut seemed to shake.

Varick pressed the edge of his dagger against Jordan's neck. The ex-brother raised his hands in a gesture of surrender as he flicked his eyes down to the blade.

"That's right," Varick growled, "you remember this dagger. Although, it's not the one you used when you took an oath to serve me. My mistake. You obviously need stronger steel to compel your loyalty."

Surprise and confusion warred for dominance in my head. Varick hated the Brotherhood. He barely tolerated Jordan's presence at court. When Laurent told me Jordan had accompanied Varick to the far north, I'd assumed it was simply Laurent signaling his displeasure with Varick. Or possibly just Laurent being petty by saddling Varick with a companion he disliked. But there was clearly a lot more going on here than a shared journey to Varick's estate.

"I never stopped serving you," Jordan said tightly. "It's why I'm here."

Varick hissed, his fangs bared. "You must think I'm a fool. Laurent told me the mages of Wesyfedd tipped him off to the prophecy. You showed up in Nor Doru and climbed out of his fucking pocket the same day I fetched Given from the Rift." He

leaned harder against Jordan, pushing the smaller man into the sod. “I hope you had a good laugh after that day on the beach, sweet mage, because I’m inclined to make sure you don’t laugh again.”

Sweet mage.

Jordan of Twyl—of Wesyfedd.

My heart sped up, and the memory of Rhys’s voice filled my head. “Our role is to observe—and to keep you safe when others would try to use you for their own ends.”

How long had Jordan of Twyl been observing Varick and me?

Jordan swallowed carefully. “If you’ll let me talk—”

“The time to talk was weeks ago,” Varick said, “when you could have told me this prophecy calls for me to fuck my queen and murder my own child.”

I winced. Varick had every right to be angry, but his words reminded me that, at the end of the day, I was still Laurent’s wife. And I wasn’t at all certain Laurent would approve of Varick and me sleeping together without him—especially now that we’d admitted we loved each other.

Energy rippled through the hut, lifting all the hair on my body. When Jordan spoke next, his voice rang with power. “Let go of me, Lord Varick, so I can explain.”

Varick stepped back at once. Then he frowned hard, as if he couldn’t believe he’d done it.

Jordan eased carefully off the wall. He shook grass from his robes and straightened, looking for all the world like a fresh-faced teenager. After a somewhat wary look at

Varick, he turned blue eyes to me, his gaze taking in the frying pan I still held. “It’s good to see you looking well, Your Grace. We’ve all been worried.”

It was disorienting, seeing him this way. In my head, he was still the young man I’d met at the feast on my first night in Lar Katerin. Together, we’d gawked at the spectacle and gilded danger of the vampire court. The fact that he still looked like that young man left me feeling unbalanced, like someone had switched the floor under my feet when I wasn’t looking. I set the frying pan down near the hearth. “By we, do you mean the mages of Wesyfedd?”

“Your captivity inspired worry throughout Ter Isir.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Another master of evasion. It was becoming an epidemic. But after my ordeal in Eldenvalla, I found myself unwilling to tolerate it.

I narrowed my eyes. “Rhys the Fair told me the mages observe and don’t interfere. That bad things happen when people try to bend prophecies to their will. Is that what you’ve been doing in Lar Katerin? Observing?”

If Jordan was surprised by my directness, he didn’t show it. “We try not to interfere, but sometimes it can’t be helped.” He glanced at Varick. “You’re both aware of the prophecy now, and that you’re central to it. My role, and that of my brethren, is to ensure you both stay alive so magic can run its course.”

“And what of the child?” Varick demanded. “The one you want to throw in the Rift.”

“I don’t see a child,” Jordan said coolly, “so I don’t know how I could accomplish that, General.” His gaze strayed to the rumpled bed, and my face flamed.

Varick sheathed his dagger, tucking it away so swiftly I wasn’t sure where he’d hidden it. “Well, you can forget it because prophecy or no prophecy, it’s not going to happen.”

Now that Varick wasn’t holding a weapon, Jordan’s shoulders relaxed. “The prophecy says the savior of the realm will be bound in blood and reborn from the Rift. Many powerful men want that to mean something that benefits them. The north has its version, and the south has another.”

I spoke up. “You mean Rolund wanting me dead.” Varick looked at me sharply, but I

kept my attention on Jordan. “He sent the solstone to Lar Katerin.”

“Yes, but there’s something you don’t know, Your Grace. Crasor has your brother’s ear, and he has convinced Rolund the prophecy refers to you. That your death will lift the curse your father invited when he took an elven-born as his second queen.”

Varick made a disgusted sound. “Now there’s a curse?”

“Queen Elissa lost her child,” Jordan told me. “And Princess Cathrin is ill and expected to die. Rolund has grown increasingly obsessed with his inability to sire a son. Crasor’s machinations have found fertile soil in your brother’s mind.”

An ache shot through my heart. I’d promised Cathrin I would see her again. “You’re certain Cathrin won’t recover?”

Jordan nodded.

Silence settled over the hut. The ache in my heart became a weight. I felt sympathy for my brother, but I couldn’t defend him. I’d heard him and Crasor discuss the solstone. “So be it,” he’d said when Crasor spoke of Laurent throwing me in the Rift for treason. Queen Amantha had hated my mother. She’d also been a woman of deep faith. It wasn’t much of a stretch to see how Rolund could have fallen under the Brotherhood’s influence. But it was still difficult to accept that the brother who’d comforted me when I had nightmares would arrange my death just so he could have a son.

Varick eyed Jordan. “You haven’t said what you believe.”

“You saw what lies behind the Thicket,” Jordan said softly. “It won’t stay there. Someone has to stop it, General. That’s what I believe.”

“And you think it should be Given. That’s a convenient position to take, not to mention a craven one.”

I interrupted before Varick could draw his dagger again. “Rhys the Fair said it could be me or my child. He claimed the mages don’t know how the prophecy will unfold, and that my choices could influence the outcome.”

“Not just yours,” Jordan said. “Plenty of others would love to choose how the prophecy unfolds. Rolund is one of them. It’s why he sent the solstone blade, and why he had someone move it when he learned Lord Varick would be joining you and King Laurent in bed.”

I looked to Varick, whose expression had gone stony. Even if I could have read his thoughts, I didn’t want to. Whatever his feelings toward Laurent at the moment, he protected the throne—and its occupant. The fact that Rolund had penetrated so deeply into the Midnight Palace undoubtedly made him furious. He already held Sithistra in low esteem. This would only solidify his enmity.

Knowing how far my brother was willing to go to achieve his ends sent a shiver down my spine. If Rolund could put solstone in Laurent’s bed, he could reach me anywhere. And how many other “powerful men” wanted to impose their will on the prophecy and—by extension—me? I felt like I’d landed in the middle of a giant spiderweb with enemies crawling toward me from all sides.

My trepidation must have shown on my face because Jordan said, “I came to Nor Doru to help keep you safe, Your Grace. I remain in Nor Doru for that purpose. You both have my loyalty. I’ll swear it on Avenor’s sword if you wish.”

I couldn’t help but glance at the sword, which looked woefully out of place in the humble sod hut. When I looked back at Jordan, he regarded me steadily. My heart thumped hard. “Have you always known?”

“No, but I suspected. I wasn’t certain until you read my thoughts the night King Laurent performed the blood rite with the thralls. You and I dined at the same table. As the feast progressed and the atmosphere grew more ribald, I remember thinking that I’d always dismissed the rumors about vampire blood orgies as slander from the south.”

I startled. “I didn’t...” I searched my memory—and instantly remembered replying that I hoped the celebration in the Great Hall didn’t reach that point. Jordan had turned to me with shock in his eyes.

Now, he regarded me steadily. I licked my lips. “You said that aloud.”

“No, Your Grace. I merely thought it.”

My heart thumped faster. Because the feast wasn’t an isolated incident. I’d heard Rowena, too, the night she gave me the solstone dagger. “I’m so scared. If they hurt Harald...” Her lips hadn’t moved, and yet her voice had sounded in my head as if she’d spoken aloud.

“Reading thoughts isn’t an elven gift,” Jordan said, “it’s a demonic one.”

Varick bristled. “Mage or not, Brother Jordan, Given of Nor Doru is still your queen. Show some respect.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“It’s not disrespect, General.” Jordan went to the corner and retrieved the sword. As he approached me with it, Varick drew closer like he was prepared to intercept at any moment. Jordan appeared to pay him no mind as he knelt before me.

He lifted the sword, the blade balanced on his palms. “The strongest demons attached themselves to Avenor and his queen. Your ability isn’t shameful, Your Grace, it’s proof that magic chose well when it placed you at the center of the prophecy. You are exactly who you’re supposed to be. Human and vampire. Elven and demon. You are all of Ter Isir. Who better to save the realm than someone who embodies every corner of it?”

Blood rushed in my ears as the optical illusion of the sword’s melting blade danced on his palms. I’d barely escaped Vai Seren. Midian had almost taken control of my mind on the edge of the Thicket. “I’m not sure I can do what you’re asking,” I said over the sound of my pounding heart.

Once more, Jordan shed his inconspicuous aura. He was still a fresh-faced young man with the hint of a dimple in his cheek, but now he was also more. Eyes never leaving mine, he drew one palm down the sword’s edge, slicing open his hand. Blood welled. He smeared it down the blade.

The hut filled with pressure, and his voice rolled with power again. “I believe you can, Given of Eldenvalla. You are the savior of the realm, and I pledge to help you finish what your great-great-grandfather could not.” He proffered the sword.

I took it. His blood dripped from the blade and onto my hand. The fire in the hearth shuddered and almost went out before slowly rekindling.

Jordan stood, his hand still bleeding freely. He turned to Varick. “I’ll swear another oath if you wish it, Lord Varick.”

Varick studied him. After a long pause, he nudged his chin toward me. “Just serve her well. That will be sufficient for me.”

A muscle twitched in Jordan’s jaw, and maybe it was just a trick of the dancing firelight, but he looked almost disappointed. But then he bent his head, his gaze on his palm. Light pulsed—quick and brilliant—and when it winked out, his wound was gone. He turned back to me. “There is power in blood, Your Grace. It’s a belief mages and vampires share. I believe your blood holds more gifts than you realize. Gifts you might require in the events to come.”

Varick grunted. “For someone who claims to be ignorant about the future, you have much to say about it. The queen just endured a lengthy ordeal. She needs more rest and less talk.”

His words were their own kind of prophecy, because exhaustion swept me as soon as he said them. Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to climb into the bed, pull the tangled blankets over my head, and pretend the world didn’t exist.

But I should have known that was too much to ask, because the next thing out of Jordan’s mouth was, “I’m afraid rest will have to wait, my lord. I didn’t come alone. I brought someone who wishes to speak with you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

VARICK

The black tents were a stark contrast against the white snow.

I knew them well, having spent half my life inside one, whether sleeping or standing over maps of various Sithistran troop positions. But I'd never approached these tents as an outsider.

I felt like one now.

Given stood at my side on the outskirts of the makeshift camp. Her face was pale as she gazed at the crimson and black pennants snapping in the crisp air. As it turned out, Jordan of Twyl was a master of understatement as well as a talented actor. He hadn't brought "someone" with him. He'd traveled with most of the Midnight Palace's garrison. But that was to be expected, considering the presence of the large tent in the center of the snowy camp.

More elaborate than the others, its pennant bore the twisted night-blooming rose of Nor Doru topped by a crown. Knights of the warrior class stood around the perimeter. Out of habit, I measured the space between them, looking for gaps in security.

The unveiled sun of Wesyfedd beat down on my head, making my scalp feel like a dozen hornets had nested in my hair. I knew Given was feeling the same, although her human blood probably lessened the discomfort. We had neither gloves nor cloaks to shield us. I'd briefly considered ripping up bedsheets back at the hut, but that would have meant walking into the Nor Doruvian camp advertising exactly what we'd done on them.

"The king asked to speak to you first, Lord Varick," Jordan said. His gaze skated over Given before settling back on me. "Alone."

Given's shoulders stiffened.

Jordan gestured toward a path someone had shoveled through the camp. "Your tent is just there, Your Grace. I'll take you to it."

Given stared at the path, anger brewing in her eyes. She gathered her skirts. “No need for an escort. I can find it myself.” As she walked away, the elven sword swung at her hip in the leather scabbard I’d found in the hut.

“Laurent is in for a tough lesson,” I murmured to myself. Between the two of us, he’d always been better with women. He understood the way their minds worked. Knew how to talk to them. But now I wasn’t so sure.

“Should I have insisted on taking her?” Jordan asked.

I looked down to find him frowning after Given. Apparently, Laurent wasn’t the only one in need of lessons. “Sure, if you’re all right with losing a few fingers.” When his brow furrowed more, I bit back a sigh. “Best give her some space for now. Post a knight in front of her tent and have someone take her food and blood.” I strode away, Jordan of Twyl already an afterthought as I crossed snow that horses and men had trampled.

The perimeter knights saluted at my approach. As I moved into the camp, males in armor and heavy crimson cloaks stopped and touched gloved fists to their breastplates. They were all highborn warriors—vampires capable of withstanding the naked sun. Several pulled their hoods down and bowed their heads. I nodded but kept moving, my eyes straight ahead. No one tried to speak to me, but curiosity trailed my steps like the wake of a ship. By the time I reached Laurent’s tent, I could almost hear the buzz of questions hovering over the camp. No one had ever returned after venturing into the Thicket. The knights undoubtedly wondered what I’d seen inside the forest.

Let them wonder. They wouldn’t hear it from me.

I ducked inside the king’s tent flap and straightened.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

Laurent stood in the center of the big space, plush carpets under his feet. He wore all black, as was his custom. Dark hair waved back from his forehead, the lamplight turning it almost purple in places. Silver winked in his ear, and silver eyes locked with mine. But they weren't completely silver. I knew that up close they were shot through with streaks the color of moonlight.

In Eldenvalla, I hadn't let myself think about the night I left Lar Katerin. I'd pictured the obsidian walls of the Sanctum, and I hadn't dwelt on prophecies and betrayals.

But I did now. At last, I allowed myself to feel. Emotion broke over me like rapids, the flow so fast and violent it was all I could do to keep my head above the deluge. I'd loved Laurent from the start, when he was a dark prince with knowing eyes. He probably didn't realize it, but he'd saved me during those years when waking in my father's house had made me wish I wouldn't wake at all. And then he'd saved my life in earnest on that frozen beach. What we'd built together in the years since wasn't perfect, but it was precious to me. Because every time I was with him, he saved me a little more.

"We can tell each other anything. No matter what."

I'd carried that promise under my heart since I was sixteen years old. I'd been foolish, storing his words in such a vulnerable place. I should have known that in breaking one he would break the other. I hadn't prepared for this moment, and now that it was upon me, I didn't know what to say.

I opened my mouth, but all that came out was a strangled, "Why?"

He pressed his lips together. Tipped his head back and stared at the tent's ceiling like it might offer some answers. When he lowered his chin, his eyes gleamed with unshed tears. "I'm sorry."

I took a single swift step toward him. "That is not an answer." My pulse pounded in my head. I jabbed a finger in the air between us. "I didn't ask if you're sorry. I want to know why you plotted behind my back in the name of some prophecy. Why you steered me into accepting your marriage and a place between Given's thighs so you could fulfill some mystical quest."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Gods, Varick."

"You lied to me about everything," I said, a haze of red descending over my vision. "From Jordan to the reason you wanted Given in the first place. And when I asked you about it—multiple times, I might add—you gave me one bullshit excuse after another. And when I tried calling you on your bullshit, you doubled down." I felt my mouth twist as my tone grew vicious. "Trust me a little, baby. Remember that? You fucking asshole."

His lips parted, but no words emerged. After a few tense seconds, he dropped his stare to the ground.

"I'm waiting for an answer," I bit out. I'd waited on him for such a long time.

He closed his eyes on a long blink before looking at me again. "Nothing I say can excuse what I did." His throat worked as he swallowed. "I understand if you don't forgive me."

Suddenly, I had him by the front of his jacket, the fabric bunching under his chin as I hauled him up. A hot tear ran down my cheek, and its presence was like fuel tossed on the inferno of hurt and anger raging inside me.

“You don’t get to take the easy way out,” I grated. I bared my fangs and tried to hiss, but the sound emerged more broken than threatening, and that just made everything worse. “You used me. Do you understand what knowing that does to me? Planning to murder my child was bad enough, but you took my will away. Can you even for one minute comprehend how that fucking wrecks me? And you were going to do it again and again until I gave you what you wanted. Damn you, Laurent, I should choke the life out of you right now!”

“Do it,” he rasped, his eyes stark. “I want you to.”

“Fuck that,” I snapped. I shook him a little, and my voice rose with my fury. “Stop being a coward and answer my question. Fucking tell me why. Tell me why you did this to us!” My body went numb as soon as the words were out of my mouth. I released him and stumbled back.

We stared at each other, the truth of my statement as precise and devastating as a knife’s edge. Laurent hadn’t betrayed me. He’d betrayed us, and his deception had smashed the foundation our relationship was built on. Now there was nothing to hold us up. Nothing to bind us together. And I didn’t know how to be without him. I wasn’t at all confident I was capable of standing alone, untethered from his support. I’d grown with it, taking for granted that it would always be there. Now that it wasn’t, I realized I’d never learned how to exist without it.

Laurent’s eyes were wide—and scared.

My anger bled away, leaving gray desolation behind. It hurt to breathe. I felt like I might crack apart if I tried to move. But looking at him hurt more, so I turned away. I staggered a couple steps and stopped, my chest rising and falling like I’d just sprinted up a staircase. My knees loosened, and I fell into a crouch. I squeezed my eyes shut and put my head in my hands, my fingers spearing into my hair.

Silence fell, and I waited for it to swallow me. Erase me so I wouldn't have to feel anymore. But nothing happened. The ground remained solid beneath me, and I continued breathing and hurting.

"I was selfish," Laurent said behind me. "I was losing the Deepnight, and I was becoming everything my father said I would become. Weak. Unfocused. He always claimed I didn't have what it takes to do the truly hard things. I thought he meant throwing people into the Rift, but I realized he meant...everything."

Behind my closed lids, images of Laurent as a boy flashed through my head. Before he'd been mine, he'd been an enigma to me—the charming crown prince everyone doted on. Then my father took me to court and I learned there was pain behind the prince's easy smiles. King Nicolae resented and feared the priests, so he'd forced a powerful priestess into his bed and sired an heir he could use as a weapon. He wanted a son who could set the throne above Petru and the Sanctum. In his delirium, Nicolae thought he could raise his heir—and the crown—above the gods. Paranoid and slowly going mad, he made Laurent study blood rites and ancient rituals until Laurent collapsed from exhaustion. As a teen, Laurent would kneel in the Sanctum for hours, the sound of dripping blood his only companion.

And when Laurent showed signs of being every bit as powerful as Nicolae desired, the mad king turned his paranoia toward his son.

Laurent spoke again, his voice a thread of sound. "I used to think my father was wrong. My mother was right, and I was going to be a better king than he ever was. I knew it, you see, because I could speak to the gods and he couldn't. They favored me, putting the bly'ad on my tongue. But then the Deepnight started disappearing. I went to the Sanctum. I did every rite, purifying myself and beseeching the gods over and over. But I couldn't reach them anymore. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't—I didn't want to tell you. I should have. I realize that now. If I'd just talked to you, maybe we could have figured something out. But you were gone so much." His

breath hitched. “I d-don’t mean that as an excuse. I’m not— It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault. I don’t want you to think that’s what I’m saying.”

I opened my eyes. He was rambling, and Laurent never rambled. Always, he was confident and sure of himself. Arrogant in front of everyone. Arrogant in front of me until I forced him to submit and then punished him for his arrogance. And he loved it and I loved it, but I didn’t love this.

“When I learned of the prophecy I thought it was stupid,” he said. “I wanted it to be. You have no idea how much I wanted it to be, but the Deepnight was disintegrating and the gods weren’t listening to me. I thought, all right, maybe this is a test. Maybe I’m supposed to be tempted to turn away from the gods, and this prophecy is something I have to ignore. And I tried that and it didn’t fucking work.”

I put a knee on the ground and turned at last. He knelt behind me, his eyes red-rimmed and his face pale as a sheet.

“You should have told me,” I said.

“I know, but—”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“You should have told me,” I repeated. “We vowed it, Laurent. No secrets between us. We tell each other everything, and we have each other’s backs.”

He turned his head to the side, and a struggle played over his face as he seemed to wrestle with some strong emotion. When he looked at me again, tears spilled from his eyes, dripping down his cheeks like liquid moonlight. “I know that now. I knew it then. You’re right, Varick. I lied to you, and it was a conscious decision. And if you can’t forgive me, I have to live with that. I have to go the rest of my life knowing I ruined us because I was too much of a coward to tell you the truth.” He put out his hands, his palms up like he was weighing something. “I had to choose between my people and this child that wasn’t yet real. And I told myself that was the hard part. That I was making this decision and keeping it from you so you didn’t have that burden. But that was just another lie. Because I knew you would never go along with it—”

“But you didn’t know that,” I said, a spark of anger reigniting. It was better than being numb, though, and I leaned into it, crawling forward until my knees touched Laurent’s. And then I was brushing the tears off his face because I didn’t like seeing them there. “You didn’t know because you didn’t tell me. You didn’t give me a chance to say yes or no.”

“I know,” he whispered. “I know how—” He swallowed hard. “Varick, I would never— Not after—”

“I know you wouldn’t,” I said, taking pity on him as he struggled to speak about the beach at Lar Keiren without saying it directly. “You would never hurt me that way. But you still hurt me, Laurent. What you did is different but it’s also the same. You

tricked me into having sex I would have refused if I'd known the truth. You took something sacred between us and made it sordid."

He closed his eyes. "Fuck," he whispered on a watery exhale. "I'm not even sure I want you to forgive me. I don't deserve it."

Something inside me loosened. He was so obviously tormented—and he'd been this way for far longer than I realized. He'd suffered in silence, struggling with the knowledge that people would die unless he acted. My mind traveled back to my walk from the sod hut to the edge of camp. I could tolerate the sun better than most, but the sting had quickly grown uncomfortable. In another hour, it would have been unbearable. The knights in their cloaks had been pale and sweating. The lowpeople of Nor Doru would have died instantly.

Before I realized what I was doing, I'd leaned into Laurent. I put my hands on his shoulders. Felt the lean muscle under his jacket as I slid my palms to his biceps and pulled him close.

He sagged forward, and then our foreheads were pressed together. "I have no excuses," he said quietly. "I was selfish then and I'm selfish now, because I won't do this thing the prophecy demands. It's not that I don't care about my people. I do, but..." He shook his head a little. "I can't do something if it means losing you. And that's selfish of me. A king is supposed to put the good of the realm before his own desires. But I can't. I love you too much."

I froze. Everything inside me went still.

He felt it, and he pulled back. Nodded. "I love you," he said quietly. "I am in love with you. I'm sorry I never said it before. I didn't want to push you. I know that we—" He gestured between us. "What we are to each other isn't as easy for you as it is for me. And I think for a long time I told myself it was better for you if I didn't say

it. Like we could fuck each other and that was all right, but loving each other would be crossing a line for you. But now I know that was wrong. I was wrong.” He drew an uneven breath, and his voice trembled as he said, “I love you. I always have. If you give me another chance, I’ll never stop saying it. I’ll say it so often you’ll get sick of hearing it. You won’t be able to shut me up—” His sentence ended in a muffled gasp as I tackled him to the floor and smashed my mouth against his.

I kissed him, and he kissed me back, tasting of tears and spices and home. And, suddenly, the world was solid again. Problems melted away, dissolving in the heat of his mouth and the slick glide of his tongue against mine. I drank him in, sipping at first and then gulping, grabbing his hair and holding him still so I could take everything I wanted.

And of course it wasn’t enough. I broke away and tore at his clothes. He joined me, twisting and grunting breathlessly as we shed jackets, boots, and trousers. Soon, we were both panting, our chests heaving as we struggled to remove the barriers between us. I pulled his gloves off and then stopped cold at the sight of his wounded, bleeding hand.

“Ignore it,” he said, pulling my head down.

I tugged from his grip and caught his wrist. “This has to hurt.” No, it had to be agony. His bone was exposed, the flesh around it shivering as it tried to heal and failed repeatedly.

“It’s nothing.” He lifted his head and found one of his gloves in the mess of our clothes. He yanked it on and stroked his good hand over my cheek. “It doesn’t hurt when I’m with you.”

I held myself over him, my weight on one forearm next to his head. His eyes were bright, as if his tears had polished his silver irises until they shined. Black stubble was

just appearing on his cheek, and I ran my fingertips over it, hearing the rasp and watching his eyelids flutter as he shivered under me. “That’s a lie,” I murmured.

“Losing you would hurt worse.” He sifted his fingers through my burgeoning beard. “Not loving you would hurt worse.”

I pulled his palm from my face. Threaded our fingers together and pressed our joined hands to the carpet next to his head. “Then don’t stop,” I whispered. I lowered my head and took his mouth. Our kiss was softer this time, slow and reverent. I slanted my mouth across his, finding the post in his tongue and curling my tongue around it.

He wore it for me, along with the one in his ear. When he’d first gotten the piercings, I protested, arguing that he didn’t need to torture himself because of something that had happened to me. He’d insisted on keeping them, saying they were a reminder that he hadn’t been strong enough to heal my back that night on the beach. He’d never forgiven himself for leaving me alone while he fetched thralls, and he blamed himself for me seeking the water while he was gone. The piercings were a promise, he said, as well as a penance. “Let me hurt a little for you, baby.”

I kissed him harder now, and I rolled my hips against his so our cocks rubbed together.

He moaned softly, and the sound went straight to my dick, but I didn’t stop kissing him. I couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to. Words passed between us, loud and unspoken. I love you and I’m sorry and forgive me.

He lifted his hips, grinding his hard cock against mine. I lowered my chest and pressed the full length of my body tightly against his. There was no space between us now. No room for doubt. I squeezed his hand and moved against him, rolling my hips so my erection slid along his. Pleasure shivered through me in a sizzling wave, and I moaned into his mouth. Felt his heart pounding fiercely against mine.

I thrust harder, and he matched me, rutting and rolling his hips. We both grew slick with precome, our movements quickly becoming more frantic. I broke off the kiss and locked my gaze with his burning one. We breathed together, grinding and huffing, our sweaty chests sealed together.

“You can’t fuck me,” he gasped. “I can’t wait that long.”

“It’s all right. I like this.”

He shuddered. “Fuck, me too.”

I squeezed his hand and stared down at him, watching every twitch that played over his face as he fought to stave off release. He tipped his head back, his lashes fluttering. I dropped my head and licked over the pulse pounding in his neck.

“Varick!” he cried, and I seized his mouth again, letting him taste his sweat and my love and the forgiveness that was still so new I was afraid to voice it. I jerked my hips against his, rubbing and grunting until I couldn’t hold back anymore. I came on a hard shudder, spurting against him. He followed a half-second later, his hot release soaking my thigh.

For a long moment, we simply breathed, our foreheads pressed together. He hooked his legs around my waist and held me that way, his ankles crossed behind my back and his hips cradling mine.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“I love you,” he said against my lips. “Come home.”

I pulled back.

“It’s not an order. It’s a prayer. The most important one I’ve ever said.” He stroked my cheek, rubbing away moisture I didn’t feel until that moment. “I love you, baby. Please come home.”

“All right,” I rasped. I captured his hand and brought his knuckles to my mouth. “All right.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

GIVEN

“I brought this for you, Your Grace.”

I looked up from my chair. A knight stood just inside the tent, a black cloak slung over one gauntleted forearm. His gaze dropped to the elven sword resting across my knees.

“Thank you, sir.” I stood, sword in hand. “Why do I need a cloak?”

“His Grace wishes to leave for Lar Katerin within the next half hour. The men are breaking down the camp as we speak.”

The anger that had been brewing under my skin heated to a boil. I’d returned from

Eldenvalla—some might say returned from the dead—and Laurent couldn't be bothered to greet me. Now, he sent a knight with a cloak and assumed I would meekly follow him to Lar Katerin as ordered.

For a moment, I considered sending the knight back with a message of my own. One with instructions for precisely where Laurent could shove his cloak. But that would have put the knight in a horrible position. I'd grown up watching Queen Amantha abuse servants. My next-mother had counted the castle's knights among those ranks, even though most soldiers came from noble families. Whether he was nobly born or not, I wouldn't take out my anger on the male before me.

"Thank you," I said, going to him and accepting the garment. "I'll be out in a moment."

"His Grace asked me to escort you to your horse at once, Your Grace." The knight's eyes dipped to the sword again. "I believe he wishes to speak to you."

Wonderful. I forced a smile. "All right."

A few minutes later, I trailed the knight through a camp that looked a lot different from when I'd entered it. Knights from the warrior class labored everywhere, collapsing tents and saddling horses. It was controlled chaos, with male shouts lifting over the sound of rippling canvas and horses' whinnies. My hooded cloak and the bustle of activity allowed me to move through the males without attracting notice.

But that ended when we stopped before a cluster of knights grouped around a figure I would have recognized anywhere.

Laurent stood with his back to me, his head bent over a map spread on a crude wooden table and secured with rocks at each corner. A black cloak streamed from his shoulders, but his hood was down. As if he sensed my presence, he lifted his head

and turned.

“Given,” he said, his raspy voice triggering memories of tangled sheets and passion-filled nights. And threats. The same voice that had whispered carnal promises in my ear had also shouted for guards to imprison me.

“Where’s Varick?” I demanded.

“Here.” Varick strode from somewhere, Jordan on his heels. Like the camp, Varick was wholly changed, his bedraggled clothing replaced with black armor and a crimson cloak. He wore a sword on one hip and his elven-steel dagger on the other. Gone was the male who’d washed my hair in the hut. Now, he was the formidable general once more. He stopped a short distance from Laurent and inclined his head. “Your Grace.” He looked at me and repeated the gesture. “Your Grace.”

It took effort to stand there in my stained, borrowed gown and say, “Lord Varick.”

An awkward silence descended. I looked between Laurent and Varick, and I’d never felt more out of place. One dark, one light, they were a study in contrasts and yet they complemented each other so perfectly. Midian’s words snaked through my head like poison. “How does it feel knowing the men in your life could never want you like they want each other?” The demon king was a liar, but even the worst liars told the truth sometimes. When confronted with a choice between greeting his wife or his general, my husband had chosen the latter. And now Varick was resplendent in Nor Doruvian armor and everything appeared well between them.

One of the knights around the table addressed Laurent. “Your Grace, we should depart. If we linger too long, it will be nightfall by the time we pass the Rift.”

“Of course,” Laurent said. “Ready the horses.”

The knights moved quickly, one of them rolling up a map, tucking it under his arm, and striding away like he was fleeing a fire. As the others followed suit, I looked at Varick. “You’re going to Lar Katerin?”

He glanced at Laurent. “You and I settled this—”

“No, we didn’t. It’s not settled for me.” Under my cloak, I rested my hand on my sword’s pommel. “I could go to Aberwas.”

“That’s not an option,” Laurent said.

My face went instantly hot. I opened my mouth—

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:05 am

“Given,” Varick said in my head. “Don’t do this here. Say whatever you wish to Laurent in private, but don’t cross him in front of his men. Not even I do that.”

I clamped my jaw shut. As tough as it was to swallow, Varick was right. A hush had fallen over the camp, the sounds of packing dying down as knights waited for the showdown between Laurent and me to unfold. I was his subject as much as anyone else assembled. If I resisted his orders, he’d have to retaliate, and that would make things between us even more unbearable.

I dipped a stiff curtsy. “Very well, my lord.”

A beat passed. Laurent signaled to a nearby squire. “The queen will ride alongside me.”

The tension eased. Almost at once, the noise started back up.

Everything moved quickly, and before I knew it, the camp was disassembled, and I rode at Laurent’s side with a small escort of knights. Varick had helped me into the saddle, giving my calf a reassuring squeeze before mounting his massive warhorse and galloping to the front of the column.

I knew it was unfair to be irritated with him for leaving me with Laurent. Varick was the commander of Laurent’s army, and I was Laurent’s wife. Nor Doru was far more progressive than Sithistra, but even the vampires had limits on permissible behavior for a wife—and a queen. Varick and I couldn’t leave Laurent in the dust and return to Lar Katerin side by side. It would cause a scandal none of us needed.

At the same time, I couldn't help feeling abandoned. Varick and I had repaired much of what had been broken between us. But now the warm, safe haven of the hut was already a distant memory.

My horse tossed its head. A second later, one of the knights shouted as trees rustled to our left. Two riders emerged from the forest, their leather breastplates bearing the mountain and laurel insignia of Wesyfedd.

I locked gazes with Rhys the Fair, my breath catching in my throat. Immediately, Nor Doruvian knights surrounded him. He reined in his horse and lifted his hands. "I greet you, King Laurent. You are welcome in Wesyfedd."

"Stand down," Laurent called. "Let him approach."

The knights moved away, and Rhys gave them a loaded look as he urged his horse forward. His man stayed behind. When I looked more closely, I realized the man held the reins of a third horse with two bodies slung over its back. My stomach dropped as I recognized the mages who held the demons at bay so Varick and I could escape the Thicket.

Rhys brought his horse to a halt. "Your Grace," he said to Laurent. His brown eyes moved to me...and then lowered to the hilt of the elven sword strapped to my side. If the sight of it surprised him, he hid it well. He lifted his gaze, and his voice softened. "Given. It's good to see you safe."

Words stuck in my throat. It felt wrong to apologize when I wasn't sorry for leaving—especially when I knew he'd meant to stop me from going after Varick. On the other hand, he'd saved my life. He'd sheltered me when I needed it and, according to Igrith, his intentions had been pure.

"It's good to see you, too," I said finally. "I wish we had parted under different

circumstances.”

He offered a smile tinged with regret. “As do I.” His gaze moved past me, and his smile faded. He bowed his head. “Archmage.”

I turned in the saddle and saw Jordan just behind me, his hands folded over his saddle’s pommel.

Archmage?

I couldn’t help swinging my gaze to Laurent. My husband watched Jordan with narrowed eyes, a bemused smile toying around his mouth. If I wasn’t mistaken, the “archmage” title was news to Laurent, but he’d decided to find it clever instead of threatening.

Jordan nudged his horse forward and addressed Rhys. “You collected your dead.”

Rhys straightened. “Yes.” He lowered his voice. “We found them just inside the barrier. I believe they were put there as a message.”

My gut tightened, and blood rushed in my ears as I recalled those last moments in the Thicket. Men I’d never met had given their lives for me. I wasn’t sure I was worthy of their sacrifice.

For a long moment, Jordan was silent. Then he nodded at Rhys. “Bury them with honor.” He wheeled his horse and clucked his tongue, spurring the beast into a trot.

When he was gone, Rhys’s gaze flicked briefly to me before resting on Laurent. “Well, I suppose I’m for hearth and home.”

“The best place to be,” Laurent replied, a silky edge in his voice.

Rhys's jaw tightened. He turned to me and inclined his head. "Safe travels, Given."

"You too," I said, trying and failing to ignore Laurent's eyes on me. "Thank you...for everything."

He nodded. As he backed up his horse, he shot Laurent a final look. "Your Grace."

"Chieftain," Laurent murmured.

Rhys spun his horse around and galloped to the trees. Within seconds, he and his man had melted into the forest.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Laurent turned to me. “As I said, Aberwas is not an option.”

I gave him a stony stare.

He ordered the knights back into position and started us moving again. I waited for him to say more, but he was quiet as we left the forest behind and entered the grassy stretch of land that divided Wesyfedd and Nor Doru.

His silence didn’t last.

As we drew near the Rift, he motioned for our escort to fall back. And, suddenly, I was alone with my husband for the first time since our rushed conversation in his Council chamber.

“That’s an interesting sword,” he said quietly.

I looked at him. His gaze was pinned on a spot on the horizon, his handsome face wreathed by his heavy black hood. It made him look like the priest he was. I could never forget that again. “My great-great-grandmother gave it to me.”

“Hmm. I think it’s scaring my men.”

“Good.”

He turned to me at last, and that bemused expression touched his features again. Perhaps he’d decided to find me clever, too. I didn’t fool myself into thinking he found me threatening.

“Rhys the Fair seemed disappointed to see you go.”

I let my disgust show on my face. “If you want to accuse me of some sort of impropriety, just say it. I never took you for someone who hides behind insinuation.”

His eyes widened, but he recovered quickly. “I’m not accusing you.”

“Well, you’re doing a bad job of showing it.”

“I’m not accusing you.” He huffed. “You have better taste than Rhys the Fair.”

After everything, I couldn’t believe he’d chosen to focus on this. “Are you really jealous of Rhys? Or are you just irritated that I might actually prefer living apart from you? As in, separate cities.”

His eyes darkened. He started to speak, then clamped his mouth shut, falling silent once more. We rode that way for a moment, the muted sounds of jangling harnesses and the knights’ murmured voices behind us.

“I am jealous,” he said after a minute, drawing my gaze again. He looked at me, and he smiled a little at the surprise that must have shown on my face. “You wanted to go to Aberwas. You looked happy when you saw the bandit king.”

His smile was dangerous—and I definitely hadn’t learned my lesson because a faint tendril of heat unfurled within me. I looked away before the sensation could grow. “Don’t call him that. His men saved my life. Mine and Varick’s. You should be grateful, not jealous.”

“I know,” Laurent said, a curious note in his voice.

I stared into the distance and wished he’d stop looking at me. It was on the tip of my

tongue to suggest he ride to the front to be with Varick, but I swallowed the words. That would make me sound jealous—and petty. And I wasn't jealous. I knew what I'd gotten myself into when I wed Laurent. I was never going to come between him and Varick, and I didn't want to. But seeing them reunited so swiftly after Eldenvalla was a shock I hadn't prepared for.

I'd been stupid not to. Laurent and Varick had been together for two decades. What was that compared to a handful of stolen hours in a sod hut? It was nothing. Laurent proved it when he stuck me in one tent and summoned Varick to another.

"Given," he said quietly.

My face was hot again, even though the sunlight seemed more muted now. I knew he'd see my flushed cheeks if I looked at him, but I also knew he'd pester me until I did. One way or another, Laurent always got his wish.

With that bitter thought, I turned to him at last. "Yes, my lord."

He frowned. "Don't do that."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Or that."

I sighed. "What do you want, Laurent?"

He pulled his hood down, and I noticed his gloves, which made me recall his injury. Another wedge between us. He didn't speak right away. Instead, he appeared to gather his thoughts, like he was arranging words in his head before he said them aloud. "I took the coward's way out by speaking to Varick first today. He knows me better, and...he loves me despite having a hundred reasons not to." Laurent flashed a

sardonic smile. “Maybe a thousand reasons.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

I didn't react. I couldn't afford to be swayed by his charm.

"I am not an easy man to love, Given." He slowed his horse, his eyes serious. "But I understand love. I know its value, and its rarity. No one, not even a king, can command it. It's something you earn, and I haven't done anything to earn yours. I thought I could start with earning your forgiveness and then, if I'm not too stupid about things, maybe I could earn your trust."

My heart beat faster. These were not the words of a tyrant. In his own way, he was saying what Varick had said earlier. Laurent was asking to start over.

"I brought you to Nor Doru for the wrong reasons, and I told myself I was doing something good. I was going to save my people, and everything would be worth it. I didn't know you, so I thought, how could it possibly matter?"

I held my breath.

"But then I met you, and you weren't at all what I expected." Silver eyes stared intently into mine. "You were so much more than I expected."

"Deepnight ahead!" someone yelled. Immediately, a chorus of whoops and hollers rose among the knights. I shook myself and gazed around. Sure enough, in the distance, the canopy was a purple-tinged curtain drawn across the horizon. I'd been so caught up listening to Laurent, I hadn't noticed we were nearing Nor Doru.

I lifted in the saddle and peered around him. Because if we were near the border, we were also near the Rift.

“It’s just there,” he said, guessing my intentions. He reached over and pulled my horse to a halt, then pointed.

I squinted, confusion gathering. “I don’t see it.”

“You can’t from here,” he said, and the tension in his voice drew my gaze back to him.

His expression was grim. “The Deepnight has moved since you last saw it. The canopy extends several feet into Sithistra now. In years past, it was thinner along our side of the Rift, so you could see the edge. It’s thicker now, but it’s thinning in other places.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “And you saw the map.”

“Yes,” I said, remembering the silver marker placed in a spot where a farmer’s wife and child had burned. “Are there more?”

He gave a stiff nod. “Just yesterday, a patch opened up a few feet from the edge. We’ll have to be careful going around it. We’ve discovered the sun is particularly brutal in places where the canopy has failed.”

“What will you do?”

The thunder of hooves interrupted us. Varick streaked toward us, a contingent of knights close behind. He was speaking before he’d brought his horse to a complete stop. “Laurent, we have to move now. Sentries at the Nor Doruvian fort spotted Green Guards on the other side of the Rift.”

My stomach clenched. The presence of Green Guards meant just one thing.

“Rolund’s army is camped on the Sithistran side,” Varick said. “It looks like he’s planning an invasion.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

LAURENT

“Rolund doesn’t have an army big enough to launch a full-scale invasion,” Petru said for the tenth time.

Or maybe it was the twentieth. I’d lost count.

“He doesn’t need one,” Varick said. “Small squads of men-at-arms can do plenty of damage on our side of the Rift.”

“Nonsense,” one of the lords—Artur of Lar Guna from the sound of it—countered. “Nor Doru has nothing to fear from a handful of humans.”

“And when was the last time you sat a horse in full armor, Lar Guna?” Varick demanded.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant, General.”

“It is when you’re pretending you know how to run an army.”

The conversation devolved into insults and arguments.

I ignored all of it as I sat at the head of the map table in my Council chamber with my elbow propped on the armrest and my head in my hand. My good hand, because my bad one was throbbing and I wanted everyone to get the fuck out of my chambers. Whichever one of my ancestors was responsible for making the Council room adjacent to the king’s private quarters was a dick of the first order.

In the twenty-four hours since I’d returned to the Midnight Palace, I’d done little

besides listen to my Council fight over how to respond to Rolund's presence on the Sithistran side of the Rift. So far, Given's brother showed no signs of invading—although, squatting on the edge of my kingdom with his army was hardly a peace offering. It was a fucking threat, and he had a lot of nerve.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

But he also had motivation. Jordan had received word that Rolund's young daughter was dead. Now, Sithistra had no heir. Once again, the prophecy reared its ugly head. If Rolund believed his land was cursed and that spilling Given's blood could lift it, he was far more dangerous than any army.

"We should attack," someone said. "Soak the Sithistran soil with blood so the humans remember their place."

Murmurs of agreement warred with sounds of dismissal.

Lord Sergiu of Lar Bassa's gruff voice cut through the noise. "What is your opinion, Your Grace?"

I lifted my head and found a dozen pairs of eyes on me. Varick stood at the opposite end of the table, his golden hair freshly trimmed. He'd kept the beard, though. I wanted to ask if he planned on shaving it, but I hadn't spent more than a few minutes alone with him since our return.

The silence stretched. I straightened and gestured at the map. "Lord Varick has recalled troops from the Wastes." I looked to Varick for confirmation. "Yes?"

He nodded. "They should arrive within the week, Your Grace. The snow is heavy on the roads at the moment, and their progress is slow."

"That's an excellent point." I looked around the table. "The weather will only get colder. Nor Doruvians thrive in the frost. The humans do not. Once reinforcements arrive from the Wastes, we'll post a large presence at the Rift. We need time to figure

out what Rolund wants. Then we can make a decision.”

Artur of Lar Guna scowled. “You assume Rolund will actually tell us what he wants, Your Grace. That’s a dangerous position to take.”

“You heard the king,” Varick said, staring Lar Guna down like he’d love to know the color of the man’s intestines. “Until our reinforcements arrive, we’ll have no more talk of invasion. This Council will reconvene on the morrow. Now, everyone get out.”

For a moment, nobody moved.

“OUT!”

Chairs scraped against stone. Petru shot me a frown but said nothing as he hustled away in a swirl of black robes. Within seconds, Varick and I were the only two left in the room.

I raised a brow. “You pissed them off.”

He shrugged.

“I need their money to buy armor for your soldiers.”

“That’s what taxes are for.”

I rested my head on the back of my chair. “Yes, baby, but it’s a lot easier when they don’t try to hide their money. And if you make them angry, they’ll stuff their gold in a hole at one of their country estates.”

Varick’s eyes gleamed. Slowly, he came around the table, trailing a finger down the

jagged coastline. I turned my head so I could watch his progress, and by the time he reached me, I was so hard I was pretty sure I couldn't stand.

He cupped my jaw. "How's your hand?"

"Perfectly fine for anything you have in mind." I'd chop the fucking thing off if I had to. Anything for him to fuck me.

He said nothing, just stared down at me with lust burning in his eyes.

"You're going to say something about holes and stuffing gold, aren't you?" I asked. As I spoke the last word, he thrust his thumb into my mouth, forcing me to hold it open.

"No," he murmured. "You're the one with the filthy mouth."

I huffed. It was too awkward to speak, so I licked around his thumb, dragging my tongue ring over the tip like I did when I sucked his cock.

His lips parted. He watched for a moment, his broad chest rising and falling. My dick tightened painfully, and I spread my legs to ease the discomfort.

Golden eyes flicked to mine. "I think you need to be fucked. Is that what you need?"

I nodded, drool sliding down my chin.

"Not here, though." He thrust his thumb deep, gagging me for a second before pulling back. "I can't do the things I have planned for you here. You'll be far too loud."

My eyes slid shut of their own accord as a dizzying wave of need swept me. Grinding on him in the tent had taken the edge off, but it wasn't nearly enough. Not at all.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

He pulled his thumb from my mouth. Then he yanked me from the chair and slung me over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

“What the fuck?” I sputtered, lifting my upper body. I heard the smack a split second before pain exploded across my ass. Before I could recover, he struck again, the sharp crack of his blow almost obscene. He’d held nothing back, and I sucked in a breath, my eyes watering.

He squeezed the cheek he’d just punished. “Are you a good boy, or do you need another?”

“I’m good.”

Smack. “That’s not what I asked. Try again.”

“I’m a good boy,” I croaked, my face and ass burning. “Fuck.” My gut burned, too, the delicious humiliation I craved roaring to life. I let myself dangle and watched the carpets change as he carried me to my bedchamber. He stopped before the wood-paneled wall, his big hand still gripping my ass like he owned it. Which, of course, he did. There was a soft click, followed by the creak of the hidden door.

We made it to the top of the stairs, and he carried me to the bed and flung me down. I bounced once and we crashed together as he came down on top of me. Alone at last, we unleashed all the sexual tension we’d been forced to bottle up since we returned to the palace. We rolled as we kissed, grabbing at each other’s clothes. He left my glove alone, but he grew impatient with the rest of my clothes and drew his knife. I hissed as he cut my shirt away. Stinging pain shot across my ribs as his blade sank too deep.

He was on me immediately, his tongue following the line of blood and sealing the wound.

My back bowed, and I clutched at his soft hair with my good hand. “Fucker,” I panted. “You did that on purpose.”

Golden eyes met mine for a brief second. His blade flashed, and my pants fell away. More lightning streaked across my thigh, followed by the warm swipe of his tongue. Another lick of fire around my calf, and then another on the inside of my knee.

He fell into a pattern, raising thin lines of blood and lapping them up while I hissed and squirmed beneath him. Nude now, I reached for my aching dick, only to get my hand slapped away.

“You’re out of your mind,” he chided. His blade skimmed my balls.

“Fuck!” I grabbed at the sheets, desire and fear twisting in my stomach. That cocktail of emotion gave way to mind-numbing bliss as he sucked one of my balls into his mouth. My eyes rolled back in my head. “Not too much,” I mumbled, my thighs twitching under his onslaught. “I’ll come.” And I didn’t want to. Not yet. I needed him inside me.

He hummed and flattened his tongue. Ran it over the delicate skin and traced the jagged seam with his tongue before releasing me with a soft plopping sound. His beard brushed my inner thigh.

I lifted my head so I could see him. And, fuck, he was a sight to behold. Burning eyes and sharp cheekbones. Wet, sexy mouth and distended fangs. His shirt was off, giving me a full view of his broad shoulders and lightly furred chest. His pants still clung to his hips, but just barely, and his dick swung heavy between his legs as he bent, offering me a nice look at the curves of his bare ass and the tantalizing cleft

between his cheeks.

He set the knife aside.

“Thank fuck,” I muttered, and then I moaned as his plush lips wrapped around my cockhead. I spread my thighs wide, my heels propped on the bed. “Suck me, baby. Please.”

He did, but he took his fucking time, bobbing up and down my head for several long, maddening moments. Only when I was reduced to pathetic begging and whimpering did he suck all the way down. He dug his fingers into my thighs and deep-throated me, letting my leaking tip hit the back of his throat over and over.

“Baby,” I breathed, my balls drawing up tight as I watched him work me. He was slow and thorough, sucking every fucking inch right down to the base before dragging his hot mouth back up and swirling his tongue over my slit. Saliva dripped down my crack, teasing the place I desperately wanted him to be.

But this was so, so good, and I didn’t want him to stop. I wanted this and everything and more and more and more. Forever and fucking ever.

He took my dick to the back of his throat and held it there, his mouth stuffed with my cock. He swallowed around me a few times, then pulled off, letting my soaked dick slap hard against my thigh.

“Fuck,” I groaned, covering my eyes with my forearms. I took shallow breaths as I struggled not to come. Because my release was right there and if he touched me, I was going to lose it.

Rough hands seized my hips and flipped me onto my stomach. His body heat caressed my back, and then his beard grazed my ear. “You falling asleep?”

“No.” I grunted as he pulled my hips up, forcing me onto my knees. “I need a minute.”

“Too bad.” His palms spread me open, and his voice went husky. “Fuck, that’s nice.” His thick finger rubbed over my hole, massaging lightly. His thumbs replaced his fingers, stroking and coaxing me open. Setting a fire that started around my rim and spread up my spine. Breath hitching, I drifted away from the burn at first, only to roll my hips up as the blaze melted into pleasure.

“Good boy,” he rasped, pushing both thumbs inside. Stroking firm, lazy circles that robbed me of speech. “Look at you open up for me.”

I buried my face in the bed and moaned—and then I let my mouth hang open because I was too worked up to close it. I tightened my abdominal muscles, doing whatever I could to hold back. Buy myself some time. But my control was fraying, the rope I dangled from ready to snap.

All at once, his wicked fingers disappeared, and he gave me a light swat on the ass. “Stay.”

He left the bed, and I heard him take off his pants. When he didn’t return, I lifted my head and looked over my shoulder. He’d fetched oil and was slicking his stiff cock while he stared at my ass.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

A blond eyebrow went up. “Did I say you could look at me?”

“I can’t help it.” His dick was a thing of beauty. He was so hard, he had to be hurting as much as I was, but he was too stubborn to fuck me quickly. He’d obviously planned this. Gods, he’d probably sat in our Council sessions devising precisely how to make me as miserable as possible.

And I’d missed this so fucking much my eyes started burning. The fact that I’d come so close to losing him made fear wave through me, which went a long way toward deflating my dick. I put my head down so he wouldn’t see my face, but I should have known I couldn’t hide from him, because a second later, warm skin covered mine from shoulder to ankle.

He pushed me flat onto my stomach and stretched his body over mine. His toes stroked my calf as he whispered in my ear. “I’m not going anywhere. I love you.”

I turned my head and kissed him, answering him with my lips and tongue. Breathing him in before murmuring, “I love you, too.”

His lips curved against mine. “You might change your mind about that in a minute.”

“Why? Were you planning on fucking me, or were you just going to stand beside the bed and fondle your dick?”

He bit my jaw playfully. “How’s your hand?”

“Fuck me first and I’ll spend the rest of the night telling you all about it.”

He chuckled as he slid oil-slick fingers into my cleft. He rubbed my hole again and pushed a long finger inside me. “Slut.”

“Yes.”

“My slut,” he clarified, “with such a greedy hole.”

“Yours,” I rasped. “It’s your hole.”

“I know.” He moved his finger inside me, teasing the magical spot where I needed him. “I think I should play with it a little more. Make sure it can take me.” His golden eyes darkened as he fingered me. Within seconds, my dick was hard and leaking again. I buried my head in the crook of my elbow as he delivered on his promise, playing all sorts of games calculated to drive me out of my mind. He was ruthless, taking me right to the edge before hauling me back. He fucked his finger into me, nailing my spot, and then pulled out and scraped his fingernail over my crinkled, bunched entrance, stealing my orgasm and making me yell obscenities into my arm.

He kept it up until I was sobbing and rocking my hips, my legs splayed and my crack dripping with oil and the saliva he’d fingered into me.

He planted a soft kiss behind my ear and thrust two fingers deep, expertly finding my spot and stroking until my spine turned to liquid. “Is this where you want me?” he murmured.

“Yeah,” I croaked. “Right there, baby.” I pumped my ass up and clenched around him, trying to trap him with my hole. “Right fucking there.”

Bastard that he was, he pulled out immediately. A second later, his hands pried my cheeks apart, and his tongue speared me.

I yelled into the sheets, pleasure lighting me up. He didn't play this time. He made a meal of my ass, thrusting his tongue deep before sucking and biting at my hole. Digging his face in and fucking his tongue into me with warm, slippery strokes. He ate me until I was wet and loose, and then he drew back, his big hands spreading my cheeks so wide the muscle burned.

"Damn," he breathed, his voice husky. "You want it bad, don't you?"

"Yes," I whined, clawing at the sheet with my good hand. I could feel my gape, my hole wide and vulnerable from all the torment he'd put me through. The muscle clenched and grasped at the air as he kept me that way, shivering and squirming under his gaze that cut through all my secrets and evasions.

His hands left my ass only to grasp my hips and haul me onto all fours. Pain shot through my injured hand, but I ignored it as I steadied myself. And the discomfort fled when his oiled fist grasped my dick and pulled it backward between my legs.

"Whose is this?" he demanded, stroking up and down my length.

I hung my head. "Yours," I choked out.

A sharp crack, and then fire over my ass. "I didn't hear that. Say it again."

"Yours," I barked, feeling like one of his soldiers, which was new for us but I didn't hate it. Not with his hand like a manacle around my cock.

He worked my dick for a few moments, then cupped my balls and squeezed. "And these?"

"Yours." I held my breath, bracing for pain.

It came a second later when he tightened his grip. He pulled my sack down, then rolled my swollen nuts in his palm. Sharp pain stabbed through my abdomen, and sweat broke out across my forehead.

“Whose are these?” he demanded, rolling my balls with careful, practiced movements. Exquisite, devastating torture.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

“Yours,” I said, shuddering. I breathed through the pain while my dick dripped onto the bed.

He grunted approval. “Good boy.”

At last, he released my sack. Before I could catch my breath, he delivered another brutal crack to my ass.

I rocked forward, outrage and lust twin fires inside me. “What was that for?”

He slapped the other cheek, making the muscle quiver. While I was still gasping, he gripped my hair and pulled my head back. “It’s my ass, and I feel like spanking it.” He released my hair and slid his hands under my chest, finding my nipples and pinching hard. “And these? Who owns these?”

“Fuck. You do.”

“My hole still open for me?” He didn’t wait for my reply. Just groped my ass, then pushed two fingers inside me. He gave me a firm nudge, using his fingers in my asshole to force me onto my stomach. I whimpered again. With the care he’d taken to loosen me up, I knew I was in for a pounding.

His heavy body landed on top of mine, pressing me into the bed. His hot breath coasted over my nape as he dragged his dick up and down my cleft, and only when I was a babbling, shivering mess did he enter me.

As he’d promised, I was loud. I yelled the ceiling down as he rode my ass, his hips

snapping in savage thrusts that had me clinging to the edges of the bed. Skin slapped, and his grunts mixed with my hoarse shouts and the wet sounds of his oiled dick punishing my hole. He bit at my sweaty shoulder and pumped me hard. Flattened me and drove so deep he touched parts of me he'd never touched before.

I closed my teeth over the bedding, sobbing and moaning as he took me apart, plowing me so hard and fast my vision wavered. My dick was trapped between the bed and my stomach, which was a sticky, wet mess. He was going to kill me, and I didn't care because if there was any way to go, it was this.

He gave a shout, then dropped his forehead to my shoulder and flooded me with hot come. Seconds later, he pulled out, flipped me onto my back, and sucked my whole dick into his mouth.

"Fuck!" I levitated off the bed, my legs sprawled wide and my arms flung over my head. He shoved two fingers into my dripping, pulsing ass, and then it was over. I came on a bellow, shooting my load in his hot mouth. He drank me down, his thick throat working. I came so hard he couldn't keep up, and milky-white seed leaked from the corners of his lips.

When I was spent, I surged up and pulled him down, kissing him and tasting myself on his tongue. Our legs tangled together, and we ended up panting and staring at each other on the wrecked bed.

He reached up and brushed the hair off my sweaty forehead. Then he put his palm on my chest, over the spot where my heart tried to burst through the bone to reach him. "Don't ever forget you're mine."

Emotion swelled as I realized what he'd done. In reclaiming every part of me, he'd made a new vow. And he'd given me a gift. Forgiveness.

I didn't deserve it.

But I'd never been able to resist Varick Lar Keiren, so I reached out and took it, wrapping my arms around him and whispering thickly in his ear.

"I won't."

Chapter Twenty-Four

VARICK

"You alive?" I dipped a cloth in the basin I'd fetched from downstairs and wrung it out.

Laurent made a sound somewhere between a moan and a grunt. "No. You killed me with your dick."

I smiled and let my gaze wander down his lean, perfect body. He sprawled on his stomach, his arms wrapped around a pillow and his head turned away. But he rolled onto his back at the sound of the water.

Amusement shaded his eyes. "What's all this?"

I climbed onto the bed and stroked the cloth down his chest. "Don't ruin it," I said softly.

The amusement turned to curiosity. "I won't." He lay still as I cleaned his chest and stomach, and the curiosity in his gaze warmed to something softer as I dipped the cloth again and stroked over his dick and balls. Slowly, he relaxed beneath me, and when I reached his ass, he spread his legs and let me work the cloth between his cheeks. My come leaked from him.

I paused so I could watch it slide from his swollen opening. “More,” I murmured.

He moaned softly and flexed his hole, pushing more creamy seed from his body. When I wiped it away, his eyes fired with mischief. “You’re going to need a bigger cloth, baby. That was a warrior-size load.”

I snorted. “Turn over.”

He obeyed, letting me wipe him down. He shivered when I dropped a kiss on his shoulder, and he sighed contentedly when I kept going, kissing all the way down his spine to his ass.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

“I like that beard,” he said lazily, his voice muffled by the bed.

I sat back on my heels, one hand lifting to the hair that was just beginning to feel soft instead of itchy. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You think I should keep it?”

He flipped over. His silver eyes studied me a moment, and then he sat up and stroked his fingers over my cheek. “Not if it reminds you of...that place.”

I grunted. I’d told him everything that happened in Eldenvalla, leaving out some of the details I knew he could fill in on his own.

“I’ll leave it for a while,” I said. “It’ll keep my face warm through the winter.”

He smiled, but his eyes were sad. “You can talk to me about it. If you want to.”

“I’d rather talk about your hand.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, lifting it between us. “I’d rather not talk about it.” His eyes followed the thin curl of smoke that rose from the velvet and drifted toward the ceiling.

My gut clenched. “Is there anything you can do?” But I knew there wasn’t. Vampires feared solstone for a reason. The metal was exceedingly rare, which was a saving

grace. But it only took one blade to inflict an everlasting injury.

“Yes,” Laurent murmured, surprising me. He continued watching the smoke as if it fascinated him.

“What?” I pressed, wishing he’d stop. He didn’t seem to take the injury as seriously as he should. It would kill him eventually. Not right away. He was too powerful for that. But his body was caught in a constant struggle to heal itself, and it couldn’t wage that battle indefinitely. At some point, he’d grow so weak that no amount of blood would save him.

“Laurent,” I said sharply.

He lowered his hand. “I’m leaving for the Sanctum in the morning. I’m going to ask the gods to give me the bly’ad for heal.”

My heart sped up. The language of priests was cloaked in mystery. Only the gods could bestow the power words, and only the most accomplished priests could speak them. Laurent possessed nine—more than any other priest. But receiving them was dangerous. Every time he sought a new one, he courted death.

I swallowed the protests that crowded my throat. “Were you going to tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Laurent...”

He shoved his good hand through his hair—a gesture that made my heart ache because it was one of his few tells. But I didn’t need to see it to know he was nervous. The other times he’d attempted to learn a new bly’ad, he’d been healthy and strong. Approaching the gods in his weakened state was an enormous risk.

His dark lashes swept his cheeks as he lowered his gaze. “I wouldn’t have left without telling you.” He swallowed. “I didn’t want to ask, but I’d actually like it if you attend me during the rite. I don’t think I can recover with blood from the thralls.” He looked up. “I know you’re not fully recovered yourself—”

“I am,” I said at once. “I’m fine. Gods, Laurent, I can’t believe you’d even hesitate to ask.”

“It’s a lot of blood.”

“I’m a lot of male.”

He gave me an appreciative look. “You certainly are. I’m going to walk into the Sanctum with a limp, and I am not complaining, General.”

My face heated—and my dick stirred, damn Laurent and his mouth. I cleared my throat. “That’s settled, then. We’ll leave at first dawn.” I gave him a look. “You should tell Given.”

“Why, so she can celebrate the possibility of my death?”

A flash of anger made my voice gruff. “You know better than that.”

“I do,” he conceded. “But she’s still so angry with me. I don’t know how to fix that.”

“You should try talking to her.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

He frowned. “I have. She hasn’t been very...receptive.”

“You should try talking to her more. It’s going to take more than one or two conversations.”

His frown deepened. “I’ve been busy—”

“Definitely don’t tell her that.”

Irritation sparked in his eyes. “Like you haven’t sat through the same fucking meetings. If I have to watch Artur of Lar Guna stroke himself to the idea of invading Sithistra for even one more minute, I’ll put the fat fuck on a horse and catapult him over the Rift myself.”

“Gods, that’s an image.”

“You smelled like her,” Laurent said.

I jerked, caught off guard by the sudden shift in topic.

“At the camp in Wesyfedd,” he added, his silver gaze steady. “I smelled Given on you.”

We stared at each other. After a second, I stood and put the washbasin on the floor. I wrung out the cloth and draped it over the side, and then I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled a corner of the sheet over my lap.

Laurent leaned against the headboard. Completely at ease in his nudity, he drew a knee up and slung a forearm over it, a ring with the night-blooming rose of Nor Doru on his little finger.

I looked away as I searched for the right words. “I love her,” I said finally. Then I frowned. “No, it’s more than that. I am...devoted to her. She would have died for me in Eldenvalla.” I rubbed a hand over my mouth and jaw, letting a self-deprecating laugh slip around my palm. “She’s stronger than I am, and it’s not even close. I gave up in Vai Seren. She never did, not even when Midian violated her mind and body. She walked willingly into the jaws of death and plucked me from the belly of the beast. I believe she would have carried me from that cursed, unholy place across her shoulders if she’d had to.” I looked at the male I loved with all my wounded but healing heart. “I love her, Laurent, and I will protect her with my life. Even from you.”

My words hung in the air. Laurent let them, his expression unreadable as we both waited for his response.

And then I surprised myself by gesturing to his ring. “The night-blooming rose of Nor Doru grows on a double vine. The damn things twist together so tightly, they’re almost impossible to separate. Did you know that?”

He smiled.

“Gardeners hate them because the roses won’t thrive unless you loosen up those tangles. It’s hard work, and the thorns make it painful, but if you want night-blooming roses in your garden, you have to make room between the vines. Otherwise, they won’t grow. But if you’re patient and willing to put in the work, they bloom forever.”

Laurent’s lips parted. He slid off the bed and came to me, moving between my thighs

and stroking his good hand through my hair. “You like to pretend you’re nothing but a blunt sword, but you have never fooled me, General.”

I leaned forward and kissed his hipbone. “And perhaps you’re not quite the irreverent libertine you’d have everyone believe.”

He said nothing, but his eyes smiled as he continued stroking my hair.

“Go talk to your wife, Laurent. Give her a reason to fall in love with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

GIVEN

“I wish you wouldn’t stand out here.”

I turned as Laurent stepped onto my balcony. He moved to the railing beside me and gazed out over snow-covered Lar Katerin, which was just beginning to go to sleep for the night.

“I can see why you like it, though,” he said, his breath forming a small cloud. “The city is beautiful at this height.”

I looked at the streets and the neat rows of shops I’d admired my first day in Nor Doru. The air was chilly, and smoke curled from miniature chimneys. “The guards you posted at my door made no mention of staying off the balcony, Your Grace.”

He turned to me, his gloved hand on the railing. “You’re free to go wherever you wish, Given. The guards are for protection, not punishment.” He lifted his hand, which smoked in the frozen night air. “If Rolund can reach my bedchamber, we have to assume he can reach you. Even so, you’re not a prisoner.”

A sigh built in my throat. “I know.”

“Do you?” he pressed.

I looked at him—and swallowed some of the pride I’d been clinging to since I returned to Lar Katerin. “Yes. And I know the guards are necessary.” I let a smile touch my lips. “But not even Sithistran arrows can reach this high. I think I’m safe on the balcony.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

He turned back to the city, and his voice went low and angry. “It’s infuriating that my wife has to worry about her safety in my own fucking capital. What kind of king am I if I can’t protect what’s mine?”

Perhaps the possessive words should have offended me, but they did the opposite. A curious warmth spread through me, and I found myself curling a hand around the railing, like some part of me worried I might need to hang on for dear life. Laurent had that effect on me. Just about every interaction with him left me feeling like the ground had been yanked from under my feet.

It was exciting in a way, but I wondered if it made for a lasting relationship. Because at some point, constant excitement led to exhaustion. I knew how to be passionate with him. He’d taught me plenty about that during our brief marriage. But passion was explosive and loud.

I didn’t know how to be quiet with him—or boring or ordinary. And life was full of boring and ordinary things.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said quietly. He looked at me, and his silver eyes warmed a bit at the surprise that must have flared in mine. “Varick told me everything the two of you endured in Eldenvalla. He said he would have died there, but you fought for him.” Laurent’s eyes gleamed. “You brought him back to me, Given. Even if I had no other reason to love you, that would be enough.”

I gripped the railing more tightly, my foolish brain latching onto that “even if” with hope I had no business feeling.

He knew it, too—possibly because I was bad at hiding things, but more likely because he was Laurent, and he was difficult to hide from. He tilted his head, and the post in his ear winked in the twilight. “But I believe you and I might find other reasons.”

“Like sex?” I asked.

For a moment, devilry danced in his eyes. “It’s not an altogether bad way to start a marriage.”

“We started ours that way and look where it got us.”

He sobered. Then he turned his back to the railing and leaned against it. “I’m not opposed to starting again.” He stared at me, and the veneer of sophistication he wore like armor faded away. It was subtle, but I’d spent enough time with him to notice the shift.

Which was why my heart pounded as our gazes held. And why I gripped the railing as tightly as I’d gripped the sword I’d carried from Vai Seren.

Laurent gazed up at the obsidian wall of the palace behind me. His tone turned thoughtful. “People love to mock Wesyfedd. What a strange country, they say, to choose its own king. But I believe the smugglers have it right.” His chest lifted as he sighed, sending a small cloud of his breath rolling into the air. “Kings are no closer to the gods than any other man. We are fallible creatures, and perhaps more prone to mistakes than others.” He turned his head, his eyes meeting mine once more. “I made a grave mistake with you. I thought I could wed you and keep my heart out of it.”

My throat was tight. “You don’t love me, Laurent.”

“I believe I could.” He straightened, his silver eyes intense. “Varick loves you, and I

know you love him.”

“That’s—” I searched for a way to put my feelings for Varick into words. “We went through something together.”

“And you will again,” he said grimly. “This prophecy dogs our steps, despite what we may wish otherwise.”

I did wish otherwise. But the past twenty-four hours had made it clear my wishes were irrelevant as far as Fate was concerned. My brother’s army camped at the Rift, the drumbeat of war growing louder. Midian was still locked behind the Thicket, but the barrier was weakening. The Deepnight continued to crumble.

And somehow, I found myself at the center of all of it.

“I came to you for another reason,” Laurent said, pulling me from my dark thoughts. “I need your help. And before you dismiss my request as a scheme to get in your good graces, I want you to know I’m deadly serious.”

I felt my eyes go wide. If he’d jumped on the balcony and sprouted wings, I wouldn’t have been more surprised.

He lifted his gloved hand. “Whatever happens with the prophecy, I believe you and Varick will need me. As I am now, my power is diminished.” His mouth tightened, and an icy blast of air rolled off him. “I want it back.”

Goosebumps lifted on my arms. He was charming so often, it was easy to forget how menacing he was in his anger. “What do you need from me?”

“Do you remember seeing me drained after I performed a blood rite?”

I nodded, the memory of his emaciated body springing readily to my mind. He'd looked like a corpse.

"I'm going to ask the gods for the power to heal, which means I need to perform that rite again. Varick will be there to feed me. I'd like you to be there too."

More memories surfaced, but of Midian this time. My stomach twisted as I remembered his blood searing my throat. "You can't feed from me." I gulped a breath, something akin to embarrassment squirming through me. "Not after Vai Seren."

"That's not why I need you." His gaze turned shrewd. "You brought the sword from Eldenvalla. You have the gift of farseeing and the gods only know how many others. I may not understand your power just yet, but I do understand power. And you're brimming with it. The only universal rule about power is that it's best to have as much of it as possible."

I frowned. "Some people say too much power is dangerous."

"Those people are stupid."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

I couldn't help my smile. But it faded quickly. "What does Varick say about this? He thinks it's possible Midian's blood could affect me beyond the Thicket."

"I haven't told him. He'll probably be cross about it, but he gets horny when he's cross, so you and I both benefit."

"I thought you said you weren't trying to get in my good graces."

A wicked gleam entered his eyes. "Princess, if I taught you anything, it's that you don't need to be in someone's good graces to enjoy fucking them."

I pressed my lips together, because I was not going to walk into his trap of vowing I'd never sleep with him again. He'd invariably take it as a challenge and set about proving me wrong.

"Come with me to the Sanctum tomorrow," he said.

The air around us seemed to hold its breath. It was still chilly on the balcony. It was, after all, winter in Nor Doru. But perhaps, just a little, some of the frozen air between us thawed.

"Yes," I said simply. "I'll help you."

The roguish gleam in his eyes softened. "You won't regret it," he said, and we both knew he wasn't just talking about the Sanctum.

By some unspoken agreement, we turned and gazed out at the city. We stood in quiet,

companionable silence for a moment. With the twinkling lights of the vampire capital sprawling before me, I murmured, “I was just thinking that I don’t know how to be boring with you.”

He looked at me and raised a dark brow. “I am the priest-king of Nor Doru. You are the lost heir of Eldenvalla and wielder of Avenor’s sword.” He lifted my hand from the railing and kissed my knuckles. “Trust me, princess, you and I are anything but boring.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

LAURENT

As I predicted, Varick was displeased about me bringing Given to the Sanctum.

He’d growled his displeasure all morning, pointing out that we didn’t know what Midian’s blood had done to her. When I replied that I had no intention of feeding from her, he claimed it was selfish and irresponsible of me to involve her in a blood rite when she was still recovering from her ordeal.

I’d given him a mild look as I mounted my horse in the palace courtyard. “I’ll be sure to let her know you think she’s too weak to stand next to an altar.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he’d snapped, and he’d swung into his own saddle. He might have thundered off, but then Given appeared, and he fell in with the knight escort who flanked us the whole ride to the Sanctum.

“I am devoted to her,” he’d said, and I found that I...liked it. I’d spent such a long time trying to convince him to give her a chance. But I’d done it for all the wrong reasons.

He'd remedied that, falling in love with her without me. But his reasons were the right ones, and I couldn't fault him for it. The more I thought about it, the more perfect it felt.

The three of us entered the private temple alone. Given walked forward, her face lit by the glow of a thousand candles. Her white-blond hair flowed down her back, reaching nearly to her ass. Her elegant black gown was trimmed in crimson night-blooming roses. She was beautiful in anything, but seeing her in my colors never failed to make me hard.

But there was a new addition to her wardrobe. An elegant leather sword belt circled her slim hips, the elven-steel sword secured in a scabbard that played peek-a-boo with the folds of her skirts.

Varick's eyes widened as he clearly noticed the elven steel for the first time. "You brought the sword with you?"

She turned, regal and confident. "Of course, General." She rested her hand on the pommel. "I don't know if we'll need it, but I know it's powerful. And the only universal rule about power is that it's best to have as much of it as possible."

I winked at her from behind Varick.

She moved off, drifting toward the altar with its grinning vampire skull.

Varick turned around. Golden eyes studied me. His voice flowed into my head. "You did it for her. So she feels like our equal."

I reached up and tugged gently at his beard before stepping around him and going to a low bench positioned along the wall. The priests had left everything I needed, and I stripped quickly and donned a robe. I carried the golden bowls to the altar and set

them before it. Given and Varick watched as I fetched the daggers and placed them on the floor. Varick radiated tension. He'd seen me perform the Rite of Destruction, although never in the Sanctum.

It looked pretty much the same regardless of location. In fact, the golden bowls weren't strictly necessary. They would, however, make it a lot easier to clean up the bloodbath I was about to unleash.

My stomach twisted, but I ignored it as I went to the square pool and shed my robe. Varick came to me, and I gestured to the towels at the edge of the pool. "You remember what to do?"

"Yes, but why don't you have other priests helping you?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

“Because we’ll both come when I feed from you, and I don’t want an audience.”

His breath caught. Strong emotion filled his eyes. “You mean you don’t want me to have an audience,” he rasped. His throat worked. “Laurent... I’m sorry—”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I love you.” And I knew that part of him would never fully recover from what his father had done to him. Varick would carry that pain forever. But I’d make sure he never carried it alone.

“I love you, too,” he said gruffly.

I glanced at the water. “I fucking hate this part.”

He pinched my ass. “The sooner you get in, the sooner we can get this over with.”

With a sigh, I descended the steps. I dipped my head once underwater and chanted the cleansing ritual, and I tried not to think of the worry on Varick’s face or the possibility that I was playing with fire by having Given participate. But if Jordan of Twyl was correct, the prophecy would march forward whether the three of us were ready for it or not. I was determined to be ready—and I couldn’t afford to make the same mistakes again. Given was central to everything. If I treated her like a bystander, I might doom her to failure. I was also honest enough with myself to recognize that shuttling her to the side would also doom any hope I had of winning her.

And I really fucking hated losing.

When I was as mystically clean as I was ever going to be, I exited the pool and let Varick dry me. It took forever as usual, but the drag of time gave me a chance to slow my heart rate and focus on the altar. The skull grinned at me, flames dancing in its eye sockets.

Varick's whispered instructions to Given reached me as I walked to the altar and knelt. There was a swish of skirts, and then Given and Varick knelt on either side of me. Varick held a small bowl of blood in front of me.

I dipped my fingers, then painted a stripe down my forehead and another across my bottom lip. "I am a son of the gods." I dipped my fingers a second time and trailed my bloodied thumb down the center of my chest. "I speak and hope to be heard."

On either side of me, Varick and Given lifted their daggers.

Eyes locked on the skull, I lifted my arms away from my body and turned my wrists up. Varick reached out and gently guided my wounded, smoking hand more directly over his bowl.

"I offer the Rite of Destru," I said, and I tipped my head back and closed my eyes.

Together, Varick and Given sliced my arms from elbow to wrist. Hot blood gushed down my forearms and splashed into the bowls.

Burning.

It always burned so badly.

My eyes watered, and a scream scrambled to break free from my throat. The knives were coated in a special kind of ceramic mixed with salt. Otherwise, my body would have healed the wounds immediately.

But the deep gouges stayed open. Varick had instructed Given well, and she'd driven the blade to the bone, shredding flesh and slicing vein. It was better this way. The faster I bled, the shorter my agony.

Heat flooded me in a feverish, sickly wave. I swayed on my knees, a ritual chant falling from my lips. My voice echoed, my words overlapping as I grew dizzy. My heart pounded in my ears—loud at first and then fainter...and slower.

Boom. Boom, boom, boom.

I rocked, murmuring incantations through lips gone cold and numb. The cold spread, chasing away the heat.

Boom...boom, boom.

I couldn't feel my legs. The burn was gone, too, leaving nothing but cold. It wrapped around me, blue and cruel. My voice reached me from a distance, the sound tinny and odd in my ears.

Boom...boom...

Something flickered against my closed eyelids. In my mind, I rocked, my body emptying of life. Destruction. To reach the gods, I had to offer everything. My life. My will. My complete annihilation. The cold crept up my neck, freezing my voice at last.

Boom...

And then...

Nothing.

I opened my eyes and saw white mist. Light shone from nowhere and everywhere, creating tiny rainbows in the air. In the distance, a female stood with her back to me. Long, black hair fell to her waist. Her black gown puddled at her feet, and a thick snake curled from her shoulder to her hip. Her white skin glowed as brightly as the mist. As I gazed at her, the snake lifted its head and stared at me. Its tongue forked out, as if it tasted me from afar.

Slowly, the female turned.

I bowed my head. “Nemu.”

Her footsteps were silent, but I knew she approached. And just as I knew she drew near, I knew she ordered me to rise.

I obeyed, standing on shaky legs and forcing myself to look the goddess of healing in the eye.

She was exquisite, but not in any sense that would have appealed to the peoples of Ter Isir. Her skin was white like the first snowfall of winter. Red eyes shot through with gold glittered in her face. Her black lips were full and well-formed, her fangs long and hooked at the ends. Up close, her black gown wasn't a gown at all, but a dark, flowing river of blood. Pinned at one shoulder, the river coursed over her ample breasts, flared around exaggeratedly curved hips, and cascaded to the ground. Every few seconds, the snake on her shoulder flicked its tongue into the thick liquid.

She was a vampire as we were meant to be—or perhaps as we used to be, when Ter Isir was young and the Deepnight wasn't a canopy but a long, black night no human dared to enter.

She was a monster. An apex predator. And she could crush me with a thought.

Her eyes traveled down my nude body and rested on my weeping, smoking hand.

“Nemu,” I repeated, her name sizzling over my tongue. “I ask for your bly'ad.”

She kept her gaze on my hand, but the snake stared at me with beady red eyes. It opened its mouth, displaying fangs that dripped with blood the same color as her gown.

Icy fingers touched my wrist, and I looked down and saw that Nemu had lifted my hand, her black claws long and sharp against my skin. A crackling noise echoed around us, the sound like a thousand people straightening their backs at the same time. Whispers followed, the rush of noise raising every fine hair on my body.

Nemu lifted her eyes to mine. The snake hissed, its tail beating fast against her breast. Slowly, the goddess tilted her head and peered at me.

THERE WILL BE PAIN.

“Yes,” I said, and I wasn’t sure if I answered aloud. But it didn’t matter. In this place where the gods dwelt, thoughts were intention.

YOU WILL DIE.

“I am already dead.”

The snake hissed.

The goddess opened her mouth and spoke. “KESH.”

My eardrums burst. A thousand bolts of lightning struck me at once, cooking me from within.

Pain. Unimaginable. Words did not exist to adequately describe the agony of her voice. My mouth stretched on a soundless scream as Nemu held my hand and watched me die a hundred deaths. Each breath brought a million lashes of the whip.

My skin flayed from my bones layer by layer. A fire seared me from the inside out, until tears streamed down my cheeks and my soundless scream became a scream in truth. I ceased to be Laurent of Nor Doru, son of Nicolae and Sorina. I was not a king, nor even a male.

I was pain.

KESH. The word boomed through my mind and flowed onto my tongue. My mouth filled with blood, and I tasted my heart.

Nemu's red and gold eyes observed me dispassionately. Her gown flowed, and the snake swirled down to her hip. Its head weaved around her arm before arcing toward me in a sinuous wave.

A forked tongue lashed my wrist.

KESH.

The snake bared its bloody fangs.

KESH.

It struck, biting directly over the wound in my hand.

My head went back. My own fangs shot down, stabbing through my lip. I screamed, shredding my vocal cords as I shook and stared at the white mist that was nothing and everything. Blood ran down my chin. Tears poured down my face. With a wretched sob, I opened my mouth and pushed the bly'ad from between my cracked, bleeding lips.

"KESH!" I screamed, the word exploding in my mind.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

“LAURENT!” Varick screamed in my face. Rough hands gripped my shoulders. Somewhere, a female wept.

Given. My wife. My queen. I didn’t want her to cry. I’d cost her too many tears already.

A hand in my hair, and then the scent of Varick’s skin. I turned my head toward it, seeking more of that scent. Leather and sword oil, which I teased him about mercilessly. And also forest. He smelled of snow on pine. I darted my tongue out, desperate for its coolness.

“That’s it,” he said gruffly, and I scented his blood.

I hissed and struck hard. Blood flooded my mouth.

Glorious. Rich, potent wine full of power and a thousand years of pureblooded warrior vampire. Varick’s blood was the rasp of a sword. The sharp crack of a splintering shield. It was a galloping horse and the snap of a pennant.

But more than anything, it was mine. I drank him down, gulping greedily as the bly’ad lingered on my tongue. Slowly, sensation returned, and I groaned as pain came with it. Everything hurt, my entire body like a bruise.

Varick cradled me in his arms, his deep, rumbling voice a purr that vibrated against my skin, grounding me to the obsidian and rooting me in the real world.

I seized that thought and clung to it. My heart beat, and I reveled in the sound. I took

deep breaths, filling my lungs with air and then releasing it because I could.

Another scent wafted around me—softer than Varick’s but just as compelling. Given. She smelled of cloves and...forest. The same as Varick.

Yes. They were the same.

My heart pounded faster. Seconds later, desire struck. My cock went rigid, and I moaned against Varick’s neck, my hips already rolling.

He was ready for me, his long fingers wrapping around my dick and stroking. Lust sank its fangs deep, making me jerk and cry out. I thrust against his grip, needing more.

“It’s not enough,” he said above me, and his voice sounded slurred. Worry wound through me. Why did his voice sound weak?

Given’s scent grew stronger, and a cool hand stroked down my arm. Her soft, sweet voice caressed my ear and made me want to weep. “Should I...?”

“Not yet.” Hesitation, then Varick said, “Touch him again. I thought I saw...”

Cool fingers stroked my skin, harder this time. Power shivered through me, but it wasn’t mine. My power was brittle frost and the drip of poison and the black edge of twilight.

This was light. Pure light, but it didn’t burn.

I turned toward it.

“Yes,” Varick said. His hand stroked my dick. “Lie down, sweetheart.”

I didn't know if he spoke to Given or me. Maybe both. It didn't matter. They were with me, and that was enough.

More cool touches. Varick's neck disappeared. The fist around my cock disappeared, too, and I grunted my dismay. Strong hands turned me, and the shutters over my eyes lifted.

Given filled my vision. She lay beneath me, her white-blond hair spilling over the obsidian floor of the Sanctum. Her gown was loose around her shoulders, the neckline gaping to reveal creamy, round breasts and one hard, pink nipple. As tantalizing as that sight was, it didn't capture my attention.

No, it was the soft glow of her skin that riveted me. She was the light. The pure, cool power burned under her skin.

"Laurent," Varick said, his mouth appearing beside me. I seized it, driving my tongue between his ready lips. We kissed, and I tasted blood and magic. A soft, feminine moan drifted around my ears. Beneath me, Given lifted her hips, and I felt her open, wet pussy against my dick.

I ripped my mouth from Varick's. Given stared up at me, her blue eyes glittering like gems. Her lips were parted, dainty fangs distended. Her voluminous skirts bunched around her hips, and her slender thighs were flung wide. White stockings rose to her knees. Above them was flawless, creamy skin. So gorgeous. With a growl, I dragged the neckline of her gown lower so her other breast popped free. Now, two perfect globes shivered under my gaze, her stiff nipples stabbing toward the ceiling.

"Fuck her," Varick murmured, moving behind me. He grasped my hips and shifted me into place. Smoothed his battle-hardened hands over my ass. He rocked my hips forward, and my dick nudged Given's sopping pussy. "I can't give you anymore blood, but I think this will work."

Given moaned, lifting her hips. The glow under her skin intensified. Puckered, pink nipples beckoned. I dipped my head and captured one in my mouth. As I sucked, I swiveled my hips and thrust inside her.

“Ahhh!” She cried out, her sweet body squirming beneath me. Her hot, tight pussy clamped around my dick, and it was a homecoming. I’d missed her. Missed making her come and making her laugh. She always tried so hard not to laugh when I was wicked.

“You don’t love me, Laurent,” she’d said.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

I thrust harder, falling into a rhythm as I tongued her nipple. I suckled her and rolled my hips. Ran a hand up her leg, feeling the smooth edge of the ribbon that held her stocking in place.

I realized I'd used my right hand.

The pain was gone.

Joy warbled in my throat. I pulled my mouth off Given's nipple and propped myself on my forearms. My hand was whole and unblemished. The smoking, bleeding gouge was no more.

And I had a new bly'ad on my tongue. And my wife beneath me.

"You don't love me, Laurent."

Oh, I was going to prove her wrong.

The glow under Given's skin swelled. It spilled from her, filling the temple. Something drifted past my head—a small, white blossom.

Well, that's new. With a rapidly beating heart, I watched more flowers appear out of thin air and drift toward the ground. Just before they touched the obsidian, they disappeared.

I looked down at Given. She was a goddess of light beneath me. "Are you doing this?"

“Yes, but I don’t know how. I’ve never pulled the Middling into another place.”

I smiled. “We’ll figure it out later.” We had a great deal to figure out. But I was ready now.

Power thrummed under my skin. Energy crackled through my veins. Given glowed, her eyes heavy-lidded with lust as she panted those kittenish little cries I loved so much. I bent my head and kissed her, sucking at her plump bottom lip.

Varick’s hands settled on my hips. For a moment, he held me that way, guiding my thrusts. Then his thigh brushed mine, and his big hands pulled my cheeks apart.

“Fuck,” I muttered against Given’s mouth. I reared back and looked at Varick over my shoulder. “I want you to fuck me.”

“I intend to.” He planted a foot next to Given’s hip and spit into his palm. He rubbed the moisture over his dick, which was red and engorged.

Lust shot through me, tightening my balls. We were next to the altar, the golden bowls overflowing with my blood. The smaller bowl was nearby, too, the sanctified blood inside gleaming in the candlelight.

“Use that,” I said, nodding toward it.

Varick followed my gaze. His golden eyes flicked back to me.

“Use it. Get me slick and fuck me, baby.”

I didn’t have to tell him twice. He snagged the bowl and dipped his fingers. A second later, warmth coated my hole, and I cried out as his thick finger pushed inside me.

Given cried out, too, and she craned her head up, trying to see everything. My naughty princess.

I slowed my thrusts as Varick fingered me, quickly getting me ready. His breathing grew labored, and his fingers trembled as he worked me open, pushing past the ring of muscle and stroking my gland. Bliss swept me, and I bit down hard on my lip as I whimpered through his ministrations.

“I’m ready,” I rasped. “Give me that dick.”

Varick grunted. Slapped his cock against my ass cheek as he rubbed his thumb around my hole. “You’ll get it when I decide to give it to you.”

“Well, you better fucking hurry.” I clenched around his thumb, already way too close to the edge. I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle having his fat dick inside me with Given’s vise of a pussy wrapped around my cock. But I’d figure it out.

Varick teased me a second longer, then lined up and pushed inside.

I stopped thrusting and clenched my jaw against the burn. I wasn’t as ready as I needed to be, after all. Deep inside Given, my dick softened.

Varick knew it, and he smoothed his hands around my ribs and found my nipples. He pinched lightly, teasing and rolling the peaks gently as he kissed the side of my neck. “Relax.” He kissed down to my shoulder, his beard brushing my skin.

Given reached up and stroked my jaw. Together, they soothed me. Tended me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Tears burned my eyes, so I squeezed them shut. Varick's clever fingers continued teasing my nipples, each gentle twist sending shivers dancing from my chest to my dick. Slowly, I relaxed.

"There you go," Varick murmured, mouthing kisses against my neck. "That's my good boy, opening that pussy."

My eyes flew open as fresh lust bolted through me. I wasn't sure if he referred to me or Given.

He pulled out. More warm, sanctified blood dribbled down my cleft, and then the tip of his dick prodded my hole. "Come on, good boy, open that pussy for me."

Me. Fuck, he meant me.

His teeth caught my earlobe, and his rough voice scraped my ear as he thrust his hips, pumping his cockhead in and out of my hole. "My good boy likes that dick, doesn't he? You want me deep in your pussy, so let me in."

Given and I moaned in unison. "Gods, Varick," I gasped, rocking with him. My erection returned, Varick's filthy, scandalous words like a bonfire on my skin.

He kept up his steady thrusts, pumping the head of his dick inside me as he gnawed my ear. My resistance gave way, and I opened around him.

His grunt of victory echoed around the temple. He thrust deep and kept right on going, pumping his dick and rocking me forward. Driving his cock into me and my

cock into Given. He fucked us both, his big warrior's body crouched over us and his rough commands spurring us on.

“Look at her tits,” he grated in my ear. “So fucking pretty.”

Fuck yes, they were. They bounced with our movements, her nipples little spears that dragged across my chest. I dipped my head and tongued around one, flicking it with my fang. “Come for me, princess. I want you screaming my name when I come.”

Obedient queen that she was, she stiffened and cried out, her pussy clamping hard around my shaft as she orgasmed. Her blossoms rained harder, and a warm breeze rushed through the room, making the candles shiver. The scent of grass hit my nose, and I turned my head and watched patches of it appear and disappear on the floor.

Varick kept fucking me, his hand clamped on my hip. His heavy balls smacked mine, driving me closer and closer to the edge.

The Sanctum filled with the sounds of our fucking. Grunts and cries and the slap of skin against skin. We moved together, loving each other with our bodies as Given's magic showered petals upon us.

Her skin glowed brighter. Her hair glowed, too, pale tendrils waving over the ground like the stem of a flower. She threw her head back and screamed. “Laurent! Oh gods, Laurent!”

“Good girl,” I rasped, then thrust hard and spurted into her heat. Behind me, Varick shuddered and flooded my ass. I came so hard my vision went blurry, the thunder of my heart filling my ears.

After a few seconds, Varick pulled out of me and collapsed on his back next to Given. I kissed her and rolled to her other side. The three of us stared at the ceiling,

our chests heaving. A few more blossoms descended...then winked out of sight. The light faded, and candlelight reigned once more.

Varick rumbled on the other side of Given. “I hope you’re happy with that, Laurent, because I’m never doing it again.”

I lifted onto my elbow. “The sex or the blood rite?”

He scowled at me. “The second one.”

I flicked my gaze to Given, who watched me with sated blue eyes. Her skin was flushed but normal, the light whisked away to whatever plane she’d pulled it from. I held up my newly healed hand. “You saved Varick, and now it seems you’ve saved me. I am in your debt.”

She brushed her fingertips over the spot where the solstone had wounded me. “It doesn’t hurt anymore?”

“No. It’s perfect.” I curled my fingers around hers and brought her hand to my lips. I slid my gaze from hers to Varick’s, and watched his eyes soften with relief. And love.

General and wife.

Wife and general.

Either way, in whatever order, they were mine.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

GIVEN

I'd been in this situation before.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

In fact, I was starting to lose count of how many times I'd sat between Laurent and Varick as the three of us dined in Laurent's chambers.

But this evening was different. Laurent was relaxed and happy, his hand no longer paining him. Varick was more content than I'd ever seen him. He toyed with a goblet of blood-wine, his golden beard glinting in the candlelight. The remains of our dinner littered the table. A fire crackled in the hearth. The chamber smelled of the night-blooming roses that burst from a vase on a sideboard along the wall.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that this new happiness might never occur again. Like we were inviting disaster by indulging in it.

The men had spent the afternoon in a Council meeting, locked away with Petru and the highest-ranking lords of Nor Doru. No one could agree on what to do about Rolund. The troops from the Wastes had yet to arrive in Lar Katerin, and the city was on edge.

Laurent surprised me by asking if I wished to join the men in their meeting. "Bring that big sword of yours, princess. I might need you to threaten a few lords with it."

But I'd felt too unsettled to sit still. So I'd paced my bedchamber, replaying the events in the Sanctum in my head. Like Varick, I never wished to witness the Rite of Destru again. Laurent's heart had stopped beating, and when Varick's blood wasn't enough to revive him, I'd prepared to rush into the main temple and scream for thralls.

But something had compelled me to touch Laurent instead. And when I had, I'd

tapped into the same making I'd summoned in the Middling. Just as before, my power had reached its full potential when I surrendered completely.

The problem was, I had no idea how I'd done it. As I'd told Laurent, I'd never pulled the Middling into the real world. The in-between plane was somewhere I went—not something I summoned. But I had, and I didn't know what it meant.

Awareness prickled over me, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked at Laurent and found him watching me.

My heart sped up. "What is it?"

He flicked a look at Varick. "We want to show you something."

I swung my head toward Varick—and discovered golden eyes waiting for me.

My nape heated as I turned back to Laurent. "We?"

"Mmm. Something I think you need to see." He rose. Varick rose with him, his chair scraping the floor.

My heart fluttered faster, a mix of apprehension and heat swirling through me. Both males came to me, Varick a solid, warm presence at my back as Laurent took my hand.

"I don't want to push you, sweetheart. We want to show you a place that's special to us. That's all. No expectations." His thumb stroked my knuckles. "But if you decide you want more, we'll gladly provide it. Won't we, General?"

"We will," Varick rumbled behind me.

The heat flared hotter, chasing away my nerves. I believed Laurent. Trust had sprung up between us today. It was new and fragile, but it had the potential to become something more solid. However, it could only grow if I nurtured it, and that meant giving him the benefit of the doubt. I had to make myself vulnerable.

Was it a risk? Yes. But I also had Varick. He'd known Laurent a long time—and had forgiven him. I didn't have to rely solely on my own judgment. I could lean on Varick. I could follow his lead.

"Show me," I heard myself say.

They led me upstairs to a small, circular room I recognized from Varick's memories—the ones Midian had stolen from Varick's head and displayed to me. Candles blazed, casting soft shadows over the big bed with its carved footboard and crisp white sheets.

"Varick and I have never brought anyone here," Laurent said at my shoulder. "This has always been a place for just the two of us." His hand slipped into mine. "But now I think it should be a place for all three of us."

My toes curled in my slippers. Varick came to my other side and brushed the backs of his fingers over my cheek.

Laurent kissed my neck. "Let us love you, Given. Properly this time, with no secrets between us."

Blood-wine buzzed in my veins, leaving me warm and a little dizzy. Or maybe that was what came of standing between two solid males asking to share my body.

I nodded.

Varick moved first, stepping away and pulling off his clothes. He watched through slightly narrowed eyes as Laurent stood behind me and unbuttoned my gown, his skilled fingers moving quickly down my spine.

My gown dropped to the floor, but Laurent didn't remove anything else. Instead, he stripped off his own clothes and returned to me gloriously nude, his shaft thrusting proudly from his hips. He cupped my jaw in his hands and took my mouth in a slow, thorough kiss. His cinnamon and spice scent filled my lungs as his tongue stroked over mine. My eyes drifted shut, and I moaned softly.

Heat caressed my back, and then Varick was there, his bare chest pressing against me. He slipped the straps of my chemise off my shoulders and kissed my neck, the soft brush of his beard making my breath shudder into Laurent's mouth.

"Easy, halfling," Varick whispered, his warm breath teasing the shell of my ear. A big hand dragged my chemise up, and then his warm palm splayed over my stomach. "I'm going to get you nice and ready for me."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Another moan broke from me as his meaning sank in. He was going to fuck my ass, thrusting every inch of his huge cock inside me while I rode Laurent's dick. The last time we'd done this, we did it the other way around. Laurent's dick was plenty big, but Varick's was enormous. I wasn't sure I could take him.

Laurent deepened our kiss, tangling his tongue with mine. He guided my head back so it rested on Varick's shoulder. Varick tugged my chemise until it slipped to the floor. His callused fingers brushed my waist, sending my drawers to the same fate, and then I was nude between them except for my stockings.

Behind my closed lids, I imagined what I looked like, my smaller body flanked by their larger, more powerful frames. Laurent's erection brushed my stomach, and Varick's nudged between my cheeks, reminding me where he intended to put it.

A whimper escaped me, and Laurent ended our kiss. "Shhh, princess," he whispered in his raspy voice that wore away at my defenses. His long, elegant fingers stroked over my breast, and then he cupped one globe in his hand, his rings winking at the bottom edge of my vision.

They kissed and stroked me, their lips skimming every inch of skin they could reach. My cheeks grew hot, and the heat swept down my body, tightening my nipples and pooling between my legs.

Two sets of masculine growls vibrated against my front and back. Laurent pulled away slightly and roved an admiring gaze from my aching breasts to my trembling thighs. Slowly, deliberately, he skimmed a fingertip down my stomach and pushed between my soaked folds, making me gasp loudly. He gathered moisture and lifted

his hand to Varick's mouth over my shoulder.

"Our princess gets so wet, General."

Varick's beard brushed my neck as he sucked my juices from Laurent's fingers. When Laurent tried to pull away, Varick caught Laurent's fingers in his teeth.

Laurent's eyes gleamed as he waited for Varick to release him. When Varick did, Laurent leaned in and whispered in my opposite ear. "I hope you're prepared to be a very good girl." His hand moved between our bodies, and his thumb delved between my sodden folds again. He rubbed around my clit, making me jerk and cry out. My breasts bumped his chest, and my ass bumped Varick's dick. There was nowhere to go. I was trapped between their heat.

Gaze locked with mine, Laurent played with my clit. His fingers between my legs were loud in the hushed room, and I blushed furiously as smacking sounds reached my ears.

"More," Varick murmured, and Laurent fed him more of my juices.

"Gods," I whispered, sagging against Varick. He cupped my breasts from behind, kneading gently and flicking his thumbs over my nipples.

Laurent returned his thumb to my clit. "Spread your legs," he said softly. When I obeyed, he reached down and pulled my lips apart. Cool air teased my pussy, and embarrassment flooded me.

"Laurent," I choked, squirming.

"Let him," Varick said gruffly in my ear, accompanying the order with sharp pinches on my nipples.

I cried out, my hips surging forward. Varick pinched my nipples and Laurent pinched my lips—four tight points of contact that made my clit pulse hard. Distantly, I wondered if it was possible to come like this. No contact on my clit, just their fingers driving me wild.

Laurent went to his knees. He grasped my hips and buried his face in my pussy, his tongue delving between my splayed legs and flicking rapidly over my clit.

A cry ripped from me. I stumbled back hard. My knees gave out, but Varick had me, and he slung an arm around my waist as he continued playing with my breasts. “You are so fucking beautiful,” he breathed in my ear. “I love watching you come.”

His hot breath on my ear. His warm hand on my breast. Laurent’s hot, relentless tongue working my clit. All these things combined to send me flying into a powerful orgasm. I shuddered and cried out, my hips thrusting wantonly.

Laurent tightened his grip, holding me still while he licked and sucked my pussy. His dark head bobbed a bit as he alternated between long strokes and rapid-fire flicks that left me sobbing and rolling my head against Varick’s shoulder.

At last, I grew too sensitive, and I pushed at Laurent’s dark head, trying to shove him away.

He stood, his mouth smeared with my desire. Varick gripped him behind the neck and hauled him close, and they kissed passionately over my shoulder. The knowledge that Varick tasted me on Laurent’s lips threatened to send me hurtling into another orgasm.

Varick wrenched his mouth from Laurent’s, hoisted me up, and carried me to the bed. He tossed me down none too gently and pushed my legs apart. “I want more.”

It was the only warning I got. He climbed onto the bed, his big dick slapping his thigh, and plunged his mouth to my sex.

The first swipe of his tongue had me lifting my hips and crying out. But he was cruel, licking me everywhere but my clit. As my orgasm ebbed and I grew greedy for another, he denied me, stabbing his tongue into my opening with deep strokes instead of giving me what I wanted. When I tried to shift into a better position, he pinned my thighs flat and continued his torture.

“Varick!” I cried, frustration thick in my voice. I looked around for Laurent and found him standing off to the side of the bed, his silver eyes glittering as he stroked his dick.

He raised a brow. “I told you to be good.”

“I am!” I curled my spine and clawed at Varick’s shoulders, but it was useless. A vampire of the warrior class couldn’t be deterred by someone my size. I probably could have driven nails into his flesh and he would have kept right on fucking his tongue into me.

Laurent chuckled.

A wicked idea took root in my mind. “Come over here,” I ordered.

My husband stopped laughing.

“Come on.” I crooked my finger.

He came, twin flames of lust springing into his eyes as he stopped beside the bed. And when I wrapped my hand around his dick, he tipped his head back and closed his eyes. “Oh, no fucking fair, princess. You play dirty.”

I stroked his dick.

Varick thrust a finger inside me and sucked my clit.

Release slammed into me. I spread my thighs impossibly wide, my knees digging into the bed. My hand on Laurent’s dick faltered as I rode out the waves of bliss. Sweat broke out across my body, and hot moisture flooded me.

Varick lapped it up, his finger pumping in and out of my heat. He knew precisely when to stop, and he drew back with a shiny mouth and glittering eyes as I came down from my high.

Our gazes locked.

“Why don’t you come here, too,” I said.

I didn’t have to ask him twice. He prowled up my body and went to his knees at my side. His dick bobbed like a wooden club, fat veins running up and down the meaty shaft. I grasped him, and my fingers and thumb didn’t meet.

I stroked, a cock in each hand, turning my head slowly back and forth so I could drink in the sight of both males shuddering under my touch. I kept my legs sprawled apart, and silver and gold gazes returned again and again to my stockings tied with ribbons above my knees.

After a minute, Laurent backed out of my grasp. His lean, muscled chest heaved, his pecs gleaming with sweat. “I don’t want to come yet.”

Varick eyed him. “Then get up here.”

Pleasure shot to my sex. This. This was what I wanted. Laurent had been right that day in Lar Satha. In his usual way, he’d uncovered my deepest desires, his voice low and husky as he spoke of me watching him and Varick together. “Oh Princess, you’re a naughty little thing, aren’t you?”

Yes, I was, because I couldn’t take my eyes off Laurent as he climbed onto the bed, his body long and graceful. His cock swung between his legs, the skin there totally bare. His balls were bare, too, everything as smooth as his chest.

It was a contrast to Varick, who was hairy but not unpleasantly so. Varick’s dick sprang from a nest of curly blond hair a few shades darker than his head. More hair surrounded his heavy balls, which he reached down and cupped as Laurent climbed between my thighs and faced him.

My husband gave me a heated look. “Hold his dick for me, princess. I think you’ll like this.”

I did as he said, scarcely daring to breathe. And I groaned as he leaned forward and sucked Varick into his mouth.

Varick grunted and thrust his hips forward, shoving his cock deeper and jerking my

arm.

Laurent's eyes flashed up, meeting Varick's hot, golden stare.

"Suck me," Varick ordered.

Laurent obeyed, bobbing on Varick's dick as I held it steady. Laurent's cock bounced gently, the slit in the head glossy with moisture. He swallowed Varick completely, his lips meeting my fingers every time he descended.

Desire fired all over again. My heart raced as I watched Laurent's cheeks hollow. His dark lashes fluttered, and his throat worked as he breathed through his nose. Varick's cock grew shiny with saliva, and the wet, fleshy sound of it tunneling into Laurent's throat made me bite my lip and groan.

Suddenly, Laurent pulled back. He and Varick exchanged a look, and Laurent nodded. Before I realized what was happening, Varick left the bed and Laurent snagged my leg and jerked my body around. Now I was sideways, my legs dangling off the side. Laurent grabbed my hips and pulled until my ass was almost off the mattress entirely.

Varick appeared behind Laurent and slapped his ass sharply. "Give her another one."

Laurent tossed me a mischievous look. "What say you, princess? You want another orgasm?"

Varick shoved Laurent's head down. "Get her ready for my dick."

My breath caught.

Laurent winked at me. He pushed my thighs wide and licked down my center—and

then kept going until his tongue circled my asshole.

My hips jerked off the bed. I grabbed the sheets in both fists. “Oh...gods!”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

He hummed, pulled my cheeks apart, and thrust his tongue inside me.

Varick knelt and sucked Laurent's dick into his mouth.

I lifted onto my elbows, my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open. Heat blasted me from head to toe as I watched Varick suck Laurent's dick. Varick was just as skilled as Laurent, his powerful jaw stretched wide as he thrust his head forward, sucking Laurent to the root. Varick reached between Laurent's legs, his thick fingers disappearing. A second later, Laurent jerked, his tongue in my ass faltering.

Varick pulled off Laurent's dick. "I didn't tell you to stop."

Laurent moaned and resumed eating my ass, his tongue swiping firm circles around my rim. It wasn't the first time he'd done this. After our wedding rite, he'd introduced me to almost every sexual pleasure imaginable. But this was so, so different. The intensity was almost too much to bear.

Varick played with Laurent's ass as he sucked Laurent's dick. Laurent moaned and lapped at my hole. He teased the muscle open, relaxing me and loosening me up. His stubble scraped my most sensitive flesh, and I would have slammed my legs shut but I couldn't break his grip on my thighs.

Eventually, I couldn't prop myself up anymore, and I flopped back down, moaning as another orgasm rushed toward me.

Laurent thrust a long finger into my ass. His other hand went to my pussy and rubbed my clit in the small, quick circles I loved.

I flew apart. Every muscle tensed. My toes curled, and I screamed so loudly my ears rang.

The next time I opened my eyes, Laurent was untying my garters. Varick watched from nearby, his big hand slicking oil over his dick.

Golden eyes held mine. “I haven’t had your ass yet, halfling. We’re going to change that right now.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

VARICK

Given looked like a goddess.

I wasn’t sure what Laurent saw when he communed with the gods, but it had to be similar to the beauty arranged before me now.

Creamy skin. Flushed cheeks. Big, round tits reddened from my hands and Laurent’s stubble. And a plump, glistening pussy between slender thighs.

But, as I’d told her, I wanted her tight little hole.

Laurent finished with her stockings. I grabbed his hips and pulled him against me, our cocks rubbing as I seized his mouth. His hand skimmed my ribs as he kissed me back.

Relief pounded through me all over again. I couldn’t stop him from performing his blood rites. The priesthood was as much a part of him as breathing. But he’d never scared me like he had today. He’d died in my arms, his heart silent for so long I’d started down a long, endless tunnel of despair.

Without Given's power, Laurent would have died. He knew it. I'd seen his sharp eyes assessing the Middling as it bled into the Sanctum.

I just didn't know what the fuck any of it meant.

Awareness prickled over me, and I realized I stood next to the bed with my dick in my hand while Laurent and Given watched me with budding confusion on their faces.

I tossed the oil to Laurent, who caught it handily. "Get yourself ready." I plucked Given from the bed and stood her in front of me, steadying her with my hands on her hips. "And I'm going to get you ready." I tipped her chin up. "I would never hurt you. Never. You know that, right?"

Her blue eyes were like the sky over Lar Katerin in spring. "Of course I do."

Behind her, Laurent stretched on his back on the bed and stroked oil over his straining dick. A sensualist to his core, he spread his legs and worked both hands over his shaft and balls, a satisfied sigh easing from his lips.

I turned Given around but kept my hands on her hips. She sucked in a breath, her body tensing slightly as she watched Laurent. I smiled and put my mouth next to her ear. "Do you want to know why he's bare?"

Her heart beat faster, the thumps like thunder in my ears.

I smiled against her neck and trailed a hand down to her pussy, where I sifted through the pale, wet curls that covered her mound. "He's bare because I keep him that way," I murmured. "It reminds him that he belongs to me."

On the bed, Laurent's burning silver gaze held mine. He rested one hand on his rippling abs and worked the other up and down his oiled dick.

I spread Given's drenched lips and toyed with her clit. "If I told him to flip over and spread his ass, he would do it." Her breath hitched, and I slid my finger to her opening and circled it. "He'd show us his hole if I commanded it. He'd do anything I commanded." I moved back to her clit and stroked the hungry little bud. "That's why he's bare, halfling. It's an order he follows every minute of every day, keeping his dick and ass smooth for me."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Her breathing went ragged. Her chest lifted, her perfect tits rising and falling.

I grabbed her pussy hair and tugged. “Would you like to be bare for me, my queen?”

She made a high-pitched, strangled sound. On the bed, Laurent pumped his glistening dick.

“I think maybe you do,” I murmured, licking the curve of her ear. “And I think maybe you want to leave your drawers in your armoire from now on. I think you’d like it very much if you wore nothing under your skirts. And when I’m done training my men and I pass you in the corridor, I’ll shove you against a wall and order you to lift your gown.”

She sobbed. Her hips jerked, seeking more of my finger. I gave it to her, rubbing her clit faster. She was dripping wet, the smacking sound of her juices loud in the room.

“And you’ll raise your skirts and show me your bald little pussy, because I fucking ordered you to.”

She came on a wild cry, her pussy spasming against my cream-coated fingers. Pink nipples jutted from her heaving breasts. She was ripe for fucking, and I was done waiting to get inside her.

While she was still trembling, I picked her up and settled her over Laurent. He grabbed her thighs and guided her into place. Gripped his dick and dragged the leaking head up her cleft. Our gazes met, and I pressed Given down as he thrust up, spearing her pink folds.

She screamed again, coming all over his dick. They were gorgeous together, their bodies exquisite. Possessiveness sank its claws deep, the ferocity of it surprising me. I'd always felt that way toward Laurent. Sometimes, my need to own him scared me a little. I never expected to feel the same about anyone else, especially a female. Perhaps it stemmed from my failings with my mother and sister, but I'd always shied away from women. Men were easier. Stronger. They didn't need my protection. I could fuck them without worrying about breaking them.

I worried about breaking Given, too, but I was a lost cause for her—probably from the moment she'd lifted her chin as we faced off across the Bleak Pass. And then she'd lifted it again when she stared Midian down and saved my life.

Yeah, I was a lost cause for Given of Nor Doru, the same as I was for Laurent.

He rocked his hips up, bouncing her on his dick as he squeezed her hips. "Any time you're ready, baby," he told me.

Oh, I was ready.

My balls ached as I climbed behind them. Laurent pulled his knees up and squirmed backward, propping himself on the pillows. "You want another cock, princess?" he asked his wife. "Yeah, you do. That's my good girl. Ride my dick, sweetheart."

She whimpered and bounced harder, her pussy smacking as he drove into her.

I drizzled more oil on my shaft. Then I crowded behind her and pushed her down with a hand on her shoulder.

She moaned, and I knew the position meant Laurent's dick was rubbing hard against her clit. I dumped the rest of the oil on my fingers and stroked down her cleft. Her moans grew louder as I pushed a finger inside her. She was open from Laurent's

mouth, but not yet ready for me, so I worked another finger inside.

“Bear down,” I told her. “Push your ass onto me.”

“Like you’re trying to push him out,” Laurent said against her temple.

I gave him a look. “As if you ever do that.” He loved to be fucked, and he wasn’t shy about it. I wasn’t sure he had any boundaries at all.

He tangled his newly healed hand in Given’s hair and kissed her, his black-stubbed jaw worked as he swiped his tongue over hers.

I watched them, enraptured as I pushed a third finger into Given’s ass. My dick was so hard it was almost numb, and the sight of her pretty pink hole opening wide around me wasn’t helping. Her rim stretched, the tight ring of muscle relaxing.

“Mmph!” she squealed against Laurent’s lips. She thrust her ass up, fucking her hole on my fingers as she bounced her pussy on Laurent’s dick.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I withdrew my fingers, gripped my shaft, and pushed my cockhead into her ass.

Immediately, Laurent slowed his thrusts. As she moaned between us, I leaned forward and kissed him. I sensed her turn her head, and I deepened the kiss because I knew she liked watching. As I sucked at Laurent’s tongue, I thrust deeper into her ass.

“Varick,” she groaned, stretching my name out.

I gave her another inch, feeling Laurent inside her. Feeling her tight little asshole gripping my cock. It was too much. Too perfect. Suddenly, I couldn’t catch my

breath. I pulled my mouth from Laurent's as bright spots danced in my vision, my body overloading on raw pleasure. If this was the way it was going to be all the time, I might not survive it. But I'd die a happy male.

Laurent's lips brushed mine. His hand found mine and squeezed. "All right, baby?"

"Yeah," I grunted. I pulled Given's hair aside and kissed her sweaty neck. "How about you, halfling? Do you need me to stop?"

She looked at me over her shoulder. "Don't you dare."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Laurent's chuckle rumbled the bed. "You heard the queen, General. I think you should get to work and fuck her ass."

I surged my hips forward, seating myself to the hilt and rocking her forward. She shivered and braced herself on her forearms on Laurent's chest. "More," she gasped. "Oh gods, you're both so deep."

Slowly, I pulled out a few inches and then eased back in. I felt every inch of Laurent's cock. The sensation was unlike anything else in the world. Nothing but a thin barrier separated us. We'd spent a long time twisted tightly together. But maybe just a little space between us—some breathing room between the vines—could make everything better. Help us thrive.

"Keep going," Given urged, her voice thick with lust. "Please don't stop."

I gave my queen what she wanted, grabbing her hips and grinding into her hole. Laurent followed my lead, filling her with measured, practiced thrusts. We fucked her together, sliding in and out and over each other, our cocks meeting inside her.

The room grew thick with lust. Pleasured sighs and low, lazy moans. We moved together, Given rocking with our thrusts. Her soft curves molded perfectly to our harder bodies, and her breathy sighs mingled with our deeper moans. I kissed her and then I kissed Laurent. And then I lost track. Kisses flowed between the three of us, our mouths meeting and parting and meeting again.

Eventually, Laurent's fingers threaded with mine. He thrust faster, and I matched his pace. We lost our rhythm, pumping our dicks harder, our gazes locked as we barreled

toward orgasm. Given came first, her ass spasming around my dick as she screamed hoarsely.

Laurent gripped my fingers, his eyes never leaving mine as he jerked his hips up and up, spearing Given's pussy in short, brutal thrusts. He thrust a final time and yelled, his fangs slicing his lip.

I darted my head forward and swiped the blood, and I came with his taste in my mouth as I pumped Given's ass full of seed.

The three of us landed in a heap of sweaty limbs, our sticky, sated bodies tangled together. Given's hair streamed over everything. She curled against me, her head on my shoulder and her damp pussy pressed against my thigh. I turned my head and found Laurent on my other side, one arm bent under his head, silver eyes watching me.

"Love you," I said in his head.

He leaned forward and kissed me softly. "I love you, too."

Sleep tugged at my eyelids. I didn't fight it as I settled more deeply into the bed. The three of us were warm and safe. No one could hurt us here. Tomorrow, we'd face the troubles looming on our horizon.

A sigh eased from my chest as I drifted into slumber. And if Jordan or Twyl's voice whispered in my head about Fate and prophecy and magic determined to flow its course, well, I ignored it.

Tomorrow was soon enough to worry about those things.

Nothing would disturb this night.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

GIVEN

I woke to the sound of two snoring men.

Was this my life now?

A smile curved my lips. If so, I had no problem with it. But falling back to sleep was out of the question—at least until I'd relieved my bladder.

Moving slowly, I disentangled myself from Varick and Laurent, climbing over hairy legs and hard muscle. Just as I slid from the bed, a big hand caught my wrist.

I whipped my head to the side and met a pair of gleaming golden eyes.

“And where do you think you're going?” Varick rumbled.

Heat streaked to my pussy, and I bit back a groan of desire. Every time we made love, I learned more about Varick of Lar Keiren.

Like how he was absolutely in charge of everything that happened in bed.

I shivered.

His brows pulled together. “You're cold.”

That was another thing. The general was brutal, but he was also careful. And when he was finished being brutal, he was soft and kind.

“I'll be right back,” I whispered, glancing at Laurent. My husband sprawled on his

stomach, one knee pulled up. His head was turned away, his dark hair mussed. His back rose and fell in a regular rhythm.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

“I’ll go with you,” Varick said, starting to sit up.

“No!” I lowered my voice and gave him a meaningful look. “I need the privy.”

Understanding lit his gaze. He released me, but a frown formed between his brows.

“Don’t be long.”

“I’m only going downstairs. There are guards all over the place.”

His frown deepened.

Laurent’s sleepy voice lifted from the other side of the bed. “Let her go, baby.”

I stood and wrapped a sheet around me.

Laurent turned over, rolling into the divot I’d left in the bed. He wiggled closer to Varick and stuck his feet under Varick’s calves. “I’ll save your spot.”

A smile tugged at my lips. Before I was tempted to climb back into bed with them, I went to the stairs.

“Come right back here,” Varick rumbled after me.

I lifted a hand in acknowledgment and picked my way down the stairs.

No surprise, Laurent’s privy was more luxurious than any other in the palace. After I did my business, I washed in the large basin set in a wooden stand. I sniffed at a bar

of soap and then used that, too, scrubbing sweat and sex from my body. I'd left a few of my things in the bedchamber after Laurent and I wed, and I pulled a nightdress and robe from his armoire. After running a brush through my hair, I started for the Rose Room.

The sound of steel on steel stopped me cold.

I turned.

Nothing. Laurent's darkened bedchamber spread before me, moonlight spilling over the carpets.

My heart pounded, thoughts of Midian rushing through my head. I swallowed hard, the sound an audible gulp in the hushed space.

My vision flickered. Wind stirred my hair. Before me, a ghostly knight strode across the carpet, his cloak fluttering behind him.

A green cloak.

Fear closed its jaws around me. Not real. It had to be an illusion—something Midian was making me see. Except I didn't feel the demon king in my head. I hadn't felt anything abnormal since I fled the Thicket.

A man's muffled shout reached me. More sounds of steel.

No, sounds of a camp. I'd heard it all before, the day Varick and I met Laurent in Wesyfedd. A rhythmic, metallic clang rang out—the sound of someone driving tent pegs into the ground.

Heart thumping painfully, I drifted forward.

And stepped into a sea of green tents.

I stumbled back, dirt crunching under my feet. Laurent's chamber was gone, and I stood in the middle of the Sithistran army's camp.

Boots crunched. A shadow flowed over a nearby tent, displaying the silhouette of a knight in full armor.

Nausea burned my throat. If Rolund caught me, he'd kill me.

I clapped a hand over my mouth, tremors shaking me.

The shadow loomed larger, and a knight rounded the tent.

I couldn't let him find me! Heart thumping, I darted my head around, looking for a place to hide.

The knight kept coming.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

I shrank back, tears burning my eyes.

The knight walked right past me, not even glancing in my direction.

Trembling, I lowered my hand. He hadn't seen me. Just like the first time I visited Sithistra, the knight had swept by me as if I didn't exist.

In fact, the only time I'd been visible when farseeing was when I visited Laurent by accident.

I spun in a slow circle, my mind racing as I tried to figure out how I'd landed in the camp without trying. My gaze snagged on a familiar tent, and my heart stopped.

It was the king's tent—Rolund's tent, topped with the green flag of Sithistra. The banner waved limply in the light breeze, the Towers of the Mir encircled by the Solgard River beneath a blazing sun.

Movement inside made me hold my breath. A silhouette stood, Rolund's tall form unmistakable even in shadow. He buried his face in his hands. After a moment, he gave a deep, broken sob.

My feet moved without my permission, taking me around the tent. I spotted a sentry and ducked close to the canvas. When the sentry merely stood there, I eased from the shadows.

A pair of knights approached, their boots crunching in the dirt and gravel. One talked animatedly, his hands flying as he complained about the soup being served for dinner.

The knights nodded to the sentry, who nodded back. One of the men looked straight at me as the pair passed.

They didn't see me. My heart thumped. Maybe it was as simple as choosing not to be seen.

A wild impulse seized me, and I stepped away from the tent and waved my arms. The sentry stayed put, his expression unchanged.

Another muffled sob drifted from Rolund's tent. I hesitated, recalling Cathrin's recent death. Rolund was clearly hurting. When Helen died, grief had consumed me.

I opened the flap and stepped inside.

My brother stood over a campaign table, his back to the tent's entrance. His head was bowed, his dark hair disheveled as if he'd been running his fingers through it. A corner of the paper before him drooped over the table's edge. I squinted, drifting closer, and saw "Lar Katerin" stenciled over a drawing of a castle.

My throat went dry. Rolund stood over a map of Nor Doru. He was, at this very moment, likely planning a war.

I moved closer, trying to see more of the map. Rolund straightened abruptly, his bulk blocking my line of sight. Great, now I couldn't see anything. And I needed to see. If I could get a good enough look at that map, I might be able to learn something that could help Laurent or Varick.

Rolund moved again, further blocking my view.

I crept forward, my bare foot shifting gravel.

My brother whirled, and I froze. Rolund's mouth opened on a gasp. "You can't be here." He squeezed his eyes shut, like he was trying to rouse himself from a dream. "It's not possible."

My initial shock wore off, and anger flooded me. I stepped forward. "What's not possible, Brother? That I'm here in your camp, or that I'm alive?"

He recovered quickly, his expression going from startled to stern. "Who brought you?" His eyes took in my robe and nightdress. "What game do you play, Given? Something cooked up by the priest, no doubt. That snake is probably invading as we speak." His chest lifted, and he opened his mouth like he meant to shout for his men.

"You coward," I spat, rushing forward before he could summon his knights. "If you want me dead, at least have the courage to kill me yourself."

Rolund's mouth snapped shut. Surprise flashed in his gaze. There was guilt, too, which he hid quickly.

But not quickly enough.

I nodded, anger rising. "That's right. I heard you give the order. I was there the night you spoke to Crasor about sending the solstone to Nor Doru. He repeated the prophecy and said Laurent would throw me into the Rift if he found the blade. And you said so be it."

The blood drained from Rolund's face. "This is exactly what Crasor warned about."

"What?" I raised my chin. "People finding out you're a murderer?"

His expression darkened, and he stepped toward me. Light flashed, drawing my attention to a small, mirrored pendant around his neck. "No," he said, "Crasor warned

of foul magic that comes from the Fir. Demonic forces who leave their bodies and spy undetected.” He took another step forward, and I remembered he’d been a formidable warrior in his youth. Although his middle had thickened with age, he was still a powerful man.

My heart thumped as I stumbled back, willing myself to farsee to Laurent’s chamber. I waited to blink and open my eyes in Nor Doru, but nothing happened. I remained in the tent, Rolund slowly bearing down on me.

“Y-You don’t want to do this,” I said. I’d been stupid to enter Rolund’s tent. But his weeping had kindled compassion. Despite everything, some part of me had clung to the hope that maybe I’d been mistaken about my brother—that he was still the man I remembered instead of the man he’d become.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:06 am

Rolund spoke as if he hadn't heard me. "My mother was right," he said, advancing. "Crasor tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. They told me there was darkness inside you, that Father invited it into Sithistra when your mother enthralled him."

"He wasn't enthralled. He loved her." Desperate, I tried to farsee again.

"Like you love your priest and his...companion?" Disgust twisted Rolund's mouth. "I told Crasor his plan would never work. I said there was no way my gently reared, innocent sister would bed down with two men, let alone two perverts. But I should have known better." Hate shimmered in his eyes. "You are your mother's daughter. A whore, just like the demon bitch who birthed you."

The vile words struck like arrows, piercing the last bit of love I felt for him. My brother was gone, twisted by the same fanaticism that had consumed his mother.

And he had murder in his eyes.

I took another careful step back, wishing I had Avenor's sword. The rage in my throat was so thick, it was difficult to speak. "Laurent and Varick are better men than you'll ever be. You're not fit to polish their boots. And my mother was no whore."

"She was a devil," he said, "and now my daughter is dead and my line dead with her. Father turned away from the Lord, and he cursed us all. My wives are barren, my kingdom consumed by Nor Doru's shadow."

My heart pounded. We were nearly to the tent flap. I could turn and make a run for it. "There is no curse, Rolund. Only prophecy."

Blue eyes the same shade as my own danced with madness. He drew a dagger. Gold appeared to ripple down the blade. Solstone. “If that’s the case,” he hissed, “let me fulfill it.”

My fingers curled around something solid. A familiar hilt filled my hand.

Rolund charged me.

I thrust Avenor’s sword into his gut.

We both froze. For a moment, he just looked at me, his brow furrowing like he couldn’t make sense of what happened. Slowly, he looked down. I looked with him, and we stared at the elven steel lodged in his stomach. Blood spread around it, turning his green jacket black.

Blue eyes lifted to mine. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and ran into his dark beard. “You... Evil...” His legs folded, and he crashed to the ground. He stayed upright for a second, then fell to his side. The life drained from his eyes. His chest went still.

I stood over him, shock holding me immobile. Something tickled my hand, and I looked down and saw it covered in blood.

The crunch of boots on gravel rang out. Someone was coming.

With a muffled cry, I reached down and grasped the sword. It slid from Rolund’s gut so easily, I flailed backward.

And landed hard on my ass in Laurent’s bedchamber. Laurent and Varick stood over me, both half-naked and looking scared out of their minds.

Varick knelt and seized my shoulders. “Where were you?”

“She’s bleeding,” Laurent barked.

The three of us looked at the sword I still clutched in my hand.

“It’s Rolund’s blood,” I rasped. “I killed him.”

* * *