



Brutal Fae King (Dark Faevea King #1)

Author: *Alexa Griffin*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The savage Fae King imprisons me and forces me into marriage.

I'm a human, living as an outcast and doing the hard, menial work.

When the dark Fae King captures me during one of his raids, I become his slave.

And when he gets obsessed with me, he forces me into a mate bond.

He's a sadistic monster, more beast than man.

According to an ancient prophecy, a lost queen will take his throne from him.

That's why he kidnaps me and locks me into his dark dungeons.

That's why he wants to torture me until I break.

Enslaved and locked into his castle, something dark and evil is brewing.

He's obsessed with my innocence and my latent magic.

He's possessive of my body, of what he thinks belongs to him.

I try to protect myself, but he breaks me open and makes me his.

Can I escape the mate bond the Fae King forced on me?

The Dark Faevea King rules with an iron fist. He's cruel, he's ruthless, and he's savage. And when he finds his mate, he will keep her, no matter the cost.

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

My fingers burn in the cold as I pull the rope, drawing water from the well. My fingers are pink, slick with the wetness of the rope. This is my least favorite chore; Thawallow's constantly freezing temperatures make it a miserable task.

I pull the rope one more time, carefully maneuvering the bucket through the ice that has formed over the top of the water on the well. Once I have the bucket, I very carefully lower it down, but I still can't avoid the ice-cold water slopping over the sides and making my fingers feel worse. My arms are almost immediately aching from carrying it, but I just grit my teeth and keep going.

The well isn't that far out from the village—just a short, serpentine path that can only be about fifty feet at most—but carrying a bucket, it feels like it will never end.

Eventually, I arrive at the wall that surrounds Thawallow. It's built of the tallest, thickest logs, sharpened at the tips. It looks like it was built to keep gigantic monsters out, but in reality, they're only there to hold the net that's there to try and stop the chunks of ice that routinely fall from the ice wall nearby.

The monsters have no trouble getting inside.

As I walk through the gateway of the wooden wall to Thawallow, movement catches my eye. I look over, and I see Ahfaldor painting a big red X on the front door of his house in the low lighting of the lamp he's carrying.

Oh, no... his family has the Weeping Fever, too?

My stomach sinks. It feels like it's spreading faster this year than it has in any

previous ones... There might be no one left by the time the next harvest comes... It's never not flu season in Thawallow—the constant cold eking out from the ice wall, combined with being so far toward the edges of the kingdom of Faevea that humans never see the sun anymore, means that recovering from sickness is... difficult. But the greater races than humans have taken the more pleasant lands.

Ahfaldor turns around and spots me. For a moment, he just stares. I look back at him.

Then his face crumples into a sneer, glaring at me. He starts muttering under his breath, walking back into the plague house.

I sigh, realign the bucket in my grip, and keep moving.

Out of all the houses in our village, I'd say nearly half of them now have X's on their front doors by now. The villagers wander around, going about their regular business, but there is an air of sluggish melancholy amongst them. Unless they spot me—then they glare at me with crinkled noses, narrowed eyes, and sometimes bared teeth. Most of them don't dare to speak, but Hegtiro, outside her home and washing her family's clothing in freezing water, never has anything better to do than berate me, so I'm mentally prepared when she screams at me:

“Do you see what you have brought upon us?! You should have kept your filthy magic to yourself, you whore of demons!”

Other people refuse to say anything, but they glare at me in the same way; they don't need to say anything to show solidarity for Hegtiro.

I suppose she's right about one thing—I should have kept my magic to myself. I only used my powers once, many years ago, but it was enough to turn me into a social pariah. It didn't even help; my powers don't help very much in a small village—all they can do is destroy. I've never tried to use them since, but that doesn't matter to

the folks of Thawallow.

I just keep my head down. Just get the water home. I say to myself.

The village has a population of a hundred and thirty at most—it doesn't take me long to get to my house at the very end of the village. It feels oddly separated from the other houses, and even though I know it wasn't built like that, it feels like even my house reflects the social pariah status.

The problem is... I'm not the only one who lives here.

I get to my front door, marked with a red X, and I press my shoulder against it to push it open. There's a flood of warm, stale air smelling of woodsmoke. I welcome the warmth like a loving embrace.

But as I enter my house, I deep, retching cough rattles out.

"Maribelle?" I call lightly.

I enter my house. The entire wooden house is drenched in smoke from the dying fire. The cauldron on it seems to be smothering it, and on the other side of the room is the large bed where Maribelle lies. There are so many fur rugs and other coverings on the bed that it looks triple the size, but I can still hear her shivering.

"Maribelle?" I ask again.

"We-welcome back, Ebelor!" she stutters.

"I have the water!" I say. "I'll heat it up on the fire for you. The stew should be warmed by now as well. Would you like some?"

Maribelle starts coughing again. It's a very wet cough laden with phlegm.

"I'll fill you a bowl," I state.

I carry the water over to the fire and put it down. After putting a few logs on the fire and restoring it to a crackling flame, I check the cauldron. The stew bubbles lightly, so I ladle a bowlful and carry it over to Maribelle.

My heart sinks into the soles of my shoes; she looks worse than ever. Her skin is flushed and pink, and a steady stream of liquid comes from her nose, ears, and eyes, dribbling out constantly. She's curled up in bed miserably, wiping her constantly flowing face, extra foam flecking from her lips as she coughs. It's the final stage of the Weeping Fever.

I sit down on the stool by her bed.

"Come, Maribelle," I say. "Have some stew. You need to recover your strength."

She just stares into nothing, eyes constantly flowing with water.

"What's the point?" she asks. "I'm going to die soon."

My stomach clenches.

"Don't talk like that!" I insist. "You'll recover! People have recovered from the Weeping Fever before!"

"Not Mom and Dad," Maribelle answers grimly.

A little nausea moves through me, and I swallow hard.

“No...” I murmur. “Not Mom and Dad. But you’re younger than they were. You can get better if you regain your strength.”

She still lays, staring at nothing miserably.

“Please, Mari,” I beg. “Eat something! For me...”

My sister sighs lightly and then laboriously struggles to sit up. I give her the bowl of stew, and she very slowly starts to eat it.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

As she eats, I return to the cauldron and take it off the fire. I fill a new cauldron with the water and hang it over the fire.

“Once that’s warm,” I call to Maribelle, “you can have a bath. It’ll do you good.”

She just grunts a little, eating her stew. My stomach turns, and I just turn, tending the fire.

“Can you light some lamps?” Maribelle croaks suddenly. “It’s very dark in here.”

“Certainly.”

As I do that, she adds:

“They say the light is fading from around the ice wall,” Maribelle murmurs worriedly. “Have you heard?”

“Yes, I have,” I answer. “I don’t know... we have never seen the sun here. How do we know the light is fading when it’s always dark?”

“I don’t know,” Maribelle says. “But I’m worried. I swear I can see it some days.”

“Things will be fine,” I state firmly. “It’s all going to be fine.”

I’m in the middle of lighting more candles when a noise starts sliding into the door for us. Crashing. Clashing of metal. Voices. Screaming.

“What is that?!” Maribelle croaks.

“I... don’t know,” I answer

“That is not a raid, is it?!” Maribelle says, then breaks out into a coughing fit.

“No,” I protest. “It can’t be! There hasn’t been a raid since we were children!”

We both wait. There’s more commotion outside. More screaming. Banging.

“It has to be!” Maribelle gasps. “It’s a raid!”

My skin prickles in terror—my body’s paralyzed. I’d only ever heard tales of the raids. My mother used to tell me about how the fae used to come for the women of the village and take them away, never to be seen again. I just assumed that she was telling us tall tales to scare us away from being inside the forest when it grew dark.

But... it’s real...

“Ebelor!” Maribelle wheezes. “What do we do?!”

I turn to her and open my mouth-

A smash causes me to whip around, and I see them.

They all tower over me, every one of them. They wear black, spiked armor, including obscuring helmets, their eyes hidden. They barely fit through our front door, the spikes on their shoulders spread so wide. As three of them barge into our house, their iridescent insect wings spread wide. Each one of the wings is as big as my leg is.

I back away. My heart feels like it's throbbing—it's beating so hard.

The dark fae leading the crowd looks over their shoulder:

“Captain! There are two more in here!”

The dark fae start striding in—there are five of them now, walking right on in.

My chest is tight. I can barely breathe, but I suck in a breath and squeak:

“G-get out of our house!”

They all turn their gazes on me. There's a rumbling of dark laughter among the group. A voice echoes in from the outside.

“Take them both!”

As the terror cascades through me, it's followed up by a bolt of rage. The soldiers start walking toward Maribelle. She screams—to the best of her ability—but it comes out as a weak croak.

Another bolt of rage crashes through me: No! NO, YOU DO NOT TOUCH MY SISTER!

The rage keeps coursing through me like a waterfall, smashing, crashing, swirling, and frothing. It all seems to boil in my torso, filling my stomach and swelling in my

chest until I have so much hot rage in me that I can't contain it anymore.

I thrust my palm out toward them.

“NO!” I scream

With a mighty BANG, a bolt of lightning strikes across the room. It hits one dark fae and sends them tumbling across the room. They all gasp and start backing off.

My head's whirling already; my powers already take so much out of me. But I keep firing lightning into the room. The dark fae back away, and I run forward to Maribelle's bedside. I lean on the side of the bed, heaving in breath.

“Ebelor!” my sister begs.

“It'll be okay, Mari,” I pant. “It'll be okay...”

My head is reeling. My vision grows dimmer and dimmer. My chest is spasming—I just can't catch my breath.

“Captain! This human! She-she has magic!” one of the knights calls out toward the door.

“What?”

Another dark fae comes in through our doorway. Bigger than the last few, spikier. It's a hulking mass of a being.

“Very well,” they growl. “Leave this house. I shall handle this one.”

“What about the other one?” one of the dark fae asks.

“She’s on her deathbed from Weeping Fever; it’s useless to take her,” the Captain answers.

The other fae turn and leave our house—the large one starts stalking toward me.

“Get away from us!” I shout.

I thrust my palm forward again. Another bolt of lightning crashes out, and the dark fae holds up their own hand, and I see the air ripple in front of them. My magic bounces off the outstretched palm, crashing into the wall.

But that last one took everything out of me; my vision suddenly blacks out for a moment, and I fall. My knees crash against the floor.

“Ebelor!” Maribelle wheezes.

My vision comes back a touch, wavering like I’m seeing the world through rippling water. The dark fae gives out a loud, dark chuckle.

“You cannot control your power?” they chortle. “Well, that makes things easier.”

They keep striding toward me, but my vision is blacking out.

“Ebelor!” Maribelle says again.

“It’s... fine...” I murmur. “Things will... be fine... Mari...”

Then my vision blacks out, and I fall forward. I’m gone before I hit the ground.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

“Sire,” one war counselor says to me. “The defenses at Murbyn Bridge are beginning to fail.”

A simple sentence with a lot of connotations.

I take a moment to absorb it, scanning my eyes over a map of the Faevea Dynasty, dotted with little wooden figures representing our forces. Many of our forces still continue to stay in Eyston, surrounding my castle, but just outside of the castle town is Murbyn Bridge. All roads and paths toward the royal city go through Murbyn Bridge—if it falls to our enemies, the consequences are clear.

I scan my eyes around the war room as I think. Its dull red and gold color scheme shines low in the candles flickering in the chandelier. The fire roars, sending out its fierce orange glow into the room. The table upon which the map and other paraphernalia lie is golden oak, polished to a mirror shine. None of my officials lay any hands on it, perched on the edge of their matching seats like pussycats. In fact, they act like kittens as well—skittish, eyes darting around. If my gaze lays upon them, they squirm in discomfort.

These? These are supposed to be my military leads?

Pathetic.

I shuffle forward and look over the map again.

“The Naga have claimed some Northern areas in Murbyn Bridge. Our forces have successfully halted their invasion around the canal; however, we suspect our defenses

will fail if they continue their attack at the same rate,” the war chief continues. “The dwarves seem to have pulled back, but it may be a feint. The sirens have joined as well, but they only seem to act opportunistically, claiming no man’s land as their own territory. They haven’t been a problem as yet, but we are keeping them under observation. What shall we do, Sire? Do we send some of our forces in Eyston to support our soldiers in Murbyn Bridge?”

I look down at the map. Of course they would suggest that.

I am so very disappointed in my war council. Somehow, they have become cowards in my presence.

I jab a finger onto the map, onto Cesscaim Island.

“I do not want one single soldier taken from Eyston Keep,” I growl. “Not one. We send all remaining forces to Cesscaim Island.”

There’s a murmuring of confusion among the idiots I unfortunately call my council.

“Why, Sire?” one asks.

“Because the sirens are an enemy unlike any other,” I explain. “With their aerial abilities, they can avoid many of our more powerful magical attacks, and they will likely take the opportunity to attack us whilst we tackle our other enemies. We attack Cesscaim Island—they will return to protect their home.”

Again, there is more worried murmuring by the council.

“An... unprompted attack on Cesscaim Island?” one says loudly—unlikely to me.

“It is not unprompted,” I answer. “They have joined the fray by claiming territory in

Murbyn Bridge.”

I look up at them, challenging them with my gaze. They squirm, and one by one, each one of them hangs their head.

“Send all remaining forces to Cesscaim Island,” I answer. “In the meantime, let us charge a magical assault on the Northern Naga-occupied territories to the North of Murbyn Bridge from here.”

“What about our force at the border, Sire?” an advisor asks.

“Send a messenger to tell them to leave—but the message can only arrive a few hours before our magical attack,” I answer. “We cannot tip off our enemy that we are planning something.”

“A few hours, Sire?” another person asks. “Is that enough time for all our soldiers to retreat to a safe distance from an aerial magical assault?”

It is a pointed question—that is to say, they know it isn’t enough time for all our soldiers to retreat to a safe distance.

“I don’t appreciate your tone,” I growl warningly. “They are soldiers. They are prepared to die.”

Again, cowardly, bird-like gazes passed between each other.

“Is that understood?” I snarl.

They all stand to attention.

“Yes, Sire.”

“Good. Make it happen. You’re all dismissed,” I grunt. “I have more important matters to attend to.”

They all bow their heads and begin the slow process of adjourning the meeting, gathering up the paraphernalia. I’m looking for Gargamint among the faces—I need to talk to him about the prophecy desperately.

Some whispering catches my attention:

“A magical attack on the Northern areas with only a few hours’ notice to our soldiers?” one war counselor hisses to another. “It’s insane! The entire squadron posted there will be killed instantly!”

“Do not let King Vicmar hear you say his plan is insane,” the one he was talking to answers back. “He’ll have you executed.”

I would. He’s fortunate I have far more important matters to attend to. If I hadn’t just spotted Gargamint, then I would have ordered a whipping for the wretch.

I approach my war chieftain as he moves with purpose toward me.

“Gargamint,” I ask him in a low tone. “Any news on the latest raid?”

“Yes,” he answers in an equally quiet voice. “In fact, you may want to accompany me, Sire, when you have the time.”

“I have the time now,” I say. “Take me there.”

He bows his head and leads me out of the war room.

As we travel down the grand hallway, he briefs me quietly: “There is one woman we

have picked up you may be particularly interested in, Sire. A human woman with magical powers.”

A chill runs through my blood for a moment before it heats into a torrid rage.

“Are you sure she’s human?” I snarl softly. “You have ensured she’s not a witch or hiding her race?”

“We have checked and checked again,” Gargamint replies. “She is definitely human.”

That definitely fits with the prophecy...

“Moreover,” my war chieftain adds, “her power was lightning.”

My feet stop moving. I glare at Gargamint as he walks a few steps before he stops and looks around.

“Lightning?!” I spit. “Are you quite sure?!”

“I was there myself,” he replies. “There was no mistaking it. We are lucky she is unpracticed, or I wouldn’t have been able to deflect it. She could have taken out our entire team had she even had a small amount of experience. Fortunately, she is so inexperienced that after using her powers, she fell unconscious, so we didn’t need to fight too hard to capture her.”

My fists clench. My mind is buzzing in a numbing fury—I’m so enraged that I can’t even think for a few moments. I cannot believe it.

Prophecies, the damn things, have a tendency to be laden with metaphors and innuendos. Flowery language and riddling talk. But a human... wielding lightning...

It is as clear as prophecies come. This is the human woman who will steal the throne from me...

“Sire,” Gargamint says. “Is she the one? ”

“I believe so,” I growl.

“Shall we kill her?” he asks.

Every fiber of my being wants to say yes, but I pause long enough to consider it.

“Not yet,” I reply. “I must read through the prophecy again to ensure nothing will befall the kingdom if we kill her. Her being alive could be the key.”

“Understood,” My war chieftain grunts.

“But,” I continue, “we must send someone to consult the witch. We need her to perform some rituals on this woman and ensure she is who we think she is. Perhaps the witch can offer us some clarity on the prophecy or read us a new one.”

“Yes, Sire,” Gargamint says. “I’ll send someone to fetch the witch at once.”

I nod.

“But I do want to meet her myself,” I growl, my tone darkening as I speak. “I want to see the wretch who’s supposedly fated to steal my kingdom from me with my own eyes.”

Seldom do I ever grace the dungeons with my presence. There are hardly any

prisoners here most days—after all, if there are a lot of executions, there is usually a lot of space in the dungeons. Most of it remains the same. The stones are still dull grey, so dark that they appear to draw light in rather than give it out, and the echoing ring of dripping coming from somewhere indiscernible.

What is new is the screaming. There is a lot more present here than typical—a raid always leaves the dungeons laden with women. As I walk in, I scan my eyes through the barred cells, looking at the prisoners. They are as frightened animals, curled up, eyes wide, whimpering like dogs. Some hide their faces. Others sit or kneel, frozen like rabbits in the face of the dog. Many are weeping, and others are muttering.

They are right to be frightened. Most of them will not survive the ritual. All but the one who fulfills the prophecy won't.

But it's what's needed. There's nothing else for it.

That's when a scream attracts my attention. It's a screech, not of terror, but of rage:

“Unhand me! I have done nothing wrong—you cannot keep me here!”

A strange shiver runs through me at the sound of her voice.

Hm. Impressive. Not many are willing to raise their voice in such a way when they have been captured and taken to Eyston Keep. Most of these women are too scared to even utter a single word, and this woman is screaming profanities.

I hear the prison warden clap back: “Stop fighting, you ill-mannered girl!”

I approach the scene at hand, and I see her—long, flowing brown hair, thrown over her shoulders as she wrenches back and forth against the guard; gleaming green eyes, shining with rage as she fights against her bonds. A simple peasant's dress, puffed

and thick with endless wool, as is typical of humans living near the ice wall. When her leg reaches up, I see typical woolly boots before she plummets a kick into the leg of the warden.

She is fighting tooth and nail, yet no lightning is being thrown. I suppose she is supposed to be unpracticed with her powers, but still... Is this truly the woman set to steal my kingdom from under me?

I walk closer, and the prison warden flinches when I walk in.

“I-I— Sire!” h e yelps.

I ignore the warden and approach the woman in his hands. She’s got her arms bent backward by the warden, bent down at the waist as he tries to heave her into a nearby open cell. I have to lean down to meet her eyes. Her eyes are fierce. Like emeralds whittled to a knife-sharp edge.

So... you’re the woman set to steal my kingdom from me, are you?

She’s more... slight than I would have imagined from the tales.

I reach forward and grab her by the jaw, forcing her head back and forth, surveying her face. Yes... very slight. Almost waif-like.

The woman snarls like a beast in my hand, and as I twist her face again, she spits at me. I feel the thick glob hit my face, warm and thick.

“Sire!”

The warden swings at the back of her head. She snarls in pain as he does. For a moment, I’m frozen in the sheer audacity of her. Then, I start laughing and look up at

the door.

“Lock this one up more securely than the others,” I order. “The witch will be here to see her first.”

“Yes, Sire,” he says.

I begin walking away. As I do, I snarl to myself: Fine. Enjoy your little rebellion, as small as it is. We shall see who wins in the end.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I yank at my wrist, but the iron shackle is locked tight around it. I brace my foot against the wall and pull as hard as I can. A dull throbbing pain starts spreading up my arm from my hand. But I need to get out of here now! Maribelle needs me! She has to rest if she's going to recover from the Weeping Fever, and if I'm not there to do things for her, she'll have to go out into the cold!

Because she is going to recover—she has to!

She can't... sh-she can't... Not whilst I'm gone... Please!

Angry tears start rolling down my face as I yank hard on my metal binds.

“Oh, stop, please!” A begging voice startles me. “You’ll break your hand!”

“I don’t care!” I snarl, tears still falling down my face. “I need to get back to my sister! She’s very sick!”

Another voice calls, much more bitter this time:

“That doesn’t matter now. You’re not getting out. None of us are.”

I stop tugging at it and look around. There are many other women in these cells, a few of them cowering, but the two who spoke to me are standing by the edge of their own cell. One of them looks worried, and the other is sneering—it’s easy to tell who is who.

“Who are you people?” I ask. “What is this place?”

They exchange a look.

“You mean you don’t know?” the worried one asks.

“How can you not know?” the sneering one adds.

I just stare at them both.

“You’re in Eyston Keep, dear,” the concerned one says.

“Eyston?” I ask. “Why did the raid take us to the royal city?”

“They always do,” the bitter one snarls. “They always take the kidnapped women here. How did you not know this?!”

I shrug moodily. My parents died before I was old enough to tell me about these kinds of horrors, and thanks to my outcast status in Thawallow, no one else would take the time to tell me. But I don’t want to tell them that.

“What are they going to do to us?” I ask. “I heard them say something about a witch?”

The women look between each other again. The sour-faced one gives a dry laugh. The nicer one just winces at me.

“I’m so sorry,” she says.

“Wait. What does the witch mean?” I ask.

“No one knows,” the bitter one grunts. “But after they leave to go to the witch, they don’t come back.”

A harsh BANG makes me jump out of my skin.

“Quiet down in there!” a guard snarls.

I freeze, tingling from head to toe. There’s a small cluster of guards behind the one who spoke, and as the guard walks forward and unlocks the door to my cell, all of them walk in. They all gather around me and one of them grabs a wrist before the lead guard starts unlocking my shackles. As soon as I’m released, the ones holding my wrists drag me forward, and the others go behind me.

“What are you doing?!” I demand.

They start dragging me forward.

“You’re going to see the witch,” the lead guard grunts. “Now stand up and walk straight!”

I scream and shout, trying to stop them, but they drag me anyway.

The guards drag me to a corridor in the middle of the castle, and one of them darts forward to open a door. The door seems to open into swirling darkness, like it opens into the depths of space, and I scrape my heels against the floor to try and resist them.

“What is that?” I shout. “What is that?!”

They don’t answer me. They just keep shoving me, pushing me into the room. The darkness envelopes me. I hear a door echo as it slams behind me.

My ears start washing. My eyes burn. The darkness is warm and smells like burning flowers. The air is warm, but it feels cold as it flows in and out of my mouth.

“Open your eyes.”

The voice is soft and feminine. I have to fight myself to open my eyes. In front of me is a ghostly figure, an extremely tall, thin woman. I feel like I can almost see through her, but the room I’m in is so dark I can barely tell. Her face is snow white, her black hair and black dress melding together at her shoulders. Her piercing ice blue stabs into my own eyes, but I keep her gaze. Then, the woman smiles slowly.

“Impressive,” she purrs.

“Impressive, how?” I ask.

“The king has his guards take many a human in to see me. Regardless, it has been a long time since a human has looked me in the eye,” she murmurs

She glides toward me—it’s like her legs move, but not enough to actually walk, yet she flows through the air toward me anyway. Once she gets close, she produces a small vial of something. It looks like liquid silver.

“Drink this,” the phantom woman says.

“Why should I?” I demand.

“The guards still wait outside,” she purrs. “They will kill you if you don’t.”

“And what will the liquid in the vial do?”

“Hopefully, nothing,” the woman replies.

She presses it into my hands, and I consider my options. Not only could those guards kill me, but I don’t doubt this woman could as well; she’s clearly... something else.

I put the vial to my lips and take a sip from it. I was expecting a metallic taste, but surprisingly, I just taste water.

“How was that?” she asks.

“I don’t taste anything,” I answer.

The woman then smiles wider.

“Then congratulations, My Queen,” she says.

“What?”

But she doesn’t answer me—instead, she waves a hand forward, and a thin beam of light forms a doorway in front of us both. With one flash, the doorway opens, and I see the corridor in the castle again. This time, the king stands there, staring in at us. His eyes are as dark as the black, thorny crown that sits on his head, his cloak blood red.

“She’s still alive?” he asks grimly.

“Yes,” the witch purrs behind me. “Not only is she alive... she is her. ”

I look between the witch and the king. The king lowers his chin, glaring at me.

“I see...” He answers.

There is a woosh behind me, and suddenly, a flurry of warm wind eases me out of the door, and the door slams behind me. I look around, and the door is gone. Then, I turn back, and the king is in front of me—just inches from my face. Those dark eyes seem endless, like a pair of black holes burning into me.

For a moment, he just stares at me—really into me—as if he can see right into my soul. It’s like I can feel this destructive energy rolling off him in waves, like he’d burn me if I touched him.

Every inch of him is sharp. Even his facial features have an edge to them—his harsh eyes, his strong jaw, his pointed nose, and pointed fae ears...

“Come,” he says suddenly. “We need to talk.”

His hand grabs me by my upper arm. He’s so strong. The king begins striding, pulling me behind him. He keeps dragging me behind him until we end up in a large room. My impression of the room is that it’s very red. Red carpets, red curtains, and red accents on most of the tapestries. There are golden elements in the room as well, but I mostly see a golden wood chair that the king drags me toward, thrusting me toward the chair.

“Sit down,” he orders.

I fall into the chair. The king leans down over me, right in my face. Again, I’m staring directly into his dark eyes again. He stares me down for a long moment. I’m not talking first—I just stare back.

“What are your plans with Faevea?” he demands after a second.

“W-what?” I reply.

He slams his hands down on the armrests of the chair. I yelp a little in shock. When he speaks again, he’s so close to my face that I can feel his warm breath fan across my mouth. I hang my head and stare at my lap.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” he whispers in a husky tone. “What are you doing

here?”

“What do you mean?!” I squeak back defiantly. “Your insane guards kidnapped me!”

His thumb and forefinger grip my chin as he forces me to look at him.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” he says. “If you do not want to tell me willingly, you are going to force me to use... other means to make you talk. You have one more chance to speak now—in a civilized manner.”

I sneer at him. He smirks.

“Spit at me all you want,” he says. “It won’t change anything.”

“I won’t spit at you again,” I growl. “You look like that’s what you want.”

The king breaks out into low chuckles.

“You’re entertaining,” he purrs, then leans close to my ear. “I’m going to miss that defiance when I break you. ”

A chill moves down my spine. He whips away from me, releasing my chin and stepping back. The king knocks on the door twice, and a cluster of guards walks in.

“That was your chance to speak civilly with me,” the king announces. “Remember that.”

He nods, and the guards move over to me.

This time, when I’m dragged to the dungeons, I walk with my head high, shooting a glare at the smirking king as I go.

When I'm thrown into the dungeons the second time, I'm taken to an area that has no one else in it. No other prisoners around.

Perhaps this is his first attempt to "break me"—separate me from everyone else we could talk to...

I'll admit it's tough to be entirely alone down here. I'm left alone with my thoughts, or rather, my worries about Maribelle. Time begins to blend into nothingness as I pace back and forth, only the ache in my feet telling me I've been doing it for a few hours.

Before long, I start murmuring to myself—just to break the silence:

"Mari... I'm coming back. I don't know how, but I am coming back for you. I promise."

"How are you planning on doing that?" a teasing voice asks.

I shriek and spin on my heel. There's a man in my cell. He doesn't look like a guard—he's not wearing any dark, thorny armor like the rest of them; he's showing a little more skin in casual wear. He smiles at me, a crooked, sexy grin paired with his very dark eyes. His long, silver blonde hair is pulled back tight to his head, and his large insect wings rest wide. His arms are folded. He is so muscular...

"Who are you?!" I gasp.

He stands from where he's leaning and starts striding toward me, that same attractive smile on his face.

“Irikon. You’re pretty,” he purrs once he’s close to me. “Who would have thought you’d be so beautiful?”

For a moment, I don’t know what to say. The man walks closer—close enough for me to feel the soft heat of his body on mine.

“I haven’t got a lot of time,” he purrs. “But you want to earn your freedom? You want to get home to your sister?”

He leans closer to me, and I feel his whispering breath against my ear.

“If you work with me, then you can earn your freedom,” he murmurs.

“W-what do you want me to do?”

He gives a low chuckle. He steps just a little closer, and I can just about feel his warm body touch mine.

“What I need you to do, I’ll let you know when the time comes,” he purrs. “What I want from you, though...”

His deep, throaty tones whisper into my ear. I shiver.

Then, there’s a crash nearby, and my head whips around. It’s the prison warden, carrying a bowl of something like gruel in his hand.

“Dinner!” the guard barks.

I look around. The man I was with has disappeared. There’s no change in my cell at all, like he was never here.

Well... except perhaps a small crater in the ground. But that could have always been there, right?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

She clearly knows more than she is willing to say.

Of course. The fated usurper would be crafty. She would know to keep her cards close to her chest. It will take a lot more than I am used to in order to get that information from her, I'm sure. Torture is often not very effective in getting information out of people, I find; they will say almost anything to stop the pain before long, so I need to do something else.

Something more psychological would do better.

I pace back and forth in my war room as I think.

Well, I at least have her in my grasp. That's better than her being loose in Faevea...

There is much I could do. She is a pitiful peasant woman after all—surely it won't take much to break her now she's mine.

There is a gentle knock on my door.

“Enter!” I bark.

One of my war counselors walks in and bows his head lightly.

“Sire,” he says. “The magical assault on the Northern arena is being built by the court mages. They should have formed a spell large enough to destroy the Naga army by sundown.”

“Good,” I grunt.

“They... um... they would like to clarify that you don’t want to send the message to our soldiers in the Northern Murbyn Bridge territories until a few hours before.”

Anger courses through me—I twitch and glare at the war counselor. He recoils, staring at the floor like a kicked dog. His wings give a shiver of fear.

“You would question me?” I snarl quietly.

“N-no, Sire!” he adds. “I-I am just the messenger!”

I grunt.

“Yes,” I tell them. “I want them to send a message to our soldiers a few hours before. If the mages are ready with their spell by sundown, then send the message now.”

“Very well,” the war counselor murmurs. “We shall ready the steeds to send the message now, Sire.”

He bows and starts to leave. An idea hits me:

“Hold!”

He flinches and turns slowly.

“S-Sire?” he asks.

“What needs doing to get the horses ready to ride?” I ask.

“Um... much,” he replies nervously. “We had not expected to ride so early, Sire—we

shall prepare our fastest horse.”

I think for a second.

“So there are no horses prepared?” I ask

“No, Sire. B-but we shall set many men on the task! It shall be done momentarily!”

“No,” I answer. “There is a woman in solitary confinement in the dungeons. Have her clean the stables and prepare our horses—starting with our fastest for the messenger, and then continue until every stable is spotless and every horse is groomed and shod.”

“Every horse?” he asks. “One woman?”

I can hear the bemusement badly hidden in his voice. I crack a smile.

“Yes., one woman.”

After several hours, I visit the stables. There she is, the usurper, on her knees, scrubbing the floor of the stables with a thick, bristled brush and a bucket of dirty water.

I can begrudgingly admit that a decent job has been done. In the morning, these stables were covered in hay, combined with some horse defecation, and now it has been restored to what it looked like when it was first built.

I wave my guards away and walk toward her.

“Impressive job,” I say to her. “Have you cleaned horse shit before?”

The usurper doesn't answer. Instead, she just turns and looks at me. Her face is smeared in streaks of dirt, yet somehow, it does nothing to dull her beauty.

She is enchanting. I'll give her that. That's what makes her so dangerous.

Her green eyes are just as flinty as they were before. She says nothing, but her defiant gaze speaks for her.

"If you are finished, then there are some more tasks for you," I say. "Unless you'd rather share a meal and conversation with me ? "

The woman's nose pinches up. She stands and sweeps her hands over her dress to clean them off. Then she walks up, almost chest to chest with me.

"What's your next task for me?" she spits at me.

Feisty woman... I chuckle lightly. Then I reach my toe out and tip over the bucket with my foot.

"You don't seem to have finished yet," I tell her. "Come find the guards when you are."

She growls a little under her breath, then sinks back down to her knees.

A few days later, the damn woman still hasn't broken. It doesn't seem like there's any task she can be given that will be too much for her. She takes even the nastiest tasks in stride and refuses any semblance of conversation. She receives low-quality gruel—and not that much of it—for every meal and is never tempted by rare meats and wine. She is kept isolated for hours at a time, with every person forbidden to

Speak to her, and yet she still does not want to speak to me.

Her resilience is another thing to be begrudgingly admired, but I am beginning to wonder what can be done to make her talk. Torture is not effective, and the witch has indeed clarified that she must not be killed. Perhaps a few guards should be sent back to her village—something there could help... persuade her. I remember they said something about a sister, but they did not take her because she was on her deathbed... If the sister is alive still...

A knock lands on my door.

“Sire?” It’s my lord-in-waiting.

“Come in, Bruamin,” I answer.

Bruamin walks into my quarters. It feels like every time I lay eyes on him, I remember the young man from my childhood, not the elderly man he is now. He bows lightly, and now I see the strain on his back.

“It is getting late, Sire,” he says.

“It is...” I murmur.

And then it hits me; I have given this woman every humiliating task to think of to make her finally tell me her secrets. Except for that...

“Sire?” my lord-in-waiting asks.

“Bruamin, you may go fetch the usurper and then retire for the evening,” I tell him.

“The usurper?” he asks. “Are you sure, Sire?”

“I am,” I reply.

“Are you going to be safe, having that dangerous woman up here?” Bruamin asks.

I look over to him. Then I smile.

“I’ll be fine. She’s not practiced enough with her powers yet,” I assure him.

My lord-in-waiting gives me a worried look. He bows his head to me and then turns and leaves the room.

It takes a long time, but eventually, a demure little knock hits my door.

“Enter,” I order.

The usurper walks in. with her gaze down but her chin proudly up. Her dress is the same one she was wearing when doing all the chores, so it still carries its stains. Again, it does nothing to hide her beauty at all.

When she walks into my room, she breaks into a sneer.

“What?” she growls.

Her audacity is stunning, but again, I can’t help but laugh; it’s been years since anyone has dared to speak to me in such a way.

“I need you to undress me,” I tell her.

For once, her stoic expression changes. Her eyes widen a little bit. Her soft, rose lips part just a little. I smirk.

“Or you can tell me what you know,” I say. “Your choice.”

She just stares at me for a moment.

Yes. She'll talk now.

Then, she closes her eyes and sucks in a deep breath. Her face returns to her usual position, mostly neutral but with just the smallest touch of disgust.

“Fine,” she says.

That gives me pause.

I... didn't expect her to agree. But I can't back out now; it'll make me look weak.

She approaches me. She sucks in a deep breath, and she reaches toward me. She keeps her gaze low as her hands move under the hem of my shirt. Her fingers graze my skin, and a tremor crackles through me like electricity.

Is she using her lightning powers on me?!

The backs of her fingers touch my stomach. There's a hot streak across my skin as she lifts my shirt up. I stare at her face as she does. She's averting her gaze, a deep red inching across her cheeks. After a second, the shirt won't go any further. We pause, and she looks up at me. Her eyes are so very green, and her brown hair is so very glossy... It looks soft. Looking up at me like that... she looks... sweet.

“I-I need you to lift your arms.” She tries to sound strong, but there's a wobble in her voice.

I give a little grunt and lift my arms up. Her hands continue crawling up my body,

pulling the shirt up and over my head. I'm getting hotter and hotter as her hands move over me.

Is she... casting her spell?

When the shirt comes up over my head and I can see again, she's so close to me... I can feel her chest almost resting on mine, she's standing so close. Her nose almost brushes mine as she turns her head to look at me. Her eyes are so deep. She looks at me for a long moment. Then she backs away a little and walks around to where the shirt has gotten caught on my wings.

Once she's behind me, she slowly starts to peel the shirt off my back.

"Your wings..." She murmurs.

A prickle runs over my skin. My wings start to fold down, but I fight it so she can take the shirt off.

"I know. It was a long time ago," I answer before I can stop myself.

I feel her continue to take the shirt off. Most people don't notice the scars my step-brother left there until they're up close.

She brushes the shirt off my wings, and a deep shiver runs through me.

What is this woman doing to me?

She walks around to my front again, my shirt in her hand. Her eyes are still looking down, but this time, she's not averting her eyes from me. She's looking at me. Directly at me.

I watch her scan her eyes up and down my body, as much as she may try to hide it.

And I like it.

I watch her look over me for a moment—and then her eyes snap up to me again when she realizes I'm watching. A little intimidation passes over her face as she meets my gaze again. She keeps looking at me for a moment and then glances down.

There's only one more thing left. She looks down and then meets my eyes again. Then, the usurper steps forward, reaches her hands out, and takes hold of the top of my waistband.

A jolt runs through me—more powerful than before.

“That's enough!” I snap. “You... you don't have to do anymore. You're dismissed.”

She sighs a little, but her cheeks are still flushed and she hides her face as she hastily exits my room.

Once she's gone, I sigh in relief.

It's been a long time since I got even that close to losing control...

What did she do to me? Is she a witch after all...?

Either way, that was supposed to coax the answers out of her, but it did nothing. Nothing but...

I can never allow anything like that to happen ever again.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

As I mop the floor, my mind keeps whirring. I can't get last night out of my mind. I hate it, but I can't stop thinking about the warm skin under my fingers, the peaks and valleys of his body...

Was that his plan? Seduction? I don't know if that's what he was planning—he was the one to recoil from my touch in the end, when he... when we...

If his plan was seduction, then I can never fall for it... even if he...

I shake my head. Forget it. Forget him. Concentrate.

I dip the mop into the bucket and then wring it out.

I need to be concentrating on how I can get back to Thawallow...

As I finish wringing the mop out, I look up at the guard nearby. He's in full armor, so I can't tell what his expression is, but the helmet is facing my direction. His helmet is always facing my direction—the king doesn't leave me alone for a moment. If it's not him in person, then it's a guard or another member of staff. Just dropping the mop and bolting is not an option.

It seems like he very particularly wants something from me—every time I finish a task, he comes and asks me to tell him what I know. He'll do it again when I finish mopping here. If I knew what he wanted, I could possibly use it as leverage to get home, but I genuinely don't know what he wants from me...

The witch said I was a queen. That's my only clue right now. Me? A queen? It's

ridiculous. I came from the most impoverished, plague-ridden village in the realm—what is queenly about that?

It doesn't make sense.

As I smear the wet ribbons of material over the floor, I wonder about it. Who could I ask about it? Who would know?

I can't think of anyone specifically I could speak to. I think my only option there is to talk to... well, everyone.

I nod determinedly to myself and continue my task.

"The queen?" Valirey asks. "There's never been a queen in Eyston Keep."

She continues cooking for a moment, and I keep dishwashing, but I have to keep asking questions whilst I have the chance; every night, I'm locked up in the dungeon alone, so I have to take the opportunity to ask whilst I have it.

"Are there no tales of a queen? A lost queen, maybe?" I ask.

"I'm not sure why you're asking."

"I know it has something to do with why they keep kidnapping humans from around the ice wall," I answer.

Valirey's wings give a twitch in time with her cocked eyebrow. She can try to hide it, but I know curiosity when I see it. Many of the other members of staff have asked me a question every now and again about the kidnappings and my visit to the witch.

Apparently, it's the first time that anyone has survived the visit to the witch...

"There is an old tale," Valirey answers after a second. "About a lost queen. I don't know much about it, but apparently, this kingdom is supposed to belong to a queen, not a king."

"Really?" I ask. "What does that mean? Does the king have an older sister?"

"That's all I know about it," Valirey answers. "I don't care for politics, so I never paid attention to any of that kind of thing."

"I see."

"The guards will know more about it," she says to me. "They're always so much more involved in politics. I suppose it means more to them who they'll be working for if our king ever gets overthrown."

She turns over whatever she has in the pan. Fish, I think.

"Doesn't matter to the chefs," she grunts. "Cooking is cooking, no matter who it's for."

I look back down to my dish.

"I see..." I murmur. "Well, the guards don't speak to me. I've tried."

"They've likely been ordered not to," Valirey says.

"Is there anyone else who might know more about this lost queen?" I ask. "Anyone interested in politics amongst the staff?"

“Hold on,” she says. “I know that the guards are curious to speak with you—they want to know about the kidnapping and the witch. All we’d need to do is figure out a time and place for you to meet with them.”

“I can think of one place we could meet,” I say, smiling. “There’s a place where no one else goes...”

That evening, my “solitary confinement” cell is filled with guards. But they’re not here to guard me.

“So, you’ve never known why you were kidnapping human women from these villages?” I clarify.

All of the armored guards shake their helmeted heads.

“It didn’t make sense,” one of them grunts. “The humans by the ice wall have never bothered us. They are no threat to the dark fae at all. Yet, we were consistently sent in to take the women from the villages.”

“Who were you looking for?” I ask.

“Any woman of a certain age,” the lead guard says, and the others nod in agreement. “And this age kept changing. When we were first sent away, we were looking for those between the ages of ten and twelve. Then, we were looking for those around eleven and fifteen. Then, the age gap widened, and we were looking for those between ten and fifteen. It just kept growing. At this point, it’s between fifteen and twenty-five.”

I’m twenty-three... Maribelle is about fourteen... would she have been safe if she

hadn't had the Weeping Fever?

"So, it was just an age range?" I ask. "Literally just an age range? No description?"

"None," the guard answers. "We were just told how old the supposed woman was and told to take them away. We don't even know what this woman was supposed to have done. So we just had to kidnap these humans and take them to the cells. We didn't know why."

I hang my head a little.

"And then," another chimes in, "we were to bring them to the swirling door and put them inside."

"What happened then?" I ask. "After you put them inside the door?"

"Nothing," the same guard answers. "They never come back."

They all nod solemnly, a row of helmets bobbing away. After that, we fall into silence.

My next question was going to be how many women had gone into that swirling door and not come out again. But I don't think I want to know. I have this horrible squeezing in the pit of my stomach, and I keep swallowing thickly; it feels like all those women's blood is on my hands. All those women... and he was searching for me...

"So," the guard who has taken the lead says, "why were we taking those women? What did you do?"

I shake my head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I did to be taken,” I answer. “I’ve never been in contact with the dark fae. Not once. I’ve lived my entire life in Thawallow with my parents and sister—my parents died of the Weeping Fever when I was fifteen, and Maribelle was six. I had to take care of her, and we’ve been... I don’t know... Surviving ever since. I never even left my village further than the well in the forest—I’ve never been to anywhere else in Faevea. I have no idea what I could possibly done to warrant being kidnapped.”

There’s a rumbling chorus of confused grunts from the guards. They look at each other and I see their wings shimmering as they think.

“Sorry,” I say lightly. “I know you were hoping for more.”

“Well, what happened when you entered the door?” one of the other ones says.

They all nod and lean forward after the question has been posed.

“It was very dark in there—I couldn’t see anything. It was like I’d stepped into the middle of a storm,” I reply. “At first, that is. Then, this... ghost appeared in front of me. She told me that a lot of women couldn’t even lay eyes on her.”

There’s a rumble of interest. They look between each other and then look back at me.

“I don’t know what that means,” I say before they can ask. “But she was already impressed before I even did anything. Then, she handed me a vial of silver liquid and told me to drink it. I don’t know what that was.”

“Probably an iron solution,” one of the guards murmurs. “To make sure you weren’t a dark fae. You had powers, and that’s not something humans are supposed to have.”

I shrug.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’ve always had them.”

“You shouldn’t,” the guard replies. “It’s just not supposed to happen.”

He's so firm when he answers me that there is no room for argument—facts are facts. At least, as far as he’s concerned.

“What happened next?” another guard asks.

“Oh, yes. She said that I was to drink it, or else the guards outside the room would kill me,” I say. “I figured if it was poisonous, it’d be a quicker death than by the sword, and I didn’t have any hope for escape. So I drank it.”

“Yes? And?”

“It didn’t taste like anything, and it didn’t do anything,” I answer. “Then, she let me leave. The king was waiting outside the door.”

They murmur amongst themselves in amazement.

“That was it...?” I catch one saying. “All this time, and that’s all that went on in there?”

They keep murmuring amongst themselves—in the end, I have to talk over them to make them stop.

“There is also something else!”

They quiet down and look back at me.

“The witch called me queen,” I say. “I don’t know what this means—do any of you

know what that means?”

They pause.

“He doesn’t speak of it,” one of the guards says. “But I once overheard him discussing a prophecy with his lord-in-waiting. It involves the lost queen, but I didn’t hear much more than that. My impression was that he was looking for her.”

“Why?” I ask. “Why did he need to find her so badly?”

The guard shakes his head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

“Oh, okay...” I murmur. “But then, could I talk to his lord-in-waiting about it? Would he talk to me?”

“Bruamin is the most loyal of his servants—he won’t say a word,” one of the guards says. “That’s probably why he tells him.”

“Oh. I see,” I reply.

“But the door can always be summoned again,” a guard suggests suddenly. “If there is a witch in there, then she’s probably the one who gave him the prophecy to begin with. You may be able to talk to her again about this.”

“Wait,” I murmur. “You would do this?”

The guards look between each other. The one who leads speaks up.

“We can’t,” he says. “The king is ruthless—if we help you, then it’ll be our necks.”

I bow my head.

“I wouldn’t have you all risking being killed,” I say. “Thanks for all your help, though.”

“Of course,” the same guard says. “You already know where the door is. We can’t help that. But luckily, you don’t know the spell to summon the door.”

He pulls out a piece of paper and holds it aloft.

“The one written on this piece of paper here. Good thing you don’t know it.”

With that, he simply releases the piece of paper. It flutters to the floor outside of my cell.

“If you knew that,” he continues, “then you’d be able to come and go, seeing the witch whenever you pleased. That would be bad.”

I chuckle.

“Yes, it would be a disaster!” I laugh, reaching out and taking it.

“Well,” the guard continues, “we ought to get back to our duties before the king notices we’re gone.”

They all nod and then turn to walk away.

“Thank you!” I call to their turned backs.

A few of them look around and wave at me, but they walk out quickly. I hide the precious piece of paper in my cleavage, the discomfort drowned out by the spreading

warmth of knowing that I have friends willing to help me for the first time in my life.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

“Sire,” a war counselor says. “The attack has landed against the Naga-occupied territories in Northern Murbyn Bridge.”

“And the result?” I ask

“It worked as expected; the Naga forces have been wiped out. There are, of course, stragglers and survivors, but they have fallen back,” the war chieftain says. “Effectively, there are no longer any Naga in Murbyn Bridge.”

I suck in a deep breath.

Now, the important question.

“And our forces?”

“It... also worked as anticipated, in the sense that it has destroyed many of our forces too,” he says. “The Naga suspected nothing because our soldiers didn’t move, and so they were entirely unsuspecting for our magical assault.”

“Stop obfuscating,” I bark. “How many did we lose?”

“Half the squadron, Sire,” he replies. “About fifteen men.”

I close my eyes as the war council murmurs worriedly. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly.

“A shame,” I note. “But we couldn’t allow the Naga to cultivate their forces there. If

they had taken over a significant number of territories in Murbyn Bridge, they would have been able to cut off all supplies—or worse, used their venom to poison our supplies. They could have massacred the entire population of Eyston, and especially us here in Eyston Keep, without ever having to slither an inch into the walls of our city.”

I stand from the war table and begin pacing back and forth. They murmur again.

“And what of the island?” I ask. “What is our soldier’s progress there?”

“They’re still traveling, Sire,” a different war counselor answers. “They shall be there in approximately two days, should nothing happen to offset our plans.”

“Excellent,” I answer. “How is the remainder of the battlefield? Any change there?”

“No, Sire. The dwarves continue to fall back, and the sirens continue to circle—they don’t seem aware of our forces heading to their island yet,” one counselor says.

“Very well,” I say. “If that is all, then you are all dismissed.”

Many of the war counselors breathe a sigh of relief and stand from their chairs. Amongst the scuffling, Gargamint glares at me across the room. I just know this is bad from the intensity burning in his eyes. As the other war counselors leave, I wait by the door until all of them have filed out. Once the last one has left, I close the door behind them and turn to him.

“What is it?!” I demand.

“There was a development on the battlefield,” he says in a low, burning tone. “My elite team spotted some signs of non-elemental magic.”

Cold drips down my spine like a slow droplet of ice sliding down my skin. For a moment, my clenched teeth won't let words slip through.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"No mistaking it. There were craters all throughout the battlefield," Gargamint says, then lowers his voice even more and asks. "Sire... is it him? "

I turn away from my war chieftain—just needing to break his gaze for a moment.

"It... very well may be," I say quietly. "What was he doing?"

"Not sure," he answers. "He kept himself out of sight; no one else reported any sight of him, but there is no mistaking those craters."

I grunt loudly before turning back to Gargamint: "I refuse to believe for a single, solitary moment that in the same timeframe, we find the woman of prophecy, he comes back—and it's all a massive coincidence!"

My war chieftain bows his head.

"We need to ensure that he doesn't get near her," I snarl. "That has become paramount. Forget the Naga, forget the sirens, forget everything—we must keep him away from her. The moment he claims her, Faevea falls. Every scrap of our resources must be put into keeping her away from him!"

"Understood, Sire," Gargamint replies. "We can take more guards and post them around her. She will be guarded around the clock."

I grunt a little. I pace back and forth again.

“You don’t seem reassured at all, Sire,” Gargamint comments.

“I still worry,” I confess. “It may not be enough to keep him away. There is little that stone walls, iron bars, and armed guards can do against a teleporter...”

“What do we do then, Sire?” he asks.

“I don’t know. That’s the issue. We need to find a way to magically ward the keep,” I say. “But warding against a teleporter is no easy feat... and we have no mages up to the task.”

Gargamint knows better than to interrupt my thoughts. I pace back and forth.

The only person who could possibly try to ward him off would be me... but that is the problem—I’m not able to keep that kind of magic when I’m needed here, in charge of Faevea...

For the sake of Faevea, I need to keep the potential usurper away from him.

She’s mine, a voice in my head suddenly snaps, he doesn’t get to touch my things!

The thought is sharp and passes in a moment. I suddenly know what I am to do.

I turn to Gargamint and bark my order:

“Fetch the guards who can summon the witch! I need to talk to her at once about a certain rite.”

“You have figured out a solution, Sire?” Gargamint asks.

“I believe I have,” I answer. “But double the assigned guards around her and have the

ones who can summon the witch come to me. You're dismissed, Gargamint."

He bows his head again. He spins on his heel and leaves as quickly as possible; he knows my tone, and he knows he needs to leave, now.

As soon as Gargamint closes the door behind him, I heave a huge breath. It feels as though that one breath drains almost every ounce of strength out of me.

It's always one thing after another...

I walk to the window in the war room and look out into the royal city of Eyston. As I look over it, I despair. When my parents ruled on the throne, this city was one of the grandest in the realm. It was once prosperous—but more importantly, it was once a happy place.

A happy place, with a happy king and queen 'pon the throne.

Those days are gone. Faevea is now a miserable, cynical place, and such is a terrible cycle to attempt to break. In fact, I am wondering if it's impossible. Once a war starts, who stops it? If we were to very suddenly stop sending soldiers, we would not be ushering in an era of peace; we'd be leaving ourselves open to attack.

Violence begets violence. It's the way of the world. What is a king to do when we are in the throes of violence? Beget more, I suppose.

As I look over the horrid place that my home has become, I just have to wonder what the kings and queens of the past would think. Would my parents regret having passed the throne over to me? Would they understand the situation, or would they be ashamed of what a bloodthirsty reputation I have built for myself?

A sinking feeling in my stomach says they would consider it spitting on their legacy.

They were proud of their peace, my parents, and they shared their successes and their philosophies with me when I was very young. They would despise me for the utterly heinous acts I've done...

But... there is no peace to be had in the midst of war. I don't have the luxury of peace.

Even if it shreds what's left of my reputation in the eyes of the people...

I sigh, but after that, I sweep my hair out of my face and steel over my expression.

That's enough weakness. I have a witch to speak to.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

It doesn't take long before I am once again hauled out of my cell to perform some tedious task. But it's one of the guards I met with before, and he just looks at me before settling himself in the corner of the room I'm supposed to be cleaning from top to bottom. It's an unused room in the West wing of the castle—I'd be surprised if anyone has been in here for years. I'm just being set to clean this room just for the sake of cleaning it. It feels like that's been the point of most of the tasks I've been given.

But this time, I have a friend in the corner of the room. He nods at me through his helmet, then leans against his spear as if he's dozed off.

That's my cue; I pick up and sprint as quickly as possible out of the room. I know he's risking everything to support me, so the least I could do in return is to be there and be back as quickly as I can so there's a chance he won't be spotted "sleeping" and get in trouble.

I move like a cat through the castle—fast, near soundless—but the guards I pass seem to understand to just let me pass. Before long, I'm in the corridor I was dragged to when I saw the witch, and now that I know that it's there, there is a conspicuous gap where the door is.

So I unravel the piece of paper with the spell on it and chant the words as quietly as I can:

"Friag na jehrinchia! Noree maleob na Herabug! Friag! Friag!"

I have no idea what it means, but as soon as the last word leaves my lips, the wall

shudders. The stones very slowly seem to writhe, like I'm watching a cluster of maggots in a bowl. After a short while of wriggling, the color starts bleeding out from between them. It fills out the shape of a doorway and then eventually solidifies into a real door, with the door handle swimming up through the magic, eventually coming to rest where a door handle should be.

I wait for a long moment, making sure there's no more movement before I reach forward to touch the handle. The moment my fingers brush it, it snaps down and opens by itself. I recognize the swirling blackness.

And the silken voice that comes out, I recognize as well. "Welcome! Come in, My Queen!"

It feels like a soft wind starts pulling me in, my hair flowing toward the door. I take a moment to collect myself before I step in.

It's the same as it was the last time, so I'm not worried this time. Soon, the same woman ghosts out from the obscurity. Her piercing gaze and unsettling smile meet mine.

"I am pleased to see you have found your way to me again," she purrs. "More good omens!"

"Yes..." I murmur. "I was coming to ask you about you calling me a "queen" when we first met."

She smiles even wider.

"I know," the witch replies. "I have already seen it."

I just wait for her. She slowly cocks her head—and her head just... keeps going

sideways and-

And she's gone.

My stomach drops into the sole of my shoes. I spin around, looking for her. But the darkness is too thick.

In front of me, the darkness begins to lighten and form shapes and shadows.

My queen. Her voice no longer hits my ears but rattles in the air like a cold breath. Ask your questions.

"I-I want to know what "Queen" means," I answer. "I've heard rumors of a lost queen. What does that mean? Is that me?"

The light patch of darkness begins to form even clearer shapes. It's like a silhouetted puppet show. There's a woman in front of me, tall, with a spiked crown on top of her head.

Yes... That same voice rings in the air. There is to be a queen of Faevea. She is the key to the land surviving the assaults from its enemies. Without her, the land will crumble, and its people shall die.

The shadow woman raises her hands to the air, hands spread.

She is burdened with power. Power that can be used for many means.

Black shadow lightning cracks out from the outspread hands of the silhouetted woman.

The warrior queen must choose how to use her powers, for Faevea's fate hangs in the

balance.

“I do have lightning powers,” I insist. “But I’m not a warrior! I’ve never picked up a sword in my life! And how can I be the queen when I have always been a peasant in Thawallow? I’ve lived my entire life there! I’ve never been in the castle before now!”

I sound like I’m begging; I don’t want it to be true. I don’t want to be tangled up in politics and royalty—I just want to get home to my sister.

But in front of me, the shadows shift and change. Suddenly, there are two people sprinting. The more feminine figure holds a bundle in her arms.

There was once a king and queen of Faevea, the ones who birthed the rightful queen, now lost. The witch’s voice rattles across the air again. They, too, had the strength to change the realm with their powers—to create... and to destroy.

The puppets keep running. I focus on the bundle in her arms. I can see the shadow bundle moving.

This made them dangerous, the witch continues. And this made them threatening.

The pair approach a large wall, and they’re forced to stop. They look back and forth. Then they turn around. The male figure held an arm in front of the female one. The female one curls protectively around the bundle in her arms.

Other heirs to the throne wanted them gone; their threatening nature was the excuse the other heirs needed.

A wave of shadow starts to move over them both, except a little purple color starts seeping into the shadow. Black magic. Echoing screams bounce around the empty space. I cringe. Little streaks of red swirl in the shadows in front of me.

Other royals got involved.

The red shadows part, and I see the shape of a baby in the darkness, kicking and arms lightly flailing. I'm surprised to see the baby alive.

The king and queen were found dead. The baby, however... she was never found. That is as far as the mortals knew. The baby had simply disappeared. Most presumed her dead. Others rumored she was alive, and so was dubbed 'the lost queen'.

Darkness shrouds the baby.

However... we know that is not where it ended. The baby was never found-

The shadows part like a curtain.

-because she was never supposed to be found.

There's another woman running. This time, I can see the face of the baby in her arms.

When the king and queen foresaw their deaths, the first thing they did was give the baby to their most trusted servant. She took the baby as far from the castle as she could and found a childless couple.

The woman stops running. Then, I see a very familiar silhouette.

"That's my house!" I gasp aloud.

That is the house of the childless couple. The ones who were trusted with the lost queen.

"But..."

The silhouette of my house opens its front door. A beam of light passes through the door, and a pair of shadow people wait at the door. Except I'm familiar enough with them that I recognize them. I recognize my mother's portly frame and that odd cowlick my father had that could never be flattened down.

That's definitely my parents... except... if the witch is right, then they're not.

They're my adopted parents... and my sister... is my adopted sister?

My family isn't my family?

The baby was placed into the care of a couple I foretold to be a loving and caring couple, the witch says. One who would care for the lost queen like one of their own.

My throat is thick. I swallow hard before I can speak again.

"Y-yes. They were wonderful," I croak.

The visuals fade. For a moment, I'm just stuck on my own in the darkness. I'm just trying to wrap my head around this all.

Eventually, the rage just builds and builds.

"Why?!" I snap. "Why couldn't you have just left me there?!"

The shadows begin to move in front of me again.

That, the witch's voice says, needs us to cover what happened in the castle in the absence of the rightful heir.

The silhouette forms the shape of the castle.

The one who murdered the king and queen was the brother of the king, she says, a power-hungry tyrant who attempted to claim territories beyond their realm.

A man appears. A tall crown rests on his head, crooked in the lighting, until it looks like a set of curled horns.

He was ruthless in his militaristic pursuits, and he was successful in them. Much suffering and death occurred at his hands. Depending on what one's qualifications are for greatness, he could have been considered a great man.

I give a loud, disapproving grunt.

But he was a prideful man, and that would be his downfall. He needed the best of everything.

The shadows around the king shift, and I see the silhouette of a turkey on one side and a large bottle on the other side.

Fine foods and wine could only sate a man so much, the witch says. He decided he needed a wife. A fine, human specimen to bear him a male heir. He decided upon his bride by looking at a portrait of a woman across the realm. He saw the painting of her; he wanted her, and he had to have her.

A smaller woman appears by his side, arms together, head hung.

Unfortunately... a portrait does not tell all.

A pair of fae wings spread from the back of the woman. The tyrant backs away, hands in front of the face. A vague shout of rage echoes throughout the swirling darkness, and the silhouettes fade into blackness.

He did not want his bride, but they had become married. She was treated horribly for her crime of being a dark fae. When she bore a half-human and half-dark fae child, he attempted to rid her of it. To no avail, of course.

The shadows clear. The dark fae woman cowers from another figure, a baby in one hand and the other held up over her head. The tyrant is posed over her, something I can't discern in his hand.

But I suppose I don't need to know precisely what it is to know how awful it is. My stomach is turning.

Before long, the witch continues, the bride of the tyrant had pleaded for help, and such prayers were answered.

With a BANG, there are suddenly hundreds of dark fae silhouettes. I see the tyrant bearing a sword. But there are just too many of them around him. In fact, for the first time, I see silhouettes at the periphery of my vision. I turn around, and I see an entire dark fae army all around me. Hundreds of shadows of dark fae, all armed with swords and spears, in their characteristic spiky armor.

The tyrant was defeated quickly by those who answered the prayers of the tyrant's bride. With the bride alone, she became queen and upheaved his rule.

The dark fae woman stands tall, her own crown and wings standing proud and tall.

She banished humans to the outer walls for fear of their loyalty to the former king, the witch says, and she found her true love amongst her dark fae saviors.

A dark fae man appears at her side.

The pair of them undid much the tyrant had done. Together, they ushered in a new era

of peace. However, even with their half-fae and half-human child, even when they had their own full-blooded fae child of their own, what they didn't have was an heir.

I frown.

“How didn't they?” I ask.

The future foretells of the true heir of the kingdom returning someday, the witch says. The future is uncertain and hinges on the power of the lost queen. The throne is rightfully hers, and she may save the realm... or destroy it.

With another flash of red, all the visuals disappear. I just stand for a moment, staring at blackness. Staring at nothing.

“And... that's me?” I clarify. “The lost queen.”

The witch forms in front of me, out of the shadows she'd been using to demonstrate her story.

“Yes, My Queen,” she purrs.

I sigh.

“And... now that I'm here... can I turn down the throne?” I ask. “Can I just turn away from all this and go away?”

The witch cocks her head.

“If you leave, Faevea will be certain to fall,” she replies. “The return of the lost queen is essential for the survival of the realm.”

I sink down.

Maribelle... she probably needs my help—she's so sick...

But if I leave here, the realm will fall? So Maribelle is going to die either way!

My sister—no... my... adopted sister...

It feels like my brain goes numb.

Me being a queen... the rightful heir to the throne...

I don't give a damn about any of that. The only thing that keeps coming up over and over again is the fact that my childhood... was a lie.

I wasn't my parent's daughter. Every time my father patted my back after a chore well done and said, "that's my girl", was that a lie? Every time my mother proudly referred to Maribelle and me as "her girls", was that a lie? Every time either one introduced me to someone new as "their daughter", was that a lie?

My heart is cold. My eyes are stinging.

Did Maribelle know? She was born so much later than I was... adopted, but did they tell her? Did she know that we weren't full-blooded sisters?

Were my parents ever planning on telling me that I wasn't theirs, or did they die before they could? Was I going to live my entire life happy in this delusion, or would this kidnapping have happened regardless, and I'd have found out either way?

Could... could those other women who were killed by the king searching for the lost queen have been saved if I had known earlier and turned myself in?

My mind is whirring. I can feel myself swaying on the spot.

“My queen,” the witch says. “It is time for you to leave. He searches for you.”

“I... okay,” I murmur numbly.

I blink, and a bright light glares in my eyes. I flinch and cover my eyes, but after a moment’s adjustment, I realize I’m back in the corridor where the witch’s doorway formed.

I turn around and stare at it. There is no doorway anymore. Just the space where it should be.

He searches for you.

I’d best get going before my guard friend gets in too much trouble.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

“What do you mean she’s gone?!”

The guard in front of me can’t meet my eye. He’s hung his head, staring at the floor.

“You had ONE JOB to look after her!” I snarl. “How did you let her get away?!”

“I-I do not know, Sire!” he stutters. “She may have used her powers on me! I remember nothing!”

I snarl to myself. My hand snaps out and backhands the guard across the face. He stumbles back, but I just turn and start searching throughout the castle. I spread my fingers, and my powers flow outward with them. I can sense them. All of them, their auras, as all of my guards wait, wander around, all on different floors of the castle.

Non-elemental magic is immensely useful that way. It’s the magic of auras, illusions... teleporting. Once I get to know someone, I can recognize their auras from everyone else’s, so I can sense Bruamin pottering around leisurely in the gardens outside, but I can’t tell one non-descript guard for another.

If she was walking around on a different floor, would I recognize her? Do I know her well enough? She felt unusual enough when I wasn’t attempting to read auras, but now I’m trying to find them.

This means that either I can’t recognize her amongst all the others, or... or she’s not there.

I start storming throughout the castle, searching every nook, every cranny, every inch

of the castle for the lightest snippet of an unusual aura.

She can't be gone! If she leaves this castle, then he's going to take her!

He can't take her! She's mine!

The thought slithers into my mind, and it won't leave.

She's mine. She's mine! She's mine!

I can't get her out of my mind. Those flinty, emerald eyes, staring at me with bone-shuddering defiance, the thick, glossy brown hair, the peasant dress with its crude stitching and the constant presence of dirt and other filths from chores—her beauty shone through it all. Then, the thought of her looking at me, the softer green eyes, the cheeks flushing rose pink, her warm fingers on my...

She's mine. She can't leave. She can't be taken. I won't allow it!

My thoughts return to him, but the constant thoughts of her start blending with thoughts of him. I see them in my mind. Him appearing, grabbing her—making her frightened, taking her as she screams and kicks.

No!

But then my thoughts change again, and I see him... and her...

Together.

I see the pair of them together. Her lips on him, and his hands on her. Unclothed, together, under the sheets, wrapping around each other, her sweet voice rising in—

No! She's mine!

Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, a glowing spot appears on my senses.

Her aura! It just... appeared?

How did she just disappear and then reappear?

Unless she... teleported?!

NO!

I break into a sprint, barreling my way through the castle toward her aura. As I sprint, my thoughts keep ticking on. But I can't sense him. That's weird.

At least, if he was teleporting her places, then I would have sensed him, at least for a moment. If he was carrying her, he'd have to teleport here himself, and I would have sensed him if I was looking in my aura senses like I am now.

So... did she teleport herself? Can she do that? It seems possible for the lost queen.

Before long, I turn a corner, and I see her. Just standing in the middle of the corridor, like she wasn't supposed to be in the dungeons right now.

"You!" I snarl. "What are you doing here?! How did you escape your cell?!"

She doesn't answer. I storm even closer—and then catch her expression.

She... doesn't look like herself. Her green eyes are wide, staring at nothing. Her usually rosy cheeks have gone pale. She holds herself as if she's going to fall apart.

Something's wrong. If she teleported, it doesn't look as if she did it on purpose.

Oh, no. Did he figure out a way to teleport without me being able to sense it?! How would that be possible?!

I slow in my approach toward her. She doesn't even notice me—her thousand-yard stare is affixed on the wall.

“Hey!” I snap.

The usurper flinches and then slowly turns to me. Her eyes are soft, albeit no less green. She still looks pale. In fact, she looks sick.

“Do you ail?” I ask.

“Oh...” She stutters eventually. “I-I...”

She falls to silence, and her gaze drops to the floor.

“What happened?” I can't help but notice the softness in my own voice. I don't know what it is, but the rage has just dribbled away.

I note it with surprise; it's been a while since that happened.

She looks up at me again. Those lovely green eyes also have a softness in them that I'm not familiar with.

“The witch...” She murmurs.

Ah. The relief is like cold water on a burn. Of course. that explains it. If she was inside the witch's realm, I wouldn't be able to sense her. If he was here, I would be

able to sense him.

He wasn't with her! He didn't take her!

I could start laughing at the relief of it all, but she's still looking at me with those large, soft eyes. Now that they're looking right at me, I can truly see the depth of color...

"Did the witch ask you to see her?" I ask her.

She pauses and then nods at me.

Begrudgingly, I may be the king, but with witches being the liaisons between mortals and gods, there's not much I can do to stop the witch from doing what she pleases. A witch is an important ally and a powerful enemy. They are not to be angered if you know what's good for you.

"What did she say?" I ask. "Did she tell you the future?"

"And the past..." She answers quietly.

"What did she say?"

The usurper just stares at nothing for another minute. Whatever the witch said to her, it must have been realm-shatteringly awful. And this is the woman who didn't flinch, who didn't bat an eye at anything I could throw at her...

I'm burning with curiosity, but one look at her, and I can tell that no amount of screaming, torture, or anything else would get the truth out of her right now; she's just locked down.

She couldn't tell the truth if she tried. There's no point asking her.

"Well, you left the dungeons," I growl at her. "You don't have permission to leave the dungeons. You are not to leave without anyone's knowledge ever again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she murmurs quietly.

That's all she says.

For a moment, I just keep looking at her. She still stands, head hung, eyes wide.

For a moment, we just hang in silence. I can feel the beaming gazes of all the guards looking at me. They're expecting me to do something. There are a few things I feel like I want to do, but I have too many eyes on me.

I snap my hands forward and grab ahold of her arm.

"You're going back to the dungeons," I tell her. "Right now."

She doesn't answer. I look around to the guards.

"I want no followers!" I bark. "Leave us!"

They all bow their heads and move away from us with a tinge of haste. I watch them all disperse but then extend my powers to feel their auras, just to ensure that there are no eavesdroppers. There aren't any.

Good. They ought to know what would happen if I caught them attempting to listen in on my private business.

I look back to the usurper. She finally seems to come back to herself a little, but those large green eyes shimmer in worry as she looks up at me.

It's happened... she's broken.

...I don't like this. I don't like her like this.

"Are you okay?" I ask her. "Was what the witch showed you truly that awful?"

Her eyebrows raise. She's looking at me differently.

Is it because I'm talking to her differently? Or... does she know something?

But she answers me this time:

"I... It was awful to me," she says. "It's not important to most, but the fate of the kingdom... it hangs in the balance."

"I know," I answer. "The witch told me that, too."

Her large green eyes start to water.

"I have to stay here... I'm never going to see my sister again!" She folds over and starts sobbing. "She's probably dead from Weeping Fever by now, and I wasn't there for her!"

It's odd. A lot of people have broken down into tears in front of me—under a myriad of circumstances, too.

But I was expecting such a fight to get her back into the dungeons, at least as much kicking and screaming as she did before. The fact that she's just folded has taken me

off guard. I... actually feel a little wretched watching her break down and cry.

She was an opponent I was trying to defeat. A strong, sharp woman who stood defiant against me in a way so few would. I liked that. I wanted to overcome this obstacle she'd become to me. It had become a game, a tantalizing little tease, and I was greatly anticipating how I would finally make her bow down to me.

But now... she has. She's bowed, doubled over, sobbing in grief. It's not entertaining anymore. This isn't how I wanted it to end.

I'm silent for a moment. She just sobs. Eventually, all I can think to say is:

"I know that too. The witch told me that I would need to keep you here for the sake of the realm's survival," I answer. "That's why you are here."

She's still weeping, but she gives a distinct nod.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Ebelor," I say eventually.

She looks up at me, eyes balking.

"What is it?" I ask.

She seems to calm down a little, standing straight up again. Those eyes gain a little of their flintiness back.

"Nothing," she says, a little strength entering back into her voice again. "I just... I didn't even know you knew my name. I thought I was just another girl you'd taken, and you'd never made a note of it."

"You were the one I was always looking for," I answer without thinking, then realize

how that sounds.

She looks away from me, but I'm recognizing her returning to herself.

I'm surprised by just how much relief floods around my body to see my mental sparring partner back to top form.

She looks back at me, wiping her eyes.

"I'll be going back to the dungeons now," she says. "I know that's where you'll be putting me anyway. Have guards follow me or don't; we both know I can't leave."

I can't fight the smirk that creeps across my face when I hear her speak back to me like that. She sends excited chills up me when she talks back to me like that.

She begins walking off and ends up pulling against my grip, still on her arm.

"Fine," I answer her. "But I shall take you back myself."

She just huffs, but I keep my grip on her as we walk together. I'm glad she's more like herself again; I'm glad to have our game back in place.

Next time she bows, it will be because of me and nothing else. Nothing else will break her ever again. I'll break them first.

I want her to bow, but I want it to be because of me. I want her to know it's because of me. I want her bowed in front of me.

Then she'll be mine, and she'll know it.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

The moonlight drips in through the bars of the tiny window in my cell. It paints a large streak of bright white light through the cobbled stones of my dungeon. It's soft and velvety, which doesn't match the vortex of emotions in my heart right now.

My family is not my family...

I stare at the moonbeam on the floor, lighting up the hideous stone floor. For once, I don't care that I'm back in the dungeon. My head's too full to worry about small things like that right now.

I'm the Queen of Faevea... How am I supposed to be? I've never been into politics in any way! Am I supposed to be making large decisions for the entire country? I just want to go home to Maribelle!

But she's not even my sister, is she? I'm adopted...

Oh, gods! I can't...

I cover my face and sob a little. It doesn't even matter though, does it? She could already be dead from Weeping Fever, just like everyone else in my life...

But what if she's not? What if... ?

It tears me up that I'm never going to get to go home. Knowing she died from the Weeping Fever is one thing—that'd be tragic, and the grief would destroy me, but never knowing... that'd be so much worse. So much worse.

If I could just go home and check... then things would be better, I'm sure. Even if I was still trapped here ultimately, I'd be able to accept it better if I was able to at least see her once. Even being forced to be queen would not be so terrible if I could just-

Wait...

I look around myself, sitting in the dungeon; the realization has hit me like a wild horse.

I'm the Queen! What am I doing in the dungeon?!

I stand up.

The witch declared that I was Queen! That outranks even the King! I shouldn't be spending my time in the dungeon!

In fact, it goes further than that, doesn't it? If I'm the rightful heir, with even more claim to the throne than the king himself, and the fate of the kingdom rests on me being here, then I can use that as leverage. After all, he's been ruling the kingdom, and I'm sure he wants to keep it that way. I'm sure he doesn't want someone to just walk in and legally usurp him—like I could. That would throw a wrench into any of his plans. I could make all kinds of demands of him, and he'd just have to do it.

I feel a cold shiver when I realize just how much power I have. If I can just spread the word about me being the Queen, I would have the king—and Faevea—in my palms.

I smirk and walk to my bars to wait. They usually come in soon to give me my evening meal.

It doesn't take long before the guard walks in, giving me a respectful nod as they walk in.

They walk over and reach the little sliding grate. Just as they're about to slide it open, I say:

“Actually, I'll take my dinner in the dining room this evening.”

The guard looks at me. They pause for a long moment before breaking out into low laughter. I start laughing as well before I reiterate.

“I'm not joking,” I say. “Tell the king I will take my supper in the dining room.”

The guard looks unsurely at me, and I nod at him with a pointed smile. They take my dinner back with them as they walk back out of the cell again.

I sit down in the pile of hay in the cell and wait.

My mind is wandering when the same guard walks back in. I can't see their face, but the way that they're walking signals bemusement.

“Er, the dining room is prepared for you,” they say, that same bemusement clear in their voice as well.

I nod my head, smiling softly.

“Thank you very much.”

The dining room is glorious—I've only ever been here to polish the furniture. Now that I'm here as a guest, it's like night and day. The gigantic dining room table, with enough room for two dozen people to sit and eat there, my meal sat at the head of the table. It's laid out perfectly, with many varieties of cutlery placed on either side, and

my water poured into a champagne flute.

It's the same food I'm served in the dungeon, but set perfectly. When I walk in, accompanied by the same guard, they pull out my chair for me.

"Thank you," I tell them politely.

They walk backward and wait by the wall, still watching me as they used to in the dungeons. I don't know whether they're there as a formality or whether the king genuinely thinks I'm going to use this as a time to escape, but I don't protest.

After all, the fact that I'm here in the dining room to begin with shows he understands what the situation is.

I smile and nod to the guard, grin to myself, and pick up a dainty spoon to start eating my gruel.

I'm finished with my meal, and the guard is removing my bowl from in front of me when the door slams open—in the entitled and unabashed way that can only come from the king. I'm not surprised when I turn around and see him. He glowers at me and then looks at the guard.

"Leave us."

The guard bows lightly and then scurries out of the room. The king closes the door after him, then looks at me.

"So," he says. "I take it you're making yourself comfortable?"

“I am,” I reply, picking up my champagne flute and twirling it. “I’m glad you’re here; we have some things to discuss, I’m sure you’re aware.”

He growls and then walks over to the table. He pulls out the chair next to mine and galumphs down upon it.

“I will ask this one more time, and I expect an answer,” he grunts. “What are your plans with Faevea?”

I put my spoon down.

“And I’ll tell you again, and maybe this time you’ll believe me. I don’t have any plans for Faevea. However,” I smirk. “I don’t think you want that to change, do you? Because now I know I’m queen, and it’s been confirmed by the witch, any plans I do make are going to have to be carried out, aren’t they? If you fight me on these things, it’s going to get messy very quickly and—I’ll ensure—very publicly.”

His mouth purses and twists in irritation. He doesn’t say anything.

“I know I am the rightful heir,” I say. “The witch told me everything.”

“Damn that witch...” He growls quietly to himself for a moment before he looks up at me. “If you have no plans for Faevea, then what do you want?”

I shove my chair out and face him fully.

“I know I can’t leave here,” I say. “I’m not looking to destroy the kingdom, and I’m not looking to sweep it out from under you and rule it, either.”

He leans back in surprise slightly.

“But,” I say. “I’m not staying in the dungeon anymore, and I’m not abiding by the treatment you’ve been putting me under anymore.”

I lean back in my chair, picking up my champagne flute of water and swirling it lightly.

“Things are going to have to change,” I reply smugly. “If I’m a queen, you’re going to start treating me as such, or I’ll make it happen.”

He suddenly surges toward me. I blink and lean back. When I open my eyes, he’s perhaps an inch from my face, those sharp eyes burning into mine.

“You truly think it’s that easy?” he growls lightly. “You think bloodline alone makes you queen? You think you can wear the crown without consequences like that?”

I can smell his scent. It’s a rich, earthy musk, like sweet bark. I... like breathing it in. Shivers start rattling up and down me. It takes me a second to realize I’m just sitting in the chair, breathing him in—I need to answer.

“By law, I can,” I reply.

He gives a little growl at the back of his throat before he answers.

“By law, you can,” he agrees. “But you think you are owed the treatment of a queen for simply arriving here as part of a bloodline?”

I grin at him.

“You can’t threaten me anymore,” I answer. “I know you can’t do anything. You can’t kill me, lest the kingdom be destroyed. You can’t send me away, or the kingdom will fall, too. If you go back to treating me like a servant, I will make it

known that I am the true queen, and you are the usurper. You know, with the witch attesting, they'd believe me over you. You can't do anything."

He leans down toward me. I can feel his body heat. His nose practically touches mine.

"Don't try me," he murmurs throatily. "There's still plenty I could do to you."

A deep shiver tremors up my spine.

"I'm not scared of you," I answer quietly.

He gives a light purr at the back of his throat. Those sharp eyes survey me, moving slowly from my eyes... down my nose... my mouth. His own lips part for a second—I realize I'm staring at his mouth.

"You shouldn't underestimate me," he breathes. "You aren't the first to try manipulating me."

I don't reply—my heart is pounding hard in my chest. I'm breathing hard, and every breath is filled with his earthy scent.

He suddenly pulls away from me and sits back down into his own chair—there's a certain unsettled haste to the motion.

"I am within my right," I reply. "And it won't take much to make me satisfied. This doesn't have to be so uncomfortable for both of us. You just do not have any right to dominate the way you have been doing."

He stares at me for a moment, then he half smirks.

“We’ll see,” he says. “I’ll concede at least that this can be easy, or this can be difficult. If you are going to be agreeable, then this doesn’t have to be uncomfortable.”

I sneer.

“If I am agreeable?” I snap. “I’m the one who hasn’t been agreeable in your mind?!”

He fully smirks—triumphantly.

He’s trying to get under your skin! Don’t let him!

“Fine,” I growl. “I shall be agreeable if you will also be agreeable. ”

He chuckles.

“I am not going back to the dungeon,” I say firmly.

“Very well,” he replies. “We shall have a room set up.”

“I expect better food, and to be allowed to eat at a table.”

“I can agree to that,” he says.

“And I want to see my sister back in Thawallow.”

“No,” he says firmly.

It's so sudden, so firm, that it strikes me dumb for a moment.

“Wh-what?!” I demand. “Why not?!”

The smirk has fallen from his face. The eyes are sharp again.

“You leaving the castle is not an option; it’s non-negotiable.”

“Why not?!” I repeat.

“If you are not aiming to sweep the kingdom out from under me and rule it in my stead, then you have no need to know such things,” he replies sharply.

I feel my nose crinkle in disgust.

“All I want to do is see my sister!” I reply. “This has nothing to do with politics of any kind!”

“It does. You are the lost queen—as you continue to remind me,” he says. “Do you have the slightest idea what the world is like out there? What ne’er-do-wells and other scum would do with the lost queen if they found her?”

I huff.

“I lived my entire life in Thawallow, and I was fine.”

“Eyston is not like your tiny village!” he snaps. “Life is different here.”

“I still don’t see why I cannot see Maribelle!” I clap back.

The false king glares at me for a long moment. He scours my eyes as he glowers at me. I don’t let up on my return gaze.

“Fine!” he says, slapping the armrests and standing up. “Get up.”

I go cold.

“What? Where are we going?”

“Outside,” he says. “If I cannot convince you, then come see for yourself.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

She storms by my side, cute little face pouting as I walk us both out to the carriages. She is very much back to herself—which I have to admit, I’m pleased about. The way she barks back at me makes me feel a way I haven’t felt for a while, if ever. I’d never say it out loud, but I’m happy to have her talking back to me again.

There’s a certain smugness to her angry walk, but I know actually seeing the outside world is going to knock the conceitedness right out of that stride.

As we arrive at the carriages, there’s already crashing in the far distance—not close enough for me to worry, but enough for the horses to be tossing their heads, whinnying lightly in fear. The staff hold onto their reins tightly, but it hardly helps.

The lost queen startles next to me. Her green eyes dart around the scene, taking it all in.

“What is that banging?” she asks me eventually.

“It’s outside,” I answer vaguely, then shoot her a wide grin. “Are you sure you want to go out there?”

The grin seems to inspire her; her gaze steels over and she nods. I give her a slow shrug back and bark my orders at the staff. Before long, we’re sitting in the carriage, chugging away, the curtains closed, closing us in.

“It’s too late for us to go out of the castle town,” I say to her. “This is just to demonstrate my point to you.”

She folds a leg over the other and crosses her arms at the same time.

“I grew up in the human ice villages,” she grunts. “There’s no worse in the kingdom, I’m sure.”

I snicker.

“We’ll see.”

“Do you expect to shock me with poverty?” she asks me, eyes as sharp as flint. “Or pestilence? In Thawallow, we had an outbreak of the Weeping Fever every single winter, and it was so cold all year round that we never truly recovered. Most crops were impossible to grow. Every one of us survived by the skin of our teeth—I’m sure nothing a spoiled usurper like yourself could show me would surprise me.”

“Hm,” I grunt lightly.

She was glaring at me during her tirade, but she turns back to staring at the wall as we continue to travel.

“I know you grew up in the castle,” she continues. “You’ve been in the lap of luxury your entire life—I’m sure what you think is shocking is nothing short of mundane to me.”

That’s when I break out into harsh barks of laughter. Her head snaps back over to me:

“Lap of luxury?!” I snap. “You call being groomed to rule a kingdom via a cat o’ nine tails to the back luxurious? You claim that having an entire realm’s worth of lives in your hands is relaxing? Or making the decisions that inevitably end their lives a privilege and not some ongoing horror?”

She rolls her eyes at me.

“At least you had people around you,” she snaps. “Councils and advisors who inevitably truly make those decisions! When my sister’s life was in my hands, I had no one to help!”

“Councils and advisors who hate me!” I clap back.

“My entire village hated me!” she sneers.

“Yes, but have they tried to kill you?” I ask

She glowers but drops her gaze; I take that as my answer.

“My council has! I had to fend off my first assassination attempt at eleven years old!” I snap. “If all you’ve had to deal with is village gossipers, then don’t ask for pity from me!”

“Well, don’t ask for pity from me either!” she grunts. “Your council hating you is no excuse for all the kidnapped and murdered women—and everything else you’ve done!”

I can hear the outside now. The screaming, the chaos. She hears it, too; as she finishes her sentence, she’s trailing off, looking worriedly at the windows.

“You want to know why I do what I do?” I demand.

She looks at me, a little fear dancing behind the strength in her eyes.

“This is why!” I snap, and I draw the curtains around the window back.

She looks around, out into the castle town of Eyston, and gasps.

I take a second before I turn to look. I know it's awful, and it takes me a second to build myself up to seeing it up close again.

The castle town was once the pride and joy of Faevea, as glorious and beautiful as the keep itself. It used to have shining white marble cobbles and carved pillars on almost every building. It had a glory to it that every citizen shared in, feeling grander by association with the city. That was before.

Now, every cobble is stained with so much mud and blood that they will never be white again, I'm sure. The pillars have been overturned, whether by exposure to nature, collateral damage from the wars, or purposely overturned by the bitter. The city is drenched in the remains of chamber pots, carelessly overturned in the streets. Corpses rot, with none caring enough to even drag them away. There are too many dying daily for any to keep up with digging graves. Even mass graves. And so, rotten flesh flecks off the bones of skeletons, both humanoid and animal, mingled together in a horrendous orgy of putrefying meat.

Even now, they fight. We pass by, and I see a Naga hanging from the roof of nearby ruins—once a fine building, I'm sure—and throw something. As we continue rolling by in the carriage, we see it land and explode. She flinches away from the window as it does. There's screaming from where it lands, and I see others—either human or dark fae, I cannot tell—begin sprinting toward where the Naga was, weapons in hand, set on revenge.

“Oh, my... Gods! ” she gasps. “This... this can't be—!”

“This is the world,” I grunt. “A stranger to itself now.”

“B-but Eyston is this magnificent city!” she gasps, looking at me. “It's a hub of art

and culture! I-its streets are paved with gold! It's where the beauty of Faevea lies!"

"All ash in the wind now," I answer. "That's what it once was. The human settlements are so far away that it doesn't surprise me that the news of its ruin hasn't reached you."

I glare at her.

"So, tell me now—tell me now— how unjustifiable everything I've done is!" I snarl. "Look me in the eye and tell me a harsh guard response isn't warranted or that large-scale magical assault to prevent reinforcements from sieging the city isn't necessary." I lower my head and glare at her even more sharply. "That keeping the humans in the frozen North wasn't the right thing to do."

Her gaze softens a touch.

"You're whining about crops being hard to grow up North," I growl. "But this is the alternative! War! And not just any war—war between magically empowered species that have no qualms about taking humans as spoils! Your people could barely survive the Weeping Fever—you think they would survive being poisoned by Naga? Or struck by sirens?! The ice settlements are the only territory none fight after—it's the only territory where humans would be safe!"

She just stares at me for a moment. I glare back.

"What?" I ask.

"I didn't know your sympathies lay with humans," she notes.

"My sympathies lie with every species!" I snap back. "But this land does not need a sympathetic king right now!"

Again, another moment of silence—relative silence, considering the chaos reigning outside—where she nods.

“And,” I say. “despite every effort on the part of me or my war council, things continue to decline. Our only hope to save the kingdom was the lost queen—the one fated to save us all, or raise the kingdom to the ground, depending on who got his hands on her first.”

She looks up at me, frowning.

“Who got...?” she begins to ask, trailing off.

“I wasn’t the only one looking for you,” I explain. “In fact, everyone aware of the legend of the lost queen was looking for you. Only the fact that you were, in fact, a human wasn’t common knowledge is what kept your villages peaceful for so many years. Since so many assumed the lost heir to be a dark fae, as many had always known the royals to be, they kept their searches to the other cities in Faevea.”

“I see...” She says.

“Every faction of this war had their eye out for you,” I continue. “With each of the factions aiming to use your power to win the kingdom for themselves. You are the only one who can fix the kingdom from its sorry state now, and many interpret that sentiment as their species being the oppressors. I want to return the kingdom to the era of peace it once was in.” I narrow my eyes and hang my head. “It just seems that I cannot be peaceful to achieve peace...”

“Right,” she says. “So... you say I cannot go see my sister in Thawallow because we wouldn’t survive the journey, basically? That we’d be attacked by every Naga, siren, dwarf, and dark fae who found us as we went?”

“That is a large part of my certain,” I tell her. “They know not who you are now, but they surely will. If nothing else, they’ll notice you by my side and make an educated guess. But there is an even greater threat—someone else looking for you, and this one knows you are a human. Worse still, this one doesn’t even want to save the world in their own way—this one wants to destroy Faevea, and he does so willingly.”

“Wait, what?” she asks. “Who would want to destroy Faevea? What idiot would actively aim to destroy the world they also live in?”

I take a breath to tell her, but then my stomach clenches, and only a half-truth slips from my lips:

“I know his name is Dralis, and he worships the god Mischevil,” I answer. “Mischevil is one of the more ancient gods of this land, and whilst those who worship him would defend him as a trickster god, truly, he is a god of suffering and sadism. Mischevil wants to burn this land to ashes and frolic in its charred remains.”

Her face has utterly curdled in disgust.

“But... why?” she asks. “Why would someone want to follow a god like that?”

I groan lightly before I answer.

“I don’t know, in truth,” I say. “I suppose to some people, being special is so much more important than the wellbeing of others. That’s one thing that Mischevil promises his followers: that they will be the special few who survive as the rest of the land burns away. They will be the special few. That appeals to some people.”

I look at her.

“One thing I do know for sure is that you are the key to all of this,” I tell her. “You,

as the lost queen, have the power to either destroy or redeem this vile land, and if Dralis ever got his hands on you, every person in this land would likely be killed at the hands of Mischevil. The worst part of all of this is that I know for a fact that Dralis is out there, looking for you right now.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I was so determined to see Maribelle, but what he says gives me pause. I had no idea that we were dealing with the likes of gods... I knew there was a prophecy, and the kingdom hung in the balance, its fate depending on whether I stayed here or not, but I didn't think this was that dire... I truly thought there was some wriggle room for me to go home and see my sister... Essentially, take an afternoon off and see her...

I glance back out the window again. There are still people fighting out there, truly fighting tooth and nail with each other in a horrifying display.

I had no idea things were so bad...

My sister... I still ache to go see her, but this definitely changes things... Now, I'm not sure I even feel comfortable having Maribelle brought to me—even if she was well enough from the Weeping Fever by now to travel. I don't want to risk her even seeing this, let alone getting caught up in it.

Because she has to be alive. There's no way she can be dead by now. There's no way...

I keep staring out the window, but I'm thankful we're moving fast enough for none of the people to truly notice us as anything more than a vague, unimportant blur. He's right—the human settlements are a hard place to live, but they're not... this.

I didn't even realize what I had. None of us did...

“So...” I say quietly. “Just to get this straight—if I was found by this Dralis person, nowhere in Faevea would be safe from this awful god?”

“I can’t say for sure,” the king says. “Perhaps some of the population would be enslaved. But I always took it that chaos and destruction were the point in and of itself, so I wouldn’t hold out any hope that certain places in Faevea would be left alone. That includes the human settlements if that’s what you were thinking; just because they’re far up North doesn’t mean that they’d be forgotten about by this ruthless god and his followers.”

“I see...”

I fall into silence for a long time. I can feel the king’s gaze beaming into me before he says:

“Speak. What are you thinking?”

“I... just wanted to go home and be with my sister.”

“I’m aware,” he says. “And I hope you’re now aware that me telling you no is not an act of cruelty. It’s genuinely to help the kingdom to survive.”

I keep staring out the window at the destruction. We’re now passing a fire, a blaze in the process of swallowing up an entire building. It’s so hot that I feel like I can feel the heat through the door.

“Is there any way for me to leave and see my sister?” I ask, turning back to him. “Is there no way for me to get safely back to her? Ever?”

But I see that gleam in his eye—the one I’m learning to despise—and he answers:

“There is a way we can attempt to make your travels safer.”

“What is it?” I ask suspiciously.

He leans forward, elbows on his knees and fingers linked.

“Marry me,” he says.

My heart drops into my shoes. My throat becomes thick as I swallow a few times.

“Wh-what?!” I choke. “What do you mean?!”

“If you form an alliance with me in the form of a marriage of convenience, then the situation changes,” he says. “It means that the lost queen will finally be restored to her throne, and all the magic that unlocks—and you will be bound to me and no one else. That means it’ll be harder for anyone else to claim you and your powers to use for evil. I will also be the rightful ruler alongside you, and we shall share the power of the throne equally. In return for you agreeing, I shall teach you how to use your powers.”

I feel my lips purse as I think.

Learn to use my powers...? I’ve never even thought about it. My powers were nothing more than a burden and an excuse for the other villagers not to like me back in Thawallow. Lightning hardly helped with most farmland tasks. It was too volatile to even use for the more destructive tasks, and it only seemed to set fires whenever I tried. Obviously, that didn’t help to make them like me anymore. It didn’t occur to me even in the slightest that they could be wielded for my own means...

I suppose here... they could be useful.

He notices my hesitation, and he adds: “And I will ensure that there are extra protections around Thawallow. There will always be extra guards in place to make sure the village is the safest in the human settlements. In your absence, your sister will be safe—you have my word.”

My eyes sting, and I try to look away so he doesn't see me almost cry.

"I... think what Maribelle really needs is a healer," I say. "We could never afford to send out anybody to help her."

He nods.

"Not a problem for me," he says. "Marry me, and I will send the best healer in the land directly to Thawallow. Your sister will be cured of the Weeping Fever in no time."

He's got this smirk on his face—he knows he's got me now.

He knows that he's making an offer I can't refuse, and I can see it in his eyes. I shouldn't have told him that I couldn't afford a healer for Maribelle.

I mean, on the one hand, the important thing is that she's going to get better. But on the other hand, marrying him... Marrying this man...

I'd do so much to keep Maribelle safe, but would I bind myself to this man forever to make sure she gets better?

Well... I have to stay in the castle anyway, possibly forever, and it'd just be a marriage of convenience. We wouldn't have to... consummate the marriage.

Thoughts suddenly spark over my mind—his warm body, the peaks and valleys of his chest under my hand... how warm his skin is... the scent that always brushes across my face when he gets close, except this time, I'm tasting it... His scent, his taste, rolling over my tongue as I—

Wait! Wait, I was just thinking about how I wouldn't have to consummate the

marriage!

I don't want to consummate the marriage! Definitely not! Absolutely not!

I shake my head.

"Is that a no?" he asks. "To the marriage?"

I look back at him. His gaze is burning into me.

The way he's looking at me is beyond intense. I can tell that he is not letting this matter drop. My decision needs to come now.

And it seems like there's no real choice. I have to stay in this castle, and I absolutely do not want this Mischevil to get what he wants. My choice is to agree to his offer of marriage and have a chance at saving Maribelle, getting control over my powers and sharing the throne and everything that comes with it— or I can reject his offer of marriage, and yes, I'd still be the rightful heir, but I would still be trapped in the castle anyway, and it would clearly continue this relationship I have with him where we passively fight each other. Essentially, it sounds like my choice is to be trapped here, fight him, and get nothing done, or be trapped here, work with him, and possibly save Maribelle.

Put like that... I don't think I have much of a choice. It seems like the only smart thing to do is to agree to marry him and perhaps see if there's a chance of escaping at some point in the future when Faevea is no longer in danger and doesn't need its prophesized lost queen anymore.

After all, I am the queen. Escape should be possible with that kind of power eventually.

So I nod at him.

“Fine,” I say. “I will marry you.”

He grins and nods.

“Good choice,” he says. “I shall send for Faevea’s best healer this very evening, and I will send them out accompanied by half a squadron’s worth of guards to Thawallow on the morrow. We will be married as soon as we can find someone to officiate.”

I swallow hard and nod.

So I don’t have any time at all to formulate an escape... It wasn’t like I thought he’d forget about this if I procrastinated, but I didn’t think it would be so soon.

He nods back and leans a little to the side.

“Mackinel,” he barks. “Take us home.”

The carriage begins slowing down and turning around. I just look down. I almost feel a bit sick.

“I will set you up a bedroom as well,” he says. “Have a think about what furniture and colors you want in there.”

I look up at him, but I don’t have any words.

I’ve... never had a bedroom of my own, let alone one I could decorate...

I open my mouth.

“I—”

A BANG cracks into my right ear, and I feel myself fly from my seat in the carriage in the force. Suddenly, warm arms wrap around me. I blink, and he’s holding me, his arm grabbing me around my waist and pressing me to the side of his hot body. His wings spread wide, defensively.

“Damn!” he growls under his breath and looks down at me with a sharp glare. “ Hold onto me! Do not let me go!”

I nod so vigorously that it’s more like a tremble than a gesture.

He’s standing, and he takes us both to the door. Looking out the window, I see what hit the side of the carriage. There are Naga slithering all over the carriage. They have swords drawn on the driver, whose hands are held up in surrender.

He turns and glares at me again.

“Get behind me, but don’t let me go!” h e orders. “ If they come in, we’re flying away!”

“R-right!” I whimper.

I move behind him and grab ahold of his waist. The king then moves forward and whips the door open.

“Off the carriage!” h e bellows. “ Off the carriage, malcontents!”

The Naga snap around to him. They start approaching us, swords drawn. I yelp in terror. Then, he thrusts his palm at the Naga approaching us. A pulse of magic crashes out from his palm and hits the enemies in a wave. The entire crowd of Naga

go flying from the carriage, tails flailing as they soar away.

Whoa! What kind of magic was that?! That's not elemental magic!

I step out and look at the Naga who have been blown away—and my wrist gets caught. I scream. A Naga pulls my arm, dragging me toward the door of the carriage. His lips have pulled back, his snake teeth bared, hissing.

Strong arms grab me and yank me back into the carriage, accompanied by the shing of a sword being rapidly drawn.

“Touch her and die, vermin!” the king roars, the sword pointed at the Naga.

The Naga flinches away from the sword. The king thrusts his palm toward him and sends him flying.

All the Naga are starting to slither away in panic. The king pulls my arm, and I stumble back into the carriage.

“Mackinel!” he howls. “Let's go! Top speed!”

“Y-yes, Sire!” the driver stumbles.

The whip cracks and the horses cry out and start hurtling forward. The king slams the door, and the carriage keeps barreling along. He huffs a breath and looks around at me.

“Are you alright?” he asks. “Did they hurt you?”

“N-no, they didn't,” I answer.

He nods and then sits down next to me on the seat. There's so little room with both of us on here that his warm thigh presses up against my leg. A deep shiver runs up through me.

He's breathing a little heavily and looks over to me.

"That's why it's dangerous," he says. "They didn't even know who you—who we were since I used the most discreet carriage. Imagine if they knew who you were."

I nod gravely.

"Don't ever leave without me," he orders.

"I won't," I say.

Unlike last time I agreed to that, I mean it. We sit in silence for the rest of the journey back to Eyston Keep, but I can't help but enjoy the feeling of him sitting right next to me, his leg pressed against mine.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

As soon as we walk back into the castle, I call over a nearby guard.

“Prepare one of the guest bedrooms for Ebelor,” I order.

“Yes, Sire.”

She looks up at me with that softer gaze. She’s been doing that since the carriage. I turn to her.

“Follow him to your new room,” I tell her. “We shall merely prepare it for tonight, but later on, we can change it around to your tastes.”

“Thank you...” She says quietly.

“If you’d come with me, Ma’am,” the guard says to her.

She nods and starts walking off behind him. As she leaves, Bruamin approaches me.

“Sire,” he says. “The witch is waiting in the West wing.”

“Ah, excellent.”

Finally. We’d best get this done as quickly as we can.

When I walk into the West wing, into the drawing-room, the witch stands, ethereal as

always, in the center of the room. As I walk in, she turns and smiles lightly at me.

“My king... what makes you call me from my dimension?”

“I need a spell,” I say. “As soon as you can perform it.”

She cocks a slender eyebrow.

“Well, as always, it depends on what the spell is intended to do,” she says in her lilting tones. “And, of course, what you would pay for it.”

“I need a spell to bind me to the lost queen,” I say. “A psychic link, something that ties us together. She has agreed to marry me for the sake of the kingdom’s wellbeing—”

“I’m aware,” she replies.

“—and I want to ensure she won’t go back on our deal.”

“Think carefully before you demand another spell, My King,” the witch purrs. “She is aware of the dire straits. If she is wise, she won’t leave.”

“I know,” I say. “But I don’t trust her. I don’t trust she won’t leave as soon as she thinks the kingdom is safe, even if it’s not. I need to keep the kingdom safe.”

The witch cocks her head slowly.

“Is that truly the reason?” she asks slowly.

I glower at her.

“Yes,” I growl. “Do the spell.”

“As you wish, My King,” she says. “The cost is three years.”

Three?! Oh, damn...

But I suck a breath in.

“Fine. Do it.”

The witch glides over to me and extends her hand. I take it, and we shake once. A bolt of pain crashes through me. I cry out as I feel three years shaved off my lifespan. Once she releases my hand, I’m tingling from head to toe.

I stagger forward a step and brace myself on the wall. The witch smiles.

“In but a few moments, this room will have a spell within to bind the people psychically together at the utterance of the words: I do,” s he says. “As soon as both parties have spoken those words, they shall be forever bound.”

I nod. There’s a bead of sweat running down my brow. I summon the strength to stand straight again and mop it up with my hand.

“Very good. I’ll leave you to it.”

I leave the room as the witch begins to chant. Outside is Bruamin, scowling lightly at me.

“What?” I grunt.

“I do wish you wouldn’t buy spells so frivolously, Sire,” he pleads. “You know you

have cost yourself several decades of life by now.”

“I know. Can you officiate for me, Bruamin? I know we always agreed you would.”

“Sire, listen!” he begs. “The girl was always going to stay! She knows what’s at stake!”

“I can’t take that risk, Bruamin. Now, will you officiate my wedding or not?! ”

Bruamin sighs lightly. He nods.

“Thank you,” I sigh. “Now, can you fetch a guard to bring her back?”

He nods again. He starts to walk off, hesitates, and then looks over his shoulder:

“I truly hoped I’d be the one to end up officiating your wedding like we agreed when you were younger,” he says. “But not like this.”

“Frankly, Bruamin,” I reply. “I don’t like getting married under such circumstances either. Now go fetch the bride.”

“Wait, right now?!” s he gasps.

“Yes,” I reply. “That was our deal. As soon as I found someone to officiate, we’d be married.”

“Yes, but...”

“Bruamin will officiate,” I say. “He is my lord-in-waiting. He’s been here ever since I

was a very small child—like a second father to me—so I trust he will do nicely.”

Her gaze softens just a little bit. She looks at Bruamin, and he bows his head at her.

“My queen,” he murmurs politely.

She still blinks, still bemused. She bows her head cordially back, then looks to me:

“I have to get married in this?!” s he demands. “I don’t even get a wedding dress? You’re a king! You should be able to get me a dress!”

I glare at her. She’s a smart one sometimes.

“I know what you’re doing, and there’s no point delaying it,” I growl at her. “You agreed that we would be married as soon as there was an officiant, and I’m not going to let you procrastinate. If you feel the need for a huge ceremony, complete with whatever dress takes your fancy, then we can have a ceremonial wedding later.”

I can see her grinding her teeth; I think she’s run out of excuses. I offer her my arm before she can think of any.

“Come. Time to fulfill your end of the bargain.”

She sneers but links her arm through mine. I nod to Bruamin, and he moves ahead, opening the door for us. He walks to the other end of the room, and I start taking my new bride through. But the witch stays, smiling at us both.

“Wait,” my new bride hisses. “Why is the witch here?”

“She’s our official witness,” I answer.

We reach the front, and Bruamin starts speaking, running through the ceremony like he has done at his church so many times before. I've heard it many times—my parents always insisted that we showed our faces at every official event pertinent to the family. That involved every boring wedding that ever happened, no matter how removed the cousin or uncle might have been.

Instead, I watch her face. It's odd. It keeps changing. There's still a touch of a sneer on her face, but there's some melancholic wondering in her expression. I wonder what she's thinking.

Eventually, Bruamin asks me the question. I don't hear it properly, but I look at him.

"I do," I answer.

There's a light glowing coming from the floor—the most subtle purple illuminance drawn in an ornate symbol on the floor, enclosing both me and my bride. I can only observe the symbol from the corner of my eyes. There are so many loops and twirls in the pattern that I cannot imagine how the witch might have drawn it in such a short period of time. I can see two separate threads winding mostly around themselves until the point where they meet and bind together. It's like a large horseshoe around the pair of us.

Beautiful in its own way.

I flash a glance at her, but she stares right ahead, not looking back at me.

But she's not looking at the floor, either. Good.

My lord-in-waiting nods at me, still understatedly sad, then looks to her:

"And do you, my lady, take the king to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

She sighs lightly.

“I do.”

The soft glow explodes into beams of illuminance, towers of purple light reaching from floor to ceiling. Ebelor screams. She tries to pull away, and I keep ahold of her arm to keep her from running away. It’s over in a moment.

“And thus,” the witch says in her lilting tones, “you are bound.”

The witch bows deeply, then walks backward, the wall melting into a patch of darkness behind her. She soon disappears.

Ebelor turns to me.

“What happened?! What did you do?! ”

“You agreed to marry me,” I say. “You agreed to be bound to me until death do us part. I just thought it would be prudent to have a safeguard in place that would force you to keep that promise. Something other than a piece of paper, that is.”

My wife pulls her arm away from mine, glaring at me.

“So... you cast a spell on me?” she demands. “What kind of spell?”

“The same as a legal marriage, really,” I answer. “You are now bound to me—not able to betray me to the enemy, leave without my knowing, and if you were to do these things—” “—death would then do us part.” My voice darkens.

She stares at me, mouth agape. Her head shakes lightly.

“It goes both ways,” I say. “If I were to betray or abandon you, I would also die. It’s the same deal as a marriage—if you obey your marriage vows, then you should be fine.”

I narrow my eyes at her.

“Of course,” I say. “If you were planning on obeying your marriage vows and not abandoning me in the middle of the night, My Queen, then there should be no issue.”

Her mouth closes, her teeth clenching and grinding together. I can see it in her face; she’s been foiled.

Thought so. You were going to run away in the middle of the night, weren’t you?

She finally finds her voice, albeit in choking, spluttering tones:

“You... YOU BASTARD!”

“You agreed to marry me,” I say. “All I’m doing is making sure you keep your promise.”

She stares at me, teeth still grinding. Her eyes fill with tears. Her mouth opens and closes a few times, but she says nothing. Then, she covers her face, bursts into tears, and dashes out of the room. There’s a second of silence. I can feel Bruamin’s gaze searing into me, the judgmental stare burning into the back of my skull.

I turn back to him, meeting his angry gaze and returning it.

“What?” I grunt. “There’s no use feeling sorry for her! You saw her! She would have broken her marriage vows and abandoned me, even if the kingdom would have perished because of it! Besides, she is now a queen. There ought to be no pity for

her!”

Bruamin still stares at me, eyes narrowed.

“Yes, but... is this truly how this should have been handled?” he asks.

“Oh, I don’t have to listen to this!” I growl. “I am the king! You are the lord-in-waiting, and I am the king! Don’t forget your place!”

Bruamin just closes his eyes in disappointment. I seldom play that card, but I’m in no mood.

Even the hardest man in the world will crack when everyone in his life hates him so consistently, all the time. I can’t have another lecture from my old lord-in-waiting. I already know.

I turn and begin walking out of the room as well, leaving him standing there alone. As I walk through the corridor toward my own quarters, I pass hers. There’s sobbing coming from her closed door.

A thought intrudes: No woman should spend her wedding night sobbing like that.

I shake the thought away and continue on to my room.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

My very beautiful bedroom has become a very beautiful prison in a single moment.

I can't believe the bastard would go that far!

Magically binding me to him?! After I already said I would marry him?!

I didn't have any intention of leaving the kingdom, or even the castle—I don't want to be the reason that Faevea falls and hundreds of thousands of people die—it's just humiliating to be shackled to him in such a way. I went from being the second part of a reluctant deal to a dog on a leash. An equal party to a subservient.

I'm lying face down on the puffed-up, goose feather bed, soaking the pillow with my own tears. I don't know how long it's been since the wedding-

Oh, the wedding! The wedding!

I weep even harder.

I'd dreamed of my wedding day, like many little girls had. Back in Thawallow, my life was getting up, taking care of Maribelle, helping on other villagers' farmlands so that I could earn a few measly scraps of food or old, tattered blankets—hopefully enough for us to live for the evening—and then sleep so I can do it again. Getting married seemed like the most likely way that routine was going to break, that some help was going to enter my life... that I was finally going to be able to rest, at least for a moment. It was also the only day in my life that I was going to be treated like I was special...

No taking care of anyone, no work, and everyone would be happy and celebrating me and my new husband. I'd be in a pretty dress, and there'd be music and dancing, and everyone would be smiling.

But of course... it was merely a dream. It was a beautiful, fragile dream. No man would ever find me attractive. I have nothing to offer, and I am still taking care of my sister. That's the reality of it, but I was allowed to enjoy my glorious fantasy.

But now... it's over. There's no chance I'm ever getting married to a man I love now because I'm already taken by another in a marriage of convenience. Moreover, it's not even like I can escape this marriage of convenience as soon as I know the kingdom is safe; the spell will kill me if I break my marriage vows, he said—and presumably, the spell will continue until death does us part.

Can the spell be broken? The thought crosses my mind.

I shuffle up to my knees on my bed and think about it.

The witch could certainly do something about it. But would the king know that I'd done something? Would he feel it if I broke our bond together? Or would I be able to do it in secret without him realizing?

Oh, but what's even the point? I lament. The kingdom will crumble if I leave. There's no point breaking the bond when I can't leave without destroying the entire realm.

A little of the shock and grief have washed away in my tears, and angry tears are filling my eyes in my place. I was already trapped. I was already forced to be here—why would he do this? Is he that petty? Is he that insecure or impotent? Did he specifically want to humiliate me? Is that why he did this?

I swipe the back of my hand across my eyes.

That's it, isn't it? my inner thoughts growl. He wasn't able to "break me" the way he wanted, so he did all this, didn't he?

I step out of bed. I suddenly have a wave of inspiration; if I'm married to him, now officially the queen in every undeniable way, I'm going to act like it!

He's going to regret being petty toward me! I can match that kind of pettiness and then some! By the time I'm done, he'll break the spell himself as soon as the kingdom is safe!

I stride over to my bedroom and throw open the door. The guards behind it startle as the door suddenly whips open behind them.

"Oh-oh! Your Majesty!" one of them says.

"Go to the wine cellar and bring me all the wine! " I declare. "By order of the queen!"

The pair of them look between each other.

"Wh—all of it?" the other asks quietly.

"Yes!" I order. "And then, gather all your comrades and other staff! We're having a party in my room!"

"W-wait, the staff are having a party in the queen's chambers?"

"Yes! Immediately!" I say. "Spread the word. It is my wedding day, after all, so I deserve a celebration!"

"The king will—"

I smirk.

“Have to answer to me, the queen!” I state.

The guards share another look, and then they both bow.

“At once, your Majesty.”

My room looks a lot livelier with all the staff inside it. The guards who helped me see the witch to begin with were the first to arrive, even before the wine did. But soon, even staff I’d never seen before came, just out of curiosity. After all, there had never been a party in the castle, let alone one for the staff to attend. They are stiff and uncomfortable at first, but I smile, welcome them with a glass of wine each, and chat with them, and they loosen up after a short while. Soon, the wine flows and everyone in the crowd starts talking, reassuring one another that it’s okay to relax now.

As the atmosphere gets more and more comfortable, a few of the maids start talking to me. They’re fairly curious about my story, too—and as I talk to them about Thawallow, I find myself repeating the same story over and over again to the crowds. Eventually, I’m finishing the tale for the umpteenth time in front of a couple of latecomers.

“—and it turned out the witch wasn’t there to be the witness, but instead, she was there to bind us together with magic.”

“What?” Marya gasps.

“Are you serious?” Dronfil asks, shuffling his guard’s helmet under his arm as he sits down close to me.

“Yes...” I murmur. “Apparently, being married is not enough.”

“It’s because the bastard knows you’re the true queen,” Dronfil growls.

“Yes,” Marya adds. “The Cruel King would do anything to keep his power—we shouldn’t be surprised that he’d do something so vile.”

“He’s the worst,” Dronfil says. “I’m thankful he finally stands to be overthrown—only a shame it’s not by a violent coup.”

They both smile at me.

“I’m sure you’ll do better, Ebelor,” Marya says. “I’m sure someone can break the spell—the witch should be able to.”

I nod.

“The sooner the better. Did you hear about the attack on the Naga that he sanctioned the other day?” Dronfil says, eyes scanning between myself and Marya. “There was a magical assault on the border of Murbyn Bridge—and he just sent a huge beam of magic down on it.”

My memories of Naga come slithering back. The coils, rocking the carriage, wrapping around the carriage like a Kraken sinking a ship, the screaming horses filling my ears.

“M-maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing...” I mutter.

They both stare at me.

“There was almost an entire squadron of soldiers there!” Dronfil protests. “They

didn't have enough time to escape!"

The memories of the Naga still flash in front of my eyes as I answer back:

"But were there a lot of Naga?" I ask quietly.

They look over at me. Dronfil shrugs.

"Of course," he says. "There was an entire army of them."

I shudder.

"I don't know, maybe I don't blame him," I say. "I've been there when the Naga were there, and they are terrifying. If he's just trying to keep them from invading the royal city, then... I don't know."

"Where were you when the Naga were there?" Marya asks.

"He took me out to the castle town, just outside the keep," I say. "We got attacked by Naga as we were traveling back."

"They attacked the carriage?" Dronfil asked. "Really?"

"Yes," I reply. "He was... familiarizing me with the kingdom when they jumped the carriage. Well, attacked it, I mean."

I have to break their intense gazes. My hand curls into a loose fist around my chest.

I'm still seeing my memories, and I can see him... Standing tall over me, chest clad in shining armor, so covered yet revealing at the same time. His eyes, searing hot in intensity as he stares out at the enemies around us. His arm was firm as he pulled me

to him protectively. His strong, deep voice bellows in my mind: Touch her and die, vermin!

A shiver passes through me.

Marya scoffs.

“I can’t believe the king would take you out of the castle like that!” she says.

“Yes, you need to be careful,” Dronfil grunts. “Make sure he’s not actually trying to kill you.”

He wouldn’t want to kill me—that’ll destroy the entire kingdom. But I don’t say that. For some reason, what comes out of my mouth is:

“He saved my life! He put myself between me and their swords and...” I shrug. “I didn’t expect him to do that.”

They frown at me.

“I don’t know,” I say quickly. “He’s not fully evil. I-I mean, he has his moments, I suppose.”

They just keep staring at me. I’m confused myself—why am I defending him? After everything he’s done?

I’m not sure...

“Well, he’s not the worst out there,” I counter. “Compared to the followers of Mischevil, at least. I mean, he’s not trying to destroy Faevea, at least.”

I only get blank stares in response.

“You know, Mischevil?” I ask. “The king said the leader or at least a very important member of the group was called Dralis?”

The two I’m talking to are looking at me blankly. Dronfil looks over my shoulder:

“Geiton!”

“What?” another guard replies.

“Have you ever heard of Dralis?” he asks.

The other guard frowned.

“Dralis? I don’t think so.”

A similar conversation is going on all around me—between the guards and the maids alike. After a short while, Marya comes back to me.

“I don’t think anyone knows what you’re talking about,” she says. “Was it only the king who told you all that?”

“Yes?” I say it like a question.

“Do you... think he might have lied?” Marya asks quietly. Pointedly.

“I...”

Could... He could have. It wouldn’t be that unbelievable, would it? If he would do all the terrible things that people said he would, why wouldn’t lying to me also be on the

list?

I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it.

But... why don't I want to? Why do I want to defend him after everything he's done?

Suddenly, there's a chill through the air—not a supernatural chill, but the kind that makes an entire room of happily chatting people stop.

Of course, he was at the door. The king, scouring over the scene with a deep, brooding glower on his face. He looks through the staff relaxing all over my room with a distinct scowl of disapproval, but he doesn't say anything. I stand and begin striding through the crowds to meet him. When his eyes meet mine, I stare him down.

"It's my wedding night," I say coldly. "I thought a celebration was in order. It is a royal wedding, after all."

He looks across the room again and then returns his gaze to me.

"Good to know you're having fun on your wedding night," he says. I can't even tell if he's being sarcastic or not.

But he turns around and leaves. The partygoers murmur a little but then look at me. They're looking at me in total awe.

This is the power I have now. He didn't make a scene because he knew I could make one, too. And I am the queen...

I smile as he leaves.

I could get used to this.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I stare out the window at her. My wife. What an awful, gargantuan sentiment...

I'd never imagined what it would have been like to have been married, but... my parents and Bruamin always gave me the impression that it was supposed to be some grand affair. A legal union, a magnificent event to be marveled at by the peasantry and spoken about for years. Not to mention, it was supposed to make me... feel something. At least, not so empty.

I watch her pottering around in the castle gardens—Bruamin's pride and joy—speaking with the guards accompanying her and touching upon the roses with delicate fingers.

She's here. With me. The one who could have defeated me is now bound to me in such a way that it'll never happen. I've spent my entire reign—perhaps even my entire life in some way—worrying about that possibility. Now, it'll never happen as long as the spell holds; Dralis can't take her like this, and through him, neither would Mischevil.

Things are finally on the path to Faevea being safe. I should be elated.

Why do I feel so hollow instead?

She keeps walking around in the gardens below me. At least she looks some kind of happy down there...

“Sire?”

“Come in, Bruamin.”

My lord-in-waiting walks in, a tray of tea in his hands. He puts it down on the desk with a light chink .

“I took the liberty of bringing you a drink, Sire, seeing as you didn’t come down to breakfast this morning.”

“Much obliged, Bruamin.”

I keep staring out the window. I can hear him fiddling with the utensils on the tray, and when he walks over with a steaming mug, I ask:

“Bruamin, what does she speak about with the castle staff?”

My elderly lord-in-waiting looks out the window, down at her.

“She has been speaking with them constantly,” I growl. “I must know if she is conspiring against me with the staff.”

“Excuse me if this is ignorant, but would that not exacerbate her curse, Sire?” he asks, perhaps a disapproving tone eking in. “The one that will kill her should she break her marriage vows, including betraying you?”

“It would,” I answer, eyes affixed on her.

“And she knows this, yes?”

“I made it aware to her,” I say. “But perhaps she didn’t understand the depths of the spell. Or she considers killing herself alongside me to be a worthy sacrifice.”

I hear a quiet sigh from Bruamin.

“No, Sire,” he tells me. “I do not know what she says. Do you want me to speak with her and find out?”

“Yes,” I say. “But be subtle about it. We do not want her to know that we’re suspicious of her conspiracy.”

Bruamin sighs again. I glare at him.

“You have something to say?” I growl.

“Nothing, Sire,” he answers.

“I know you better than that, old man. Out with it!” I order.

Bruamin shakes his head before he answers me:

“Sire, do you consider, even for a moment, that this might all be unnecessary?”

“Unnecessary?”

“Yes,” he replies. “This young lady would never have left the castle because the witch told her that Faevea would fall if she did. The marriage was not necessary—she wasn’t threatening your rule. On top of that, you sacrifice years of your own life to curse her like this, as if those other measures did not exist.” He lowers his head. “Speaking personally, I worry for you, Sire. This behavior encroaches on the paranoid, and that is no state for a king.”

I know in my heart he’s right; the kind of vigilance paranoia brings ironically leaves one open to attack.

But I can tell in my turning stomach that something's wrong. I'm still in danger. I have to be. If Dralis can't get to her anymore, then she has to be the danger.

"Sire, your parents—"

"It is now that you forget yourself," I answer grimly. "My parents were killed by someone they loved. They let their guard down around just the closest of their friends and family, and paid for it with their lives. I won't be killed in the same way. Even if she seems harmless, I'm not letting my guard down."

"Of course," Bruamin replies. "But must this guard be so high? That curse you cast on her cost you three years of your life, and I worry it's for no reason."

"It isn't a curse," I snap. "Any more than being married to me is a curse! It is a deal she agreed upon, and she has transformed overnight from a peasant to a queen! That is not a curse!"

I turn and glare at him.

"Now, go see what she's talking about with the staff!"

Bruamin shakes his head softly at me before he catches himself and bows his head.

"At once, Sire."

As he turns to walk out, my stomach gives another churn.

I shouldn't talk that way to Bruamin. My incredibly dulled conscious whispers.

"Bruamin!"

The old man looks at me lightly.

“I... thank you. For the tea,” I say. “I probably needed something.”

He just bows his head at me, but his eyes are a little softer.

Bruamin isn't back with his report by the time dinner is made. I suppose there's nothing for it—she needs to trust him to speak freely in front of him, and that may take some time.

But damn it all—I need to know what she's planning!

What is she capable of? I must know! I need to put her to the test sooner rather than later to know what I'm contending with—can she handle a blade? Other types of magic? I must know, but I'm waiting on Bruamin to return and report first.

I'm sizzling in frustration when a knock comes on the door:

“Bruamin?” I call.

“Er, no, Sire,” some non-descript guard replies. “Dinner is served, Sire.”

I growl at the back of my throat and stand from my desk. As I emerge from my quarters, I flinch.

She stands next to the guard, as beautiful and defiant as I saw her on our wedding night, albeit with fewer tears in her eyes.

“I... good evening,” I say.

Her eyes narrow at me. “Good evening.”

“How long were you outside my room?”

“Not long,” she answers. “Dinner had been called, so I was going down to eat.”

“Oh. That makes sense,” I reply.

The guard begins walking us down. There’s no talking for a moment—but if there’s any time to talk, it’d be now.

“I see you are making friends amongst the staff.”

“Are you about to tell me I shouldn’t?” she asks.

She looks at me sharply. I bristle from her gaze alone. I don’t say anything for a moment—what does she have to say for herself, I wonder?

“You trapped me here,” she grumbles. “You can’t stop me from being friends with anyone I want to. In fact...” She looks over and smirks “...you can’t stop me from doing anything.”

She stops walking and turns to me, arms folded.

“Now that I’m queen, you can’t stop me from doing anything,” she says. “You said we share the throne, so things are going to change around here.”

My skin prickles more.

“We may share the throne, but you have yet to do anything with your status as queen other than take advantage,” I growl. “You have yet to perform any duties reminiscent

of a queen, so I don't appreciate any smugness from you. Perform some queenly duties, and then you may have earned some arrogance."

Her emerald eyes are flinty when she glares at me again.

"What do you mean queenly duties?!"

It takes me a moment to realize what could have been interpreted from that, but I keep strong. Don't show her any weakness. She scoffs. I sneer back.

"What I mean is that you don't seem to understand what being queen entails. It doesn't mean you do anything you want." I walk closer to her and lean down, close to her face. "It doesn't mean I can't do anything to stop you if I have to. This is my kingdom still. And you are my wife."

She just glares at me.

"I agreed to share the throne," I growl. "I didn't agree to your flouncing around, taking advantage of what I've already built."

She folds her arms.

"Then you shouldn't have kidnapped me," she grumbles. "I didn't want to be here—you forced me to be!"

"I had to in order to keep the kingdom from falling," I snap back. "That prophecy doesn't give you permission to run rampant."

"You do," she snaps back. "You do whatever you want."

"No. I do what I have to," I growl. "It's just that no one sees it."

Then, an idea hits me. I smile slowly at her.

“You want to see what it takes? Why I “run rampant” like I do?” I challenge her.

“You come join me on my tasks for a day. You’ll see.”

She snorts, but I can see the glimmer in her eye—she sees the challenge, and it intrigues her. I can use this.

“What say you?” I ask.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll join you for the day. Let’s see what you do.”

Perfect.

“Very well. You’d better sleep early tonight, then,” I chuckle. “Early on the morrow, we start with sword training.”

She frowns at me, but I keep my expression still.

I need to know how much of a threat she may be. I know she has little to no control over her magic, but how can she fight? Once I have a read on her capabilities, I’ll have a better idea of what to expect from her. Then, when Bruamin comes back with his report, I’d be able to fully know what she can and can’t do.

“I’ve never held a sword in my life!” she insists.

She could be lying. I’d only know once she has a blade in her hand; even if she’s pretending to be an amateur, just the way she’d hold it alone would be an indicator. There will be subtle signs she’s not able to hide.

So, I keep smiling.

“You want to know what I do in a day? Then, you’ll join me, whether you’ve held a sword or not,” I say.

She grumbles again but tosses her glossy hair.

“Fine,” she says again.

I nod at her, still smiling.

“Let us get to dinner, then,” I say. “ Wife.”

She growls for a moment and then snaps. “I know you know my name.”

I laugh, then repeat myself. “Let us get to dinner, then,” I say. “ Ebelor.”

“Queen Ebelor,” she grunts.

“ My queen,” I press.

Ebelor groans a touch, but there’s a touch of a smile on the corner of her lips.

Strangely, a little of the tightness in my stomach eases when I see the smile. It takes off the edge of the hollowness in my heart.

Seeing her smile... I feel... a bit better?

How odd.

I frown a little bit myself, forcing myself to look away.

Why? What’s happening to me?

We keep walking toward the dining room. She doesn't say anything to me, and I dare to steal another glance at her. She's smiling fully, but she's in her own thoughts now.

I don't say anything to her; I don't want that smile to disappear, and the fact is, if I speak to her, it probably will.

I just enjoy the sight of the smile as we make our journey to the dining room.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

Dawn has barely broken when the king sends someone to come get me. As a queen, I've gotten used to sleeping late and waking later, but suddenly, a guard comes knocking far too early.

I blink bleary eyes as I'm led down to the courtyard by Geiton, and the king awaits me in the paved courtyard. He looks to Geiton behind me.

"Leave us," he grunts.

Geiton bows and then leaves. I scowl; I hate how he treats the castle staff. These are people, ones with lives and interests and names, but they've told me how the king has never bothered to learn anything about any one of them. Except for Bruamin, but he's a special case it seems.

It makes my skin crawl. I was in a lesser position than them a few days ago, and I most definitely don't deserve to be talked down to like that.

I'm brewing over my words when I look back to him—and then pause.

I realize it's just him. On a courtyard. Alone with me. With a sword. And a dark gleam in his eye.

Oh... this might have been a mistake.

Another voice counters the first thought. But he can't kill me! The kingdom will fall!

"Wh-what is this?" I ask. "I thought we were doing training?"

“Yes,” he answers. “But I figured that it’d be better if it was a private session.”

He leans down and picks up the sword by his side.

“You wanted to see what I do.” He tosses the sword from one hand to the other and waves it through the air. “This is what I do.”

He picks up the other sword and makes a motion like he’s trying to toss it to me. I give a shriek and step back. He smirks and then swivels it around until he’s offering me the sword by the handle.

“Wait, already?” I ask. “I’ve never held a sword before!”

“I want to see how you fare,” he says.

He's smirking at me. It's a power play—it has to be. He wants to see me embarrass myself with this. A sneer pinches up my face. Well, I've handled farm tools before. I'm stronger than I look. I'm not going to give him the satisfaction.

I take hold of the end of the handle, and he releases the blade.

CLANG!

It immediately falls to the ground; I had no idea it was so heavy!

“It’s a bastard sword,” he says, smirking. “It’s two-handed.”

“You’re holding it one-handed!” I protest. “How was I supposed to know?!”

He just chuckles throatily.

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” he purrs. “But I’m a dark fae. We’re stronger. But let us make the odds even.” He changes his grip on his own sword. “En Garde.”

He steps forward, and I give a small shriek, stepping backward, holding the blade defensively in front of my face.

Something cold taps the side of my neck. I realize my eyes are squeezed shut, and I blink them open. His sword rests against my jugular, but he’s holding it carefully, twisting it to the flat of the blade so it doesn’t cut me.

“Shall we try that again?” he asks.

I growl.

“Are you seriously trying to spar with me when I’ve told you I’ve never held a sword before?! ” I snarl.

He backsteps, and his eyes hone in on me again.

“En Garde,” he says again.

He steps forward, and I force myself to keep my eyes open. He’s being slow with it. I swing my own sword down in an axe motion. He switches his grip and holds his blade up to block my strike. My sword clangs against the other one, and I yelp and drop my blade.

“Ow! My hands!”

The shuddering of the impact seemed to crackle through my bones, leaving my hands tingling in pins and needles. He starts cackling. He’s forced to lower his sword, hand on his knees as he laughs.

“I told you!” I snap. “I’ve never done this before!”

“It’s true!” he cackles. “That’s truly as good as you can do!”

He keeps laughing at me. A flare of anger pulses through me, and I hold my sword up.

“En Garde, you bastard!” I snarl.

The king looks at me, and whilst the grin lowers, he just shakes his head and holds his own sword up. I charge forward, and he parries easily. I keep swinging, but he keeps blocking it like it’s nothing. After a while, I’m panting and sweating, and eventually, I swing the sword down in a tired overhead strike. He just blocks it with his sword and then steps forward and grabs my wrists.

“Stop,” he says. “That’s enough.”

“Oh, what?” I challenge. “I’ve embarrassed myself enough?”

“Embarrassed yourself?” he asks, frowning.

“That’s why you did this, isn’t it?” I demand. “You wanted to see me humiliate myself as a power play! You already stole me from my village! Took me from my sister! How much more power do you need?”

His eyes darken. His grip tightens on my wrist, and his sword bears down on my own. He strides forward, easing me backward a few steps. My back touches the wall.

“I need enough to make sure you couldn’t kill me,” he growls.

He uses his sword to flick my own out of my hand. I just let it fall away.

“If you think I’m trying to kill you, then just let me go home!” I beg. “I’m sure there’s a way we can figure out how to get me home and keep to the prophecy!”

He just leans back a little, frowning in confusion.

“After everything, you’d still rather go home? You just became queen. I thought you were making grand plans with that.”

“Of course I’d rather go home!” I snap back.

“Why?” he asks. “The squadron with the healer arrived this morning. They say Thawallow is a plague-ridden cesspool.”

“It is!” I cry. “But is Maribelle okay?! Please tell me she is all right!”

His eyes soften just a touch.

“Apparently, she ails, but she’s still in the final stages of Weeping Fever—longer than she should be if she was going to die,” he says. “Nothing’s promised, but it’s a good sign she might be on the road to recovery.”

I close my eyes as relief swells in me. I almost sag to the ground—only his hand gripping my wrists keeps me from deflating.

“Truly?” he asks quietly after a moment. “You truly only care about that?”

“Of course I do!” I howl. “There’s nothing else to care about!”

My gaze snaps back up to him. He’s looking at me with a look in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“Thawallow is dreadful! The people are vile, it’s riddled with plague, there’s barely enough to eat—and there’s no chance of leaving because you’re too busy surviving day to day! The castle dungeons were better! ” I scream. “Maribelle is the only thing that matters there! The only thing! ”

The king gives me the most sympathetic frown I’ve seen on his face.

“You were happier in the castle dungeons?” he asks.

“I HAVE NEVER BEEN HAPPY ANYWHERE! ” I scream.

I pant for a few moments before I just hang my head. I’m hanging from his hands, still clasped around my wrists. There’s silence for what feels like an eternity.

“So,” he says quietly, so quietly, “you’ve just given up on being happy... because someone else needs you...”

I can’t answer; my eyes are stinging. My throat is wobbling. I just don’t want to cry in front of him.

My hands are suddenly freed.

“I... know how that feels,” he says.

I want to bite back—but I’m still choking down a crying fit. But then I look in his eyes and there is knowing in there.

“It’s hard to be happy when there’s so many people who need you...” He mutters. “And they’re all suffering so much...”

“And you can’t do anything,” I blubber. “No matter what you do, you can’t fix it!”

“But they look to you anyway,” he adds on. “Like you should know what to do, but you can’t help them... and they... they don’t understand why you’re not helping them...”

Maribelle’s watery eyes, brimming with as much fear as leakage from the Weeping Fever, flash behind my eyes. Those eyes... they were begging for help. But what could I do against the plague?

I fold over as the crying fit erupts from me. I howl in the years of misery that have been built up in my heart. The screaming cry that leaves my lips wrenches up from my gut and screeches out into the air.

There’s a clang of metal hitting the floor, and I barely have enough time to look and see the king’s sword abandoned on the ground before his arms close around me.

“I’m sorry, Ebelor,” he says. “It’s a terrible thing to be burdened with. I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.”

Another wave of tears pours from me. My throat is wobbling so much I can barely speak:

“Th-thank you! Thank you! That’s all I’ve ever wanted to hear!”

He pulls me in harder into his chest. He’s warm. He smells incredible—I didn’t realize how incredible until I was crammed so close to his hot skin. Something glimmers from the corner of my eye, and I look over. His wing has folded over the top of my shoulders as well, like a cocoon around me. Somehow, it’s radiating heat as much as the rest of him.

He’s so warm, but he’s in full armor. Is it me? Am I imagining this heat, or... is he so warm that it can radiate all the way through the metal?

The only way to tell would be if he took the armor off...

Heat crawls through my body as well, from the pit of my stomach into my throat. The naughty thought sneaks in before I can stop it—wondering what would happen if he took it all off...

Wait! It hits me like a slap to the face. What am I doing?

I wriggle, and he steps back from me.

It's like I'm seeing him for the first time. When his face isn't smirking, sneering, or scowling, he's beautiful. Those eyes are endless, a rich brown that I could lose myself in.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I spent my childhood hearing tales of the usurper queen who would destroy Faevea—I treated you badly because of them. Clearly, you're not some kind of assassin, and you've not done anything worthy of suspicion."

He looks away, regret filling his beautiful features.

"Bruamin was right, I am paranoid..."

Even pained, that face is so perfect, his strong jaw clenching in stress. Without thought, my hand reaches forward and touches his jaw. He flinches and looks back at me, and I rest my hand on his face. He hesitates before placing his hand on mine.

"Your sister is in the best care in the realm," he murmurs softly. "You don't need to worry about her anymore. You can... be happy. If you want."

My eyes sting again.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

The smallest smile ekes across his face, and then those sweet brown eyes move down to my mouth. I see him look down. Another shiver passes through me. My hands move without my permission—moving from the side of his face to the back of his head. My fingers clench into a fistful of his soft hair. He presses into me again. His arms tighten around me. His mouth-watering scent is filling my head. His eyes are endless, delicately moving from meeting my gaze to looking at my lips and back again. His breath is a little heavier. He leans closer, and the stubble on his face scratches my cheek.

His lips... I start to turn my head. I can feel his jaw moving along mine, waiting until our lips meet. His breath fans out over my neck—I feel like I can feel his heart knocking against the inside of his armor.

My heart is pounding in my chest as well.

It's pounding... hard.

Too hard.

“Wait,” I murmur.

He does. He pauses for a moment. My heart keeps hammering—faster. Faster. My breath is heaving. My head is reeling. My face is flushing. My body is hot. Heat is pulsing up and down my body, scalding me from the inside. Finally, I recognize it.

It's... magic.

And I can't control it!

“G-Get away!”

“Ebelor? What’s wrong?!”

I stumble back away from him and hit the wall. I start to fall, and he grabs my arm and steadies me.

There’s too much crackling lightning inside me. I’ve never felt anything like it—it’s scaring me.

“Ebelor, tell me what’s happening!” h e demands.

I open my eyes, and as he looks at me, his own eyes widen.

“Ebelor…”

“Vic—”

Lightning crashes out from my body. It explodes, crackling around everywhere. Windows smash around me. Rocks crack and hit the floor with heavy thuds. My vision flashes white. My scream of agony and exertion is lost in the noise of the lightning.

Then… it’s gone.

My eyes have rolled into the back of my head. My knees hit the floor heavily, my bones shuddering as I land. My head’s still whirring, but I force myself to blink. My vision comes back, wavering as if we’re underwater.

I can see him. With a gentle purple sheen around him, coming from his extended palm. I can only see his outline and watery colors. But he lowers his arm, and the

purple forcefield vanishes.

“Ebelor!” His voice sounds like it’s coming from the bottom of a well.

“Th-thank... the gods... You’re... safe... Vic...mar...” I gasp.

My vision starts fading to black. The last thing I see is him breaking out into a sprint toward me.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

My head is cradled on either side by fluffy softness. I slowly come back to myself, starting with feeling my face embraced by something furry. Then, my fingers and toes begin coming back to me, sensation creeping inward until I feel the comfort I'm lying in.

I'm so comfortable...

Something cold touches my forehead—it gives me a little shock as it touches on me, and I flinch. Sound reaches me, completely muffled.

Because of the softness around my head? Or am I still coming back to consciousness, and my hearing hasn't come back?

I just wait, and more feeling trickles back into my body. After a while, I start to see some light behind my eyes. I take a deep breath and summon the strength to open my eyes.

At first, it's all dim blurs of color. I blink hard, and all becomes clear.

I'm in my room, and it seems to be evening time now. I'm tucked up in bed, with something fluffy folded under my neck to keep my head up. Cold spreads over my forehead, and I look up to see the king dabbing a wet cloth on my face.

When I look at him, he sighs in relief.

“Ah! You're finally awake!”

“Vicmar,” I murmur quietly.

“So I wasn’t inventing it,” he chuckles. “You did say my name. I wasn’t sure you even knew it.”

I smile wanly.

“Of course I knew it,” I say. “Just like you knew my name but didn’t use it before.”

He chuckles lightly.

“Touché,” he says.

I start to struggle into a sitting position, but Vicmar puts a hand on my shoulder and presses me down.

“No,” he says. “Be careful. You must be exhausted.”

“Not that exhausted,” I say. “I feel all right.”

He releases his hand from my shoulder, and I sit up.

“What happened?” I ask. “We were talking and...” I clear my throat. “And my powers went out of control for some reason.”

“Well,” he says. “my guess would be that you’ve been repressing your powers for a long time.”

I hang my head. He nods at me.

“I thought so,” he answers. “Repressing your powers is terrible for your magical

control. For your powers to explode like that, I'd guess that you've seldom used them throughout your entire life."

I smile weakly, my hands clenching on the duvet.

"I didn't have a choice. I only used my powers a few times in Thawallow, and I became a pariah," I murmur. "If I used them much more, they might have run both myself and my family out of the village. I couldn't do that to Maribelle."

Vicmar sighs deeply. He dips the cloth into a bucket by the bedside and spends a second wringing it out before he looks at me with a firmer gaze.

"You can't keep doing that," he says firmly. "Here in the castle, you will not be treated like a pariah for using your powers—if anything, I encourage you to use them; repressing them for so long could do a lot of damage to yourself or even get yourself killed." He reaches forward and dabs the wet cloth against my forehead.

I don't answer. The wet cloth is very soft, but what's even softer is his eyes, looking over me gently.

I... don't remember the last time someone cared for me... Has anyone ever cared for me?

I just lie for a second, my eyes scanning over his strong jaw, his sharp features, and his eyes, looking over me... his lips...

A spark jolts out under the duvet. Vicmar blinks and looks down, then back to me.

"Are your powers still out of control?" he asks.

"N-no. I'm fine."

He doesn't say anymore, but he looks down at me. Those lips pull up in another smile and sensation flickers across my own lips—that stubble on his jaw, scraping deliciously against my lips as I-

There's another spark from under the covers. He chuckles lightly and removes the cloth from my forehead. I close my eyes for a moment.

Concentrate. Control the powers.

I change the subject as a way to distract myself.

“Why are you here?”

“What do you mean?” Vicmar asks, wringing the cloth out.

“I mean... why are you here instead of the castle staff?” I ask. “A king doesn't have to do this.”

“Perhaps,” Vicmar says, dropping the cloth back into the bucket. “But a husband has to when his wife's sick.”

He leans a hand forward and presses his bare palm against my forehead. My stomach flicks at the contact, and there's another spark under the covers. Vicmar notices again and chuckles for a moment before the hand on my forehead moves to the side of my face.

I catch my breath. Another spark scatters under the duvet.

“Well, your fever seems to be gone,” he says. “You were burning up a short while ago, but now, you seem to be much better...”

He keeps his hand on my face, so gently...

“Th-thank you,” I answer, struggling to fight down the feeling boiling in my stomach.

Vicmar smiles.

“It’s fine. I’m just pleased that you’re better,” he purrs, then looks down for a moment before he says. “I don’t know how much you remember before you lost consciousness, but I am sorry for how I’ve been treating you whilst I was suspicious of your motives.”

Vicmar sits closer to me. I’m tingling, so very aware of his hand on my face still.

“You can be happy here—and to apologize, and as your husband, I will make sure you will be happy here.”

Is this the same man who was acting so cruelly earlier?

“Why are you being so kind?” I breathe.

Vicmar gives me the saddest smile.

“You said that you couldn’t remember the last time you were happy because you were too busy taking care of your sister,” he murmurs. “I have never understood anything more.”

I don’t answer at first. It takes me a moment to try and put my thoughts into words.

“I didn’t know you... were compassionate like that.”

It feels so very insufficient, but he smiles and answers:

“I feel I am,” he says. “Or was... I doubt anyone remembers when I was the nice king... But it was a fool’s route, the nice route. The compassionate one. It left more people dead and suffering than I ever wanted... Sometimes, I can’t believe I act like such a jaded monster, but other times, it doesn’t surprise me at all what it’s made me.”

My stomach gives another flutter. I swallow hard.

“I... don’t think you’re a monster,” I murmur.

His eyes soften. His lips part. His own hand presses a little harder on my face.

A flicker of pleasure crashes through me. Another spark crashes through me—and out into the air. Vicmar flinches. His fingers clench on my cheek as he jumps.

“Sorry!” I yelp.

“It’s okay,” he says throatily. “I can handle it. I’m just pleased you seem happy.”

“Happy?” I ask.

A smirk ghosts over his face.

“You know that powers tend to spark up when you feel strong, excitable emotions?” he says. “Anger... excitement...”

I feel like the last emotion he was going to say dances on his lips, but he doesn’t quite say it. I see it in his hooded, desirous gaze. He leans forward, and I get another breathful of his wonderful musk.

“Let me see how your powers are reacting,” he murmurs, his warm hands brushing

over my shoulders and draping the duvet down.

My stomach jolts harder. Electricity dances around me—sparks bouncing on the bed as I'm revealed.

“W-wait-!” I breathe.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs. “You won’t hurt me. I just want to see how they’re reacting.”

He pulls the remainder of the duvet off, and I am in my thin nightdress. Sparks dance around me, bouncing around like stones skipping on the surface of a lake.

“That looks normal,” he says lightly.

“Normal?” I gasp. “What about this is—?”

His finger touches my lips. A pulse of arousal pulses through me.

“It’s okay,” he purrs. “Don’t speak; you’ll rile yourself up. Just breathe. Calm down, and so will your powers.”

I do breathe, but that doesn’t help; his scent flows down my throat, making my mouth water.

“I-I can’t!” I whisper. “Not whilst you’re touching me!”

Vicmar laughs at the back of his throat.

“Then... perhaps you can calm down after I stop touching you?” he purrs.

My heart is hammering in my chest. I'm panting. Little flickers of pleasure skitter up and down my body. The sparks still dance.

"Maybe, but... don't stop touching me yet," I beg breathlessly against the finger on my lips.

He gives the lightest sigh at the back of his throat, and he moves up. He's so close to me that my eyes close. I drink in his scent greedily, and I feel his body heat radiating into mine. The finger slides away from my lips, and I open my mouth. Then, his lips press on mine.

I gasp on his mouth. My arms snap around him—one hand moves onto the back of his head and grabs his hair in a thick fistful. My other hand moves to his lower back, my fingers crawling through the barrier of clothing until I can reach his warm skin.

A groan rumbles in his chest. He pushes into me. His tongue pushes past my lips, warm and wet, as it seeks out mine. His tongue slowly brushes around inside my mouth.

A moan builds in my chest and then escapes me. He groans.

His arms wind around me fully, and soft warmth brushes my face. I gasp and break the kiss to look. His wings have spread around me, touching my cheek as he encloses me. I don't know if I've ever seen a fae's wing so close – how the light shines through them, lighting them up in gold. His soft lips move down to my neck, drifting down my skin. There's the smallest sting on my neck—a nibble. Pleasure cracks through me—and sparks fly around us. Vicmar flinches a little, his entire warm body grinding against mine for a second. I feel another bolt of pleasure when his body hits mine, and I arch into him.

"S-sorry," I gasp, "I- I didn't mean to..."

A dark chuckle rumbles through him, vibrating on my chest where his body is pressed on mine. Tingling spreads through my nipples—they harden under his body.

“Don’t worry,” he growls. “You can’t hurt me... I think I even like it.”

His attractive purr sends another wave of pleasure through me—another sigh escapes me.

His hands move. One falls down to the hem of my dress and moves under it. His hot fingers drift up my bare thigh—leaving a warm streak up my skin where he touches. I can’t believe how hot his body is, pressing so hard into mine. It’s like his skin is burning hot, a slick sheen of sweat building on mine as he grinds into me. Another purring, throaty laugh rumbles through his chest, and he takes his time. His fingers pinch into my thigh and drag down... Just that tiny sting of pain sweetens the pleasure – I start squirming, but he grabs me and holds me still. I hear the crackle of more sparks and feel his muscles clench and relax as he’s hit.

His lips move back to my ear, his warm breath fanning across me as he speaks:

“Yes... more of that. Give me more!”

I can’t speak back; too much pleasure has swelled in my chest – it’s all I can do to whimper in desire as his hands move up my body. His hands brush my skin as he takes off my dress. Once I’m naked, I can feel large, soft wings pressing into my back, holding me up as his hands move to my naked breasts. His hands take hold of my chest, and a spark of arousal ricochets up me as his fingers brush over my nipples. I’m still gripping his hair, and I pull him down to me. I kiss him hard, and he moans into my mouth, his fingers still rubbing my nipples.

An aroused yelp escapes me when his fingers touch on my nipples. He gives a low growl as I squirm under him, in time with his thumbs slowly moving around and

around.

“Mm... Here, is it?” He purrs, “Is that making you spark?”

I open my mouth to reply – nothing comes out but another breathless moan. He chuckles gently, then his head dips down. His wings stand erect in my vision, soft and golden.

But then the sharpest sting of pleasure yet forces my eyes closed.

Yes! Yes! Oh, gods!

The orgasm building in the pit of my stomach leaps up a few notches as his soft, wet tongue curls around my nipples. Slowly. Gently. Every small motion of his tongue scatters sharp pleasure through me – my legs kick out. My hips buck, and grind against his as his tongue moves. Then, the most delicate pinch of pain through me. His teeth close on my hard nipple – just enough to nibble me. A shriek of arousal breaks free from me. I judder out of control. I try to say his name but pleasure garbles me.

Sparks dance around us both. He twitches and moans as each spark hits him. He gives a purring laugh, and his wings tighten around me. His sweet mouth leaves my nipple and I hear myself give a weak sound of pleasure and disappointment when he does. His wicked grin widens when he hears how much I want him.

His hands move down to my body and offsets me, tipping me over until I’m on my back, spread on my soft bed.

I open my eyes, and I see Vicmar lean up, halfway through taking off his shirt. As he pulls it off, his wings springing free last, I scan my eyes down the warrior’s physique. He has sharp abs I could chip a nail on, small scars puckering his skin in short

streaks. His wings look golden and angelic in this lighting, and his eyes shine. He towers over me at first, sitting back on his knees. He sees me ogling him and gives a wide grin. Then, he leans down toward me. I arch up desirously as he lowers down, my eager hands reaching for him. Sparks zap all around us. I see each little bolt of lightning as it cascades from my hand, dances across the sheets, then hits him. It's like magnetism; they just seem drawn to him. I watch it closely, and see how his abs tighten when a spark hits them. I reach forwards, and just press my hands on his chest. I feel his muscles tense under my hands, my power flowing directly into him. A deep, guttural moan spills out of him into my ear – the sound of his pleasure sends tremors through me.

Yes... I love hearing you moan.

I try to focus a little – and I pump just a little extra power into my hands. Vicmar gives another cry of pain and pleasure, and I feel him sink a little.

I find myself in his chest, and I lean up to kiss his throat. It's salty in the lightest sheen of sweat on him. I drape my tongue slowly up his throat, and his moan vibrates across my tongue. His arms move around me, but I move up to his ear:

“Vicmar!” I gasp, “Pl-please! I need you! Now!”

He gives a groan in reply. I grab the top of his waistband and start pulling at them desperately. I don't succeed, but his hands move to his buckle. Once he's free, he leans down and presses his lips on mine, his tongue caressing mine again. As he does, his hands press against both my inner thighs. He pushes my legs open, and I let him.

I wait. I ache, and I wait.

Then—

He impales me with one smooth motion, shuddering pleasure scattering up me as he pushes inside me, the chamber inside my body tingling sharply—so sharply that the pleasure is almost pain. So very untouched until now, but now sparkling with every inch he pushes in.

I stutter, whimpering as he gifts me with the last little bit of length, then starts to drag out.

Every motion sends another bolt of arousal through me, collecting together to build an orgasm in me.

“Oh! Oh, gods! Vic-Vic-Vicmar!”

He growls in pleasure. He keeps pulling out, holds for a moment, then thrusts hard in. A crash of pleasure. There’s a flash behind my eyes. I moan again, my back arching.

His hands move to either side of my head, boxing me in. There’s nothing else in the world right now except him. His heat, his scent – and him being inside me. He starts moving faster. Faster. The arousal swirls, crashing around me like a building whirlpool. My eyes roll back in my head. I can’t breathe. There’s too much pleasure filling me. His chest is pressing on me, slick with a little sweat. His heart hammers in his chest. I lean forward and lick his sweaty skin. He moans as salt spreads over my tongue. My hands move to grip his back—touch his wings. He cries out sharply, then leans to my ear:

“Touch my wings!” he hisses at me.

I grab his wings hard with both hands. They’re soft, like the rest of his skin, and I rake my fingernails down them like I would his back. He growls in pleasure. He thrusts into me harder.

Harder. Faster. The pleasure builds. Builds. It's swelling. It's filling me. The pleasure keeps building.

And... And... Oh, gods, I can't take it!

Yes!

I burst. My hips buck up as the orgasm explodes in me. I cry out, my eyes rolling back in my head. I grip his wings harder. Vicmar cries out, his orgasm ringing in my ears. His hands move to me and tighten..

It pulses through me in heat, and then I melt into the bed. Vicmar pants for a moment, then sits back and pulls out. Once he has, I feel his body slide against mine and lie next to me.

For a moment, we just pant, deliciously spent. Then, his laugh rumbles through his chest, shuddering through my back.

"See? Didn't I tell you?" he purrs. "I told you your powers would calm down if you found a way to relax. Now you've... had some release, the sparking has stopped.

I just laugh lightly and let my head drop on the pillow.

"So it has," I sigh quietly.

Vicmar starts shuffling, and I grab his arm and pull it to me.

"No," I say quietly. "Stay. You said you were going to take care of your wife, right? So stay here and take care of me."

He laughs quietly. Then he settles down behind me, looping one arm around my

waist, the other around my shoulders, and then pulls me close to him. As I slot perfectly against his body, I slip back to sleep again.

And I'm fairly sure I've never been more comfortable in my life.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I worry last night was a serious lapse in judgment. I don't know what it was, but those feelings which escaped me as I was speaking to her... I don't think I've ever spoken them aloud to anyone.

And I barely know her...

I am the Cruel King. It's not just a title; it's what protects me. Protects us all. People hesitate to start a full-fledged war with a kingdom helmed by a Cruel King. But... that was some serious weakness I revealed to her. It worries me how easily the truth of who I am could be spread.

Is it that? A sudden, pesky, unwanted voice asks, Or is it that you think she thinks less of you for knowing how soft you truly are?

I try to shake the thought away, but it lingers like grease on my mind.

"Vicmar!" she protests. "Are you watching?"

"Yes," I lie. "I was watching. That was fine."

"What could I have done better?" she asks.

She swings her sword idly, and whilst the movement of her wrist looks a little more natural than it did even a few hours ago, she still has that stiffness to the motion that says she is a beginner. At least she is getting closer to being able to defend herself if she is ever caught.

But I'll never let that happen.

I realize I'm still staring at her when she pouts.

"You weren't watching!" she declares. "You're supposed to be teaching me, and you aren't paying attention!"

My first response is a coil of defensiveness through my stomach, but I suck in a breath through my nose. However, last night came to be, Ebelor and I are on good terms—I should not ruin it now.

"Apologies," I say. "Show me again."

She gives a growl at the back of her throat, but it is a combination of irritation and exertion as she lifts her sword to the sky. She closes her eyes.

"Find your center," I tell her firmly. "Don't fight the power. Channel it. You are its conduit, not its generator; lead it to where you want it to go. Make sure you—"

"I would really prefer it if you stopped talking now," Ebelor growls.

The shock sparks a small laugh from me.

I can see it in her. I didn't see it before—it happened too quickly—but I see the glow in her chest, around her heart. That same illuminance ekes out from her heart, into her veins, and I watch the power from the outside.

Control it... control it...

It spreads wider from her heart... out... but then it moves back inward, spreading only to her right arm holding the sword. It travels up her arm, starting to crackle over

her skin. But she controls it. It travels up to her palm, and then it hits the sword. As soon as it hits the blade, it starts conducting, the sword turning into a sizzling, illuminated blade of magic.

I look back at her face. It's creased in pain, sweat dribbling down her face in thick pearls of liquid. Her eyes are still closed.

I look back to the blade. I can see it glowing red hot under the magic flowing through it.

"Fire it!" I bark. "Don't let the sword melt!"

At my order, the power explodes out from the end of the sword: KRA-BOOOOM .

The lightning escapes the point of the sword, released into the sky and making its escape. Soon, it dissipates into the perfectly blue sky like it was never there.

Ebelor gasps. Her sword lowers to the floor with a metallic clunk, and she leans on it, panting hard.

I walk over, fetching a potion bottle hanging from my hip and popping the cork as I approach her. Once I get close, I loop an arm around her shoulders and cradle her.

"Here," I say. "Drink some of this."

"I don't need any restoration potion," she grumbles. "I've got a better handle on my powers now—I'm not going to pass out."

But she's quivering and sweating in my arms.

"Well, have some, just in case," I say. "Yes, you've got a better handle on them than

losing consciousness every time you use them now, but it's exhausting to use magic as a beginner, and we've been practicing all morning."

She sighs, then allows herself to lean against my arm as I put the teat of the glass bottle to her soft, pink lips. She closes her eyes as she drinks the potion, and I just enjoy the sight of her. Gentle, smooth face, delicate features on her pixie-like face, her petite figure fitting into my arm so perfectly. Her lips suckle on the glass bottle, sucking down the red potion. After a moment, she pulls away and sighs, a small trace smear of red in the corner of her mouth.

I wish I could kiss her to get rid of that.

The urge comes, and I hang my head and clear my throat until it goes again. Since when was I so craven for a woman? Utter insanity.

She stands from my arm, a little more color entering her face again. She gives another sigh, a more satisfied one this time.

"I have to admit," she laughs breathlessly. "It does help."

Ebelor stands from me and smiles, bobbing on her toes.

"I feel ready to go again," she says. "Where's my sword?"

I laugh lightly. Now, she's suddenly moved from petite to flinty and strong. Glaring emerald eyes of a lightning warrior.

My queen... That simple phrase suddenly runs through my head, not with dread and a feeling of obligation, but with a huge amount of warmth and pride swelling in my chest.

Suddenly, she turns from grinning determinedly to looking confused over my shoulder. I turn around, and there's a guard in full armor running toward us, clanking every step of the way.

"Sire!" the guard shouts at the top of his lungs.

"Dronfil?" I hear Ebelor murmur behind me. I'm still impressed she remembers all of their names, let alone their voices when they're in full armor.

"What is it?" I order.

"Sire, you must come at once!" the guard says. "You need to get to the war room right now! Your war counselors ordered it—they're already there!"

"For what reason?" I demand. "I did not sanction this!"

"It's an emergency!" he calls. "Sire, there is an unknown army heading toward Eyston Keep! They're going to hit the castle town in a matter of minutes!"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I have never seen a man run so fast in full armor.

And Vicmar does it whilst dragging me by the arm. As we sprint, my mind whirls: how did an army appear so quickly?! How did those watching out miss an entire army approaching the castle?!

He keeps me close to his side as he runs through the castle, forcing my legs to paddle twice as hard as his as we run together. Sometimes, when we turn corners, he flies past them too fast for me to keep up, and he takes me into the air for a moment before I hit the ground again. Before long, we burst into the war room. At first, because of my servant instincts, I try to wait outside, but Vicmar pulls me in by his side.

I have never seen such a large group of military men on the edge of a screaming panic before. They shuffle and sweat, faces red, as they shout random orders at each other. Once Vicmar strides up to the head of the table, they straighten and quieten. The respect is palpable in the air, but it's respect from fear.

Vicmar lets me go and gives me a look before he slams both hands down on the war table.

"Someone tell me, and tell me fast, how an entire army escaped every watchman!" he snarls across the room.

His voice carries, bouncing like a skipping stone off the table to a ricocheting silence. Suddenly, the war counselors don't want to say a word.

Vicmar slams another fist into the table.

“TELL ME!” h e roars.

One of the braver war counselors pipes up: “We don’t know, Sire! We are trying to figure it out and we can’t! None of our scouts in Murbyn Bridge spotted any armies approaching Eyston, and now... and now—”

“Well, give me some details!” Vicmar snaps back. “What is this army? Naga? Sirens?”

“They appear to be either humans or dark fae.”

I see the color drain from Vicmar’s face.

“Do you know what color their armor is?” he asks, a voice crack breaking his authoritative tone.

“Dark purple or black, we believe,” another says. “It has to be magical armor, Sire.”

Vicmar’s face is fully white now.

“It has to be him,” he says.

He says that one statement much quieter than any of the other things he’s said, but it somehow rings out louder than the rest of them. The entire room falls to piercing silence. But one by one, all the war counselors look to me.

Suddenly, I am under every one of their beaming gazes. Vicmar is the last one to look at me, and whilst his face is pinched up in a snarl, I can see the fear dancing in his eyes.

I hate to ask, especially in such a loud silence, but I have to:

“Who is him ?”

“Dralis,” Vicmar answers me immediately. “He’s the only one I can imagine who’s capable of materializing an army like this.”

My blood runs a little cold.

“The one working for Mischevil?” I ask.

“The same,” he says. “He’s got dangerous non-elemental powers—namely, the power to teleport. If he’s sourcing his power directly from a god, then he may be able to teleport an entire army. We’re lucky that the magical seals held firm enough that he wasn’t immediately on us.”

“But why is he here all of a sudden, Sire?” one of the war counselors asks.

Vicmar looks at me one more time and then says:

“Well, clearly, he has found the lost queen and wants her for himself.”

My throat closes. I swallow hard.

“How did he find her?” another one asks.

“I don’t know...” Vicmar answers. “The marriage, the spell around her, around the castle... it should have made it impossible for him to find her.”

My heart is sinking. I’m now gulping spit like I’m going to puke; I know.

Because as fast as we married, as fast as the spell was cast—it wasn’t fast enough. After all, he could teleport into my dungeon cell much faster than anyone could do

anything...

It flashes past my eyes: a crooked, sexy grin... very dark eyes... long, silver blonde hair pulled back tight to his head... large insect wings resting wide...so muscular...

A soft touch taps between my shoulders. I flinch. A heat creeps up into my cheeks.

“Are you okay?” Vicmar asks. “You look flushed.”

“Oh, I... I’m worried,” I answer vaguely.

“Don’t be,” Vicmar growls. “He will never lay a finger on you. I will kill him with my bare hands if he tries.”

The snarling tones send another chill through me; I believe him. Vicmar looks back to the table of war counselors.

“What are our options?” he asks. “What do we have at our disposal right this moment to work with?”

“N-not, uh, not much, Sire. Most of our forces are tied up in Murbyn Bridge—we essentially have only the castle guards at our disposal right now.”

Vicmar sucks in a deep breath, then huffs it quickly.

“Is that it?” he asks. “Just the population of guards inside the castle right now?”

“Yes, Sire.”

Vicmar huffs out another stressed sigh, leaning on the table and hanging his head. He stays like that. No one dares say a thing for a moment.

“He must have known where Ebelor was for a while,” Vicmar grunts. “He was biding his time. He was waiting until we were at our most vulnerable before he struck.” He looks over at me. “If he realized Ebelor was starting to master her powers, he might have felt the pressure to make his move. After all, the lost queen is supposed to be Faevea’s salvation when she is at the side of the person trying to save Faevea, which means his defeat. He couldn’t let her master her powers entirely before he made his move; she’d be too much of a threat.”

I’m suddenly the focal point of the conversation. In fact, it’s almost like he’s talking entirely to me in this huge room of people for a moment.

“But we are married, and we are bound,” he says. “You’re inside the castle, and the castle has so many wards on it that he couldn’t teleport his army in here. Until those doors are broken in and the castle itself is sieged, it’s the safest place for you.”

“But what then?” I whisper. “The army is in the castle town right now. Surely, they’re going to break in.”

“They haven’t yet,” Vicmar answers. “We still have time.”

He looks at me, and then his eyes sharpen. He turns back to his war counselors.

“We still have time,” he says again. “If all we have in the castle are the castle guards, then that’s what we’ll have to use to defeat his army.”

He reaches forward, grabs a blueprint of the castle, and pulls it over to him.

“We do not have the raw numbers... we don’t even have the magic...” Vicmar says. “But we have the environmental advantage in the castle. It’s a stronghold of its own...”

He looks up at the war counselors.

“Tell the cooks to start boiling oil,” he says. “As much of it as we have. Bring all the available guards to the top of the castle. Any magic users will be brought to me, and I will place them and give them the spell I want them to cast. Tell all the other staff to work on barricading all entrances, except for the secret one into the moat. Have someone contact the witch and bring her to me—we may need her assistance. Once all the regular staff have finished their barricade, take them into the bowels of the castle for their safety.”

A few of the council bow their heads and scurry out of the room. I don’t know if they are the ones who are designated as the ones who do errands or if they snatched up the opportunity to get out of the way of Vicmar’s yelling, but they sprint off immediately.

He looks over to me, then looks back to the war counselors.

“Two of you accompany Ebelor down to the safe room,” he says. “She will stay there until either the battle is over or I give the signal that the castle is about to fall. Once I give that order, you both escape the castle with Ebelor, and you flee as far across Faevea as you can. From there, you are on your own, but your ultimate objective is to make sure this woman never finds herself in the grasp of Dralis.”

“Wait,” I gasp. “What about you?”

“I shall be on the front lines,” Vicmar answers. “I am the most powerful magic user currently here. My own powers are imperative to the success of our defense. Either I successfully defend this castle alongside my guards, or I fall with it.” He glares at me. “Either way, your safety is crucial for the survival of the entire kingdom. Mine isn’t. It doesn’t make sense for us to do this any other way. I may die here, and if Dralis has his way, I will. But the castle can fall, I can die, we can all die—as long as you make it out of here alive and not with Dralis, Faevea will carry on.”

“You expect me to just accept that?” I demand. “I thought you were just training me to become a warrior! I have lightning powers— are you telling me they’d be of no use whatsoever in this situation?! If we have so few options, then let me help!”

“No,” Vicmar answers. “If you are on the front lines, Dralis will find a way to pick you off. We can’t have you vulnerable, even if your lightning powers could theoretically be of use. Besides, you are hardly a master of them, and I think you’d need to be much more skilled before I’d feel comfortable with you fighting.”

“But I can’t just sit here and do nothing!” I insist. “Not whilst everyone else fights on my behalf! My explosions of power are probably what drew him over to begin with! I can’t let everyone die for me whilst I hunker down and do nothing! ”

“You are doing something,” Vicmar says. “You’re surviving. That’s what I need from you—what Faevea needs from you.”

“It’s what I need from you, too, but you’re on the front lines!” I’m suddenly begging.

He just gives me the saddest smile.

“I do not have the time to argue with you, Ebelor. I’m sorry,” he says.

He looks over my shoulder and nods. I’m seized at either side by both arms. I swivel my head around, but the two war counselors who have grabbed me are not meeting my eye. Sparks start darting around me, in time with the rage coursing through my veins.

“Vicmar, you can’t do this!”

“Take her away,” he says, looking back down to the blueprint. “Make sure she is in the safe room as quickly as possible. You have my permission to go to the armory

and gather everything you need to defend her with your lives; her survival is imperative, even when I'm dead and gone."

"Yes, Sire," the war counselors on either side of me chant.

"Vicmar!" I howl.

They begin dragging me backward. I kick and scream, my heels scraping along the floor. My guards keep flinching as my electricity keeps hitting them, but they dutifully keep dragging. I realize that I'm crying when my screaming starts stuttering:

"VIC-VICMAR, IF YOU DIE, I SWEAR TO THE GODS I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!"

He just gives me the saddest smile over his shoulder.

"As long as you live," he replies quietly.

Then the doors to the war room slam shut in my face, and I can't see him anymore.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I keep screaming and crying until my voice cracks, but there are so many people running around that I'm barely heard over the chaos.

Except by the war counselors, that is.

"Please quiet down, Your Highness!"

I pause in my screaming. Once I've caught my breath, I snap back:

"Your Highness? So you know I am your rightful queen! Why are you doing this to me?!"

"We were ordered to—"

"I know!" I snarl. "But I have a greater claim to the throne than him! I'm ordering you to stop!"

They pause a little and look at one another. The one I wasn't speaking to shrugs and answers:

"With all due respect, orders aside, if you die, Your Highness, Faevea dies with you," he says. "And I don't want to die."

"Oh, what a shame," a new voice suddenly interjects.

The war counselors whip around.

And he's there. Just as I remember him. White hair and dark eyes, like a living skull.
A sexy, crooked smile.

"Dralis!" one of the war counselors snaps—then draws a sword.

Dralis moves faster. One of his hands snaps out, and a pulse of purple power blows both of my escorts down the hall. They crack as they hit the floor again, not uttering a single cry as they tumble.

Then, his hand grabs my wrist like a vice.

"You're coming with me."

"No!" I scream. "I know who you are, and I—"

"I'm not giving you the choice," he replies before pulling me by the arm.

I tumble forward into a swirling purple vortex. It's like being pulled into a whirlpool of purple water, but once it flows over me, my consciousness flows away with it.

When my consciousness returns, I'm on something furry. Heat radiates from one side, and I recognize the crackling of a fire. I open my eyes and look around.

It's... home. It's my home.

I stand up slowly, scanning my eyes over my family home. A simple single-room hut, but warm and smoky. Comforting.

I walk past the large bed, running my fingers over the duvet to get to the window.

When I pull the curtain aside, I see Maribelle outside in Thawallow.

“Maribelle!” I gasp to myself.

She’s not just well. She’s glowing. She’s out with other girls in Thawallow, talking and laughing. She has such a warmth on her face.

I drop the curtain and dash over to the door. I whip it open and-

Dralis’s muscular body almost fills the entire doorway, his pecs just barely visible in a hardly done-up shirt. He walks in, and I back off. My body trembles and the sparks scatter from me. Dralis gives me a sexy little smirk.

Don’t do that... you look too much like Vicmar when you do that.

“This is it, isn’t it?” he purrs.

“This is what?”

“What you want,” he answers, then gestures around him. “Exactly this? Your home, warm and welcoming. Your sister, recovered from Weeping Fever, living her best life.”

I swallow hard. It’s like I can feel his magic already shuddering through my body with every step he takes closer to me. It... throbs.

I drop my gaze from his. I can’t keep staring at those devilishly dark eyes.

“What I want... doesn’t matter,” I murmur. “I have to stay in the castle as the queen, or Faevea falls.” I scowl at him. “And you know that.”

“I know what the rumors are,” Dralis answers back.

He fully steps in and shuts the door. I hear it click in a way it never did before—and I just know it’d be locked if I tried.

“Rumors?” I ask. “You mean the prophecy?”

“Ah, yes,” he purrs. “The prophecy... Enlighten me.”

“It says that I am—”

“No. No second-hand recaps,” Dralis says. He walks over and sits on the end of my bed before looking at me with a knowing smirk. “The whole prophecy. Recite it to me.”

I stare blankly at him for a moment.

“Oh, do you not know the prophecy?” he asks. “Have you just had people assure you that’s what it says?”

I still don’t have the words. Dralis gives a single laugh and looks away.

“Interesting,” he purrs.

“I know what you’re doing,” I say. “And I’m not going to abandon the castle and go back home—or join you in your crusade to destroy Faevea.”

“See, I think this is why we’re setting off on the wrong foot,” Dralis purrs. “Because we have never met. Not truly. Yet you’re looking at me like I’m a villain.”

He pats the side of the bed next to him. I don’t say anything.

“Oh, come now,” he says. “Don’t be standoffish. We should be friends.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because we have a lot in common,” Dralis answers. “Don’t you think? I would have thought if anyone would understand my point of view, it’d be you, Ebelor. We were both pariahs in our own homes, and people made it very clear that we were not wanted every day of our lives.” His dark eyes somehow darken even more. “And, of course, they only consider us valuable once they know they can take advantage of our powers. For you, of course, it’s the prophecy that makes you valuable. Without it, no one would care about you.”

I try to answer back, but the words catch in my mouth.

He’s right. The softer side of Vicmar aside, he only cares because of the prophecy.

“Of course,” Dralis continues. “I don’t play nicely with people I know are trying to take advantage of me. That’s why I’m a villain to them, Ebelor.”

“You’re trying to destroy Faevea,” I answer. “You and your trickster god.”

“Says who?” he asks. “Says the Cruel King? The one who kidnapped and killed so many women? The one who sits on a stolen throne in a stolen castle and threw the rightful heir in the dungeons?” A smirk twists his lips. “The one who took you from your ailing sister?”

“H-he’s sent healers for her!” I explode. “She’s doing well now!”

“Oh? So you’ve seen her?” Dralis asks. “You’ve seen Maribelle alive and well?”

I pause. He stands and begins walking toward me again. I back away and hit the wall

eventually. His hands move out and hit the wall on either side of me, boxing me in.

“He’s been lying to you, Ebelor,” he purrs. “You know he’s a liar. He’s lied about why he kidnapped those women and why you were there—he only conceded when the witch told you beforehand. He bound himself to you without your consent. But you assume he’s telling the truth about your sister? How do you know he hasn’t just told you he sent people and she’s doing well? Have you seen her?”

I look out the window. Dralis takes my chin with his thumb and forefinger and forces me to face him.

“This is a representation of what I could give you,” he purrs. “If you thought it was true, it just tells you I know you well.” Then his face darkens again. “Answer the question: have you seen your sister alive and well?”

“No,” I breathe.

“So how do you know he fulfilled his promise?” Dralis asks.

“I-I...” I hang my head. His fingers drop from my face.

“You want to believe him,” he purrs. “Don’t mistake that for him being truthful.”

A shiver runs through me. He moves even closer to me, his entire arm resting on the wall behind me. His chest almost rests on mine. I open my mouth to answer back—and I’m hit with a mouthful of his scent.

He smells... so much like Vicmar.

The sex last night runs through my mind. A flicker of arousal scatters through my stomach.

Damn him!

“I would never lie to you,” he murmurs, those dark eyes resting on mine.

His presence still throbs through me. I’m panting lightly.

“Then start now,” I whisper. “Why do you want to destroy Faevea?”

“Destroy?” He smirks. “Is that the word you’ve been told? Destroy?”

“Yes.”

He tuts lightly and shakes his head.

“I told you they were liars... I want to change Faevea,” he answers.

“Really?” I say incredulously. “Define change .”

“Well...” he purrs. “I want to change how things are run. Overthrow the Cruel King, bring the humans back into the mainland of Faevea, and improve the living conditions of the average Faevean—just to name a few. I suppose to the pampered ilk in the castle, that would be “destroying Faevea”. It would be destroying their way of life, but I don’t think he should be allowed to slouch on a stolen throne whilst everyone else suffers under pestilence and war.”

“He’s... trying to fix those problems,” I murmur.

“Well, whether he’s incompetent or malicious, Faevea has suffered long enough,” Dralis declares. “It needs a change.”

“And Mischevil?” I ask. “What of your trickster god?”

Dralis flaps a dismissive hand.

“A means to an end,” he says. “After all, when you’re building an army against a king so shockingly cruel, you have to find advantage where you can.”

“Including the lost heir, right?” I ask.

“Of course,” Dralis says. “You are the rightful heir. Your will is what determines Faevea’s fate. Come on, Ebelor. What has he given you? Do you truly have faith he’s not just taking advantage of you, lying to your face, and using you?”

He leans even closer. My breath catches in my throat as I taste him in the air.

“ I’d have let you see your sister. I’d have let you walk freely from the start. I wouldn’t lie to you,” he purrs. “I’d give you anything—because I respect you. He doesn’t.”

I force myself away from those burning dark eyes.

“Well, you’re too late,” I say. “He bound me to him, remember?”

“You think we’d be having this conversation if I couldn’t change that?” Dralis murmurs.

“How?” I ask.

Suddenly, his lips press on mine. I gasp against his mouth, and he forces my mouth open. The softest touch of his tongue tangles on mine. A sharp shudder of pleasure ricochets through me.

He even tastes like Vicmar!

His mouth releases me, lips moving to my jaw and then to my neck. The smallest sting makes me cry out. Then, his lips are at my ear.

“See?” He chuckles darkly. “You’re an adulterous wife. If I remember correctly, he told you that any betrayal against him would kill you both. Another lie.”

“H-how do you know that?” My heart is hammering in my chest, stuttering my speech.

“I have my ways,” he purrs. “The point is that he lied even about the bonds of the spell. You’re not bonded like he told you.”

His hands rest on my hips. The arousal that spikes through me almost feels like pain. One hand drapes down to my inner thigh. The other crawls up my back and presses me into him. His lips plant kisses down my neck. The pleasure is crashing through me. I’m arching. I’m gasping. He starts grasping at me harder. His fingers sink into my skin, and he roughly pulls me into him.

“Let me take you,” he hisses in my ear. “Right here. Right now. And the bond’s broken. You’re free to do whatever you want... be with whoever you want.”

His fingers trail over the inside of my thigh.

Oh! Please! Yes!

I want him to touch my nipples, just like how Vicmar did...

“I can do better than Vicmar,” Dralis chuckles. “You can trust me on that. Just let me take you.”

W-wait...

Then, my heart sinks.

I didn't say anything. I was so distracted that I let him get so close to me...

I pull away from Dralis. It's like the spell has just shattered, and for the first time since I've been here, I think about everything going on.

I can't be in Thawallow right now. Maribelle can't be playing around outside. None of this is real.

Because he's inside my mind. All of this is inside my mind.

"Now, hold on—" Dralis tries to say, but my thoughts are too loud.

In fact, he's manipulating me worse than that; he keeps smelling and tasting like Vicmar because he knows he could make me want him like that!

I start pulling away from Dralis—and he grabs me harder.

I try wrenching away. His grip is hurting me now. His fingers sink into the flesh of my thigh and back like he's sinking his fingers right into soft dough. I can feel myself bruising under his nails.

"Let me go!"

"I can't do that, Ebelor," he replies darkly. "If I take you, Faevea is saved."

Terror prickles over my skin. His fingers push my thigh even harder.

"I thought you would let me move freely!" I shriek in terror. "I thought you respected me!"

A chilling smile crosses his face. His eyes are hollow.

“Well, I guess perhaps both of us brothers are liars,” he murmurs.

I search deep inside myself until my powers coil around like trained snakes. For the first time, I see a little worry in his smug gaze.

“Wait—” he says.

I push the power out. Lightning cracks out from within me, sparking out into the world around me. Dralis cries out. His grip leaves me. But I don’t stop. I force the power out into the world until all I can see is bright light sizzling out into the sky around me. My eyes are blinded by my own magic—but in the crackling shape of my own lightning powers, I see a purple symbol fighting me. It becomes brighter and brighter as I conjure more lightning; the ward fights harder and harder.

No! Get out of here!

I suck in a deep breath and then give one more push. The white lightning gives an even brighter flash and the purple ward breaks.

As soon as it shatters, I feel it. That odd throbbing I remember fades from me. His power—it’s gone.

I clench my fists and my teeth and force the lightning to stop. It’s become more obedient. As the sparking slows down, I see a dark green canopy up above me.

No... not a canopy. It’s material. It’s a tent. I’m lying in a bed, in a tent.

Not where I’m supposed to be!

Exhaustion is beginning to seep into my body, but panic is blotting it out for now; I roll over onto my hands and knees—and I come face to face with a man.

I give a shriek and scuttle back, but he doesn't move. When I stand, I look around me. There seem to be a lot of guards around me, all of them splayed and unconscious. At least, I hope they're unconscious...

But as I'm wondering, the sound of battle reaches me. Clashing metal, screaming, roaring of battle cries. I get up and sprint over to the split in the tent, where light is spilling over.

When I burst out, the first thing I see is Eyston Keep on the horizon. There's an entire army clad in purple, crawling on the stone fortress. There are soldiers at the top of the keep, firing arrows at the attackers. A steaming container rests on top of the keep, and as I watch, the container is tipped over, hitting the army below.

Then, I see a glimmer in the air above my head. I don't recognize the armor, but the one figure flies on golden wings. A dark fae. Then, a second one rises up from the battlefield, this one clad in purple.

The purple one must be Dralis, and that means the other one should be—

“Vicmar!”

His name wrenches from my lips in a strangled cry. My legs begin springing forward before my brain even has a plan. I have to reach him in time. I have to.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

The wind rips my hair around my face as I look over the battlements. It's like the weather itself has picked up on the prickling tension, blowing icy pricks of rain into my skin. The army has been making steady progress into the castle town, but they don't seem to have interest in the townsfolk, at least.

They are walking toward us with purpose. They are aiming for the gate, and nothing else will suffice.

I lean back and scan my eyes over my meager army. More like a gathering, and I'm not sure any of them have ever seen battle before. Many of them are younger. Some shake with their bows in hand. Our best are in Murbyn Bridge, and I'm sure Dralis knows that.

I've placed the magic users around the crucial places in the battlements. They, too, are the lesser ones, the leftovers, and the spell I've taught them is surely above their skill sets.

But if we're to survive this, then they are going to have to cast beyond their station. Everyone is going to have to perform above their skill sets if we are to have a chance.

But I have to make it back. I have to make it back for Ebelor.

"Hold steady," I tell them. "We have a plan. If we keep to it, we should be fine."

They speak as one: "Yes, Sire!"

I look down the battlements. The army's coming close. They're almost here.

“Hold steady,” I say again.

The army shakes next to me. A few more minutes, and they’re at our gates. They have a battering ram, and they take it to the door. Before they can even swing it once, I turn and call:

“Oil! NOW!”

“Sire!”

A pair of guards take hold of the handles on the side of the boiling oil pot and heave. It creaks and then tips over. A golden waterfall tips from the top of the container, the flush of heat hitting me even as far away as I am. I don’t watch—I hear the cries of terror and pain under us all. When I look down next, they’ve scattered away from the door of the keep.

“Archers, fire!” I roar.

All of the soldiers pull back their arrows and fire. Before I can see the effect it has on the battle, I see a dot hovering up on the horizon, shining purple in the sunlight.

There he is...

I look at the guard standing next to me.

“Give the order to the magic users. I have to face him.”

“E-even if it locks you out?” he asks.

“Don’t question me,” I snap. “And give the order.”

“Yes, Sire.”

I draw my sword and spread my wings. With one powerful beat, I’m soaring into the skies. He approaches me, mirroring me exactly. He twirls his thin, rapier-style sword, eyes fixed on me. At first, he just keeps circling me perfectly. I ready my sword, but I keep waiting. Whatever he does, I’m going to counter it...

A pulse of magic crashes behind me, and Dralis’s eyes dart up over my shoulder.

“A shield like that?” he asks. “I didn’t know you had mages like that left in the castle. Unless...” His mocking gaze moves down to me. “...you’re risking the lives of so many young mages by giving them a spell too large for them.”

I don’t rise to his bait.

“What are you doing here, Dralis?” I ask.

He gives a single bitter laugh.

“I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to spell it out to you, Vicmar. Especially considering I brought my whole army.”

“You wouldn’t have had to!” I plead to him. “There would have been no need for an army! ”

He doesn’t say anything. I fly closer to him.

“Dralis, you could have been king too!” I insist. “You could have been king alongside me! Why has it come to this?! Tell me!”

His mocking edge leaves his expression, but so does all signs of a smile. There’s

nothing but bitterness left in his sneering face.

“Are you still referencing that stupid pact we made when we were children?” he asks.

“Yes, I am!” I snap. “I meant it! I meant every word! I knew it was unjust for our parents to push you out from ascending to the throne—that’s why I promised you that we’d rule together when I did! The title was right there for you!” I sweep a hand down, gesturing to both armies clashing below us. “Why all of this?!”

Dralis growls at the back of his throat, then points his sword at me.

“Your parents!” he snarls.

“What?!” I snap back.

“They were not our parents; they were your parents!” he says.

“We share a mother, and my father raised you from a baby,” I counter. “What more do they need to do for you to consider them parents?!”

Dralis scoffs.

“Of course you would think that! Why would the golden boy notice these things?” he mutters, half to himself.

“What things?”

Dralis looks at me sharply.

“Vicmar, your parents made it extremely clear that I was an unwelcome child,” he growls. “It wasn’t just pushing me out from being in line from the throne. It was what

they called me. It was how they looked at me. I was the son of the tyrant, a dirty mongrel breed, and they made it clear that life would be easier if I wasn't there."

I feel myself curl up a little bit as hot, sticky guilt crawls throughout my body.

"I did notice," I admit. "I know they didn't treat you well." I suck in another deep breath. "But we're not children anymore. Our parents aren't even here. It's just us now. Things should be different."

"Yes," Dralis snarls. He starts circling me again. "Things should be different, shouldn't they, Vicmar? And yet Faevea is still as terrible as it ever was."

"Dralis—"

"Faevea is still as terrible as it ever was!" Dralis repeats in a roar. "You have changed nothing! You have helped nothing! You are ruling this land as your parents did, and you promised that you wouldn't!"

"Things..." I start, then sigh. "Things were harder to maneuver than I thought. It was—"

"We are too old for these kinds of excuses," Dralis growls. "You've had long enough to prove to me you're different from our parents, and you are not. It seems you're destined to rule like they did." He points his sword at me. "And I am destined to be a tyrant like my father was."

"Dralis—"

He pulls his sword back, and crackling power shimmers up and down his sword. I thrust my palm forward, and a magical shield blocks his attack. Once I look back up, he's gone.

I blink and extend my awareness around me—I sense his aura behind me, pulling back.

I spin, holding my blade up in a block. His sword clashes against mine, and Dralis then pulls back and thrusts toward me. I beat my wings hard and fly above him. I can see him recoiling from how hard he thrust forward.

Now would be the time to strike.

Except... I hesitate. As the time comes and passes, all I do is put some distance between him and me.

Damn it, damn it! What was the point of trying to be the Cruel King when I can't even strike the one person I have to?!

As he readies himself again, a sneer breaks his expression: "You're a coward, Vicmar!"

He charges toward me, and I brace myself. As he gets close, he swings his sword in a horizontal strike. I hit my blade and parry it away. I thrust a kick into his chest, and he freefalls for a moment before swooping back toward me. He dives like a hawk, and a glint of blade flickers over my eye. I swing up my own sword instinctively. Metal clangs, but pain scatters over my forehead. I cry out. I flap my wings and force myself backward. Blood red fills my vision, and I blink, clearing the sanguine out of my eye. Dralis is coming toward me. I swing blindly, and my blade meets resistance. My brother screams. But I see a gleam of movement in front of my gaze.

Pain bursts through my stomach, a blinding white-hot agony, cracking up and down my body. Shuddering up and down my spine. Everything spins. I'm screaming. Blood pours down my legs. Weightlessness begins to take me; my wings can't carry me anymore.

I'm falling. Screaming. I can barely see, but I open my eyes. Dralis flies over me, watching me fall with a smirk on his face. He draws back his sword and aims it down. Just as it looks like he's about to drop it, a crash echoes through the skies. There's a flash over my vision. A few moments later, a boom deafens me.

Dralis is falling. He's arched in pain, starting to fall through the air. Then, another one. I see it better, forcing my eyes open this time. It's a lightning bolt. It targets Dralis, cracking into his body. This time, when it hits, he goes plummeting.

More lightning strikes. More screaming around me.

But it's all fading... Fading...

It disappears as I continue to fall.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I sprint out of the tent and straight into the battlefield. There are more soldiers here than I can comprehend. Ahead of me, there's Eyston Keep, but it seems to be surrounded by some kind of purple dome. The enemy army is pounding at it—throwing spears, shooting arrows, even throwing fireballs and javelins of ice. It sends ripples through the forcefield, but that's all.

So I... I'm trapped outside... Damn it!

A clang of metal-on-metal hits above my head. My face snaps up to see them. The two dark fae whizz around each other in the sky. They're so fast that I can barely keep track of which one is which—if they weren't in different colored armor, then I would have no idea.

I see Vicmar catch Dralis's blow, and Vicmar swings his blade in return, and I see the lightest gush of blood.

But then Dralis surges forward with his own sword. I see the blade sinking into Vicmar's stomach, bursting through the other side in an explosion of red.

"NO!" I howl.

They can't hear me. I know what I have to do.

I suck in a deep breath and try to reach my powers sitting inside me. Channel it... I am its conduit. My powers coil inside me, feeling like cobras waiting for my orders.

I hold my arm over my head. Dralis is flying still, watching Vicmar fall.

You smug bastard...

I aim my hand at him. Him. Directly for him.

My powers wrap around my arm, traveling up toward my palm. Then, I force it out.

KRA-BOOOM.

The lightning bursts out and hits Dralis. I see him arch and scream, and he starts dropping. I force out another bolt of lightning, and the second time it hits, he drops from the sky like a struck insect. I can't follow Dralis—I need to keep my eye on Vicmar. He's close to the ground now.

No! No, please!

I begin sprinting to where he's going to land.

What am I supposed to do? Can I catch him? Can I use lightning to catch him?

No, I can't do that—I'll kill him if I try!

Before I can wonder much more, Vicmar's wings beat weakly and lift him up. Not much, but enough to mostly break his fall. Once he hits the ground, I skid to my knees at his side.

“Vicmar!” I yelp. “You're bleeding!”

He's not awake. His eyes are just about open, fluttering weakly. When I look down at his stomach wound, my own stomach drops.

Oh, that's so much blood!

I press my hand onto it to try and stop the bleeding. It's all I can do.

We have to get back in the Keep somehow!

I look back to the castle. The forcefield still seems to be holding strong ahead of us. Good for the citizens inside the castle, but now we're trapped.

If the army was to leave, then they'd lower the forcefield.

I take the risk to release Vicmar's stomach and stretch my arms out. This is going to be the biggest challenge I've ever tackled... I may pass out again...

But if I don't, he's going to die...

I suck in a deep breath and spread my arms even wider. My powers are frothing in my chest, and it's starting to hurt. But I need more power. I need as much as I can summon.

I let it build, and build, and build. Then, I thrust my palms forward.

Lightning crashes out, but it's different than the last few. Its white edge is tinged with blue, and it scatters across the ground between the castle wall and the enemy army. Doing that gets easier and easier as the soldiers keep moving backward from the new threat.

I keep pushing out my magic until I've formed a perfect defensive wall around the castle. After I finish connecting the electricity to one another, they keep crackling, like I intended.

As soon as I've done that, it feels like every ounce of energy has been sapped from me. I feel my eyes start to close, and I fall forward onto my hands and knees.

Oh, gods... what now?!

I don't have any strength left...

Help! Someone help! Witch! Can you hear me?!

Suddenly, I can hear her voice: how can I help?

I can feel her next to me. When I crane my head up, I can see her standing over me.

"I can take you back to the castle easily enough," she says.

"Y-you're here..?" I choke out.

"I was keeping a close eye on things," the witch answers. "Like I said, should you die, Faevea crumbles."

I can't digest that; my head is whirring.

"C-can you take us back to the castle?"

"I can take you both back to the castle," she says. "But it shall cost you one year."

My vision is fading away at the corners.

"O-one... year...?"

"All of my most magical magic comes at a price," she says. "And the most valuable price that everyone can pay is with time."

Vicmar gives a deep, retching cough under me.

“He doesn’t have much time,” she says coolly. “If you want to be taken to the safety of the castle, you will transfer one year of your life to me. If you want him to be healed, we can renegotiate.”

My sight is fading.

“T-take us to the castle!” I beg. “Please!”

The witch nods her head slowly.

“It’s a deal.”

She reaches toward me, and my vision blacks out.

I swig huge mouthfuls of red potion. I can feel it giving me my strength back, but I think that the panic pounding through my veins is doing more to keep me awake.

“Well?!” I demand.

Bruamin pulls the gauze taut around Vicmar’s wounded stomach, but it’s not a few seconds before scarlet soaks the bandages. The elderly lord-in-waiting leans back from Vicmar and gives a worried sigh.

“It... doesn’t look good,” he says. “But the strike has missed a number of major organs.”

I look over at some of the people watching. The king’s room is filled with guards and other staff, watching worriedly. Among them is the witch, who stands with a cool, knowing smile on her face. After all, if there is no other choice, there is... her.

I turn my gaze back to Vicmar in his bed. He looks... so pale and weak, his brow coated in a light sheen of sweat, his chest raising and lowering too fast, his shallow breaths wheezing weakly from his agape mouth.

“What can we do?” I ask desperately. “Surely there has to be something we can do?” I hold out my red potion. “What about the healing potion? Would that do something?”

Bruamin has a grin expression.

“It would do something, but I doubt it would do enough.”

I lean down over Vicmar. His beautiful face is creased in pain. I can only imagine the agony he must be in. That is when I stand up and turn to the witch.

“Witch?”

She steps forward through the crowd and bows her head. It’s only now I realize that it’s a false humility.

“I have to ask you a question,” I say, “about the bond between him and I.”

Her eyebrows gave a little dart up toward her hair, and then she grins.

“Yes?”

“We are bonded. Apparently, there are conditions where if either he or I break them, we would both die, right?” I ask.

“That is correct,” she murmurs.

“Is there any way we could take advantage of the bond which we have?” I ask. “Can I take some of the injury from him?”

There’s a murmuring throughout the crowd. They look back and forth between themselves. The witch smiles at me.

“We could. You would do that?” she purrs. “Keep in mind, even half of an injury like this could kill you.”

I can feel a hundred eyes on me right now.

“I’ll do it,” I say.

The witch walks over and extends one hand over Vicmar and another over me. I close my eyes, and I brace myself. It starts with a short, sharp, stabbing pain in my lower stomach—and that turns into a fiery, cracking pain. I cry out and double over. There’s some shouting from the people watching me. Hands grab me and guide me firmly to the bed. I collapse onto it and hold onto my stomach. The shock of it is starting to fade away. Now, it’s a dull, throbbing pain in my lower abdomen.

I open my eyes and see Bruamin, as well as everyone else in the room, gazing at me with very wide eyes.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “It’s not pleasant, but I am not going to die.”

“Thank the gods!” Bruamin sighs. “That was such a risky move, My Queen.”

I smile lightly.

“Not riskier than doing nothing,” I answer.

He just gives me a wan smile. The crowd around us seems to release their collective breath.

“Thank you,” he says. “I didn’t imagine for a moment you’d do this for him.”

I shrug.

“He took care of me when I wasn’t doing well,” I say.

But now there’s another squeezing in my stomach, but I know it’s that feeling of lying. I give an uncomfortable shuffle.

“Lie down,” Bruamin says suddenly. “You’re probably very weak.”

“I’m okay, Bruamin,” I murmur. “I’m not getting up.”

The elderly lord-in-waiting then gives me a very warm smile.

“Apologies, My Queen,” he says, a touch of humor on his lips. “But I wasn’t talking to you.”

Then, another hand touches my shoulder. I look around. Vicmar’s awake, looking at me.

“You’re awake!” I exclaim.

Vicmar shuffles a little, the other hand moving to his stomach.

“Somehow...” He murmurs. “Although the last thing I remember was falling, stabbed in the stomach...” His eyes turn a little more intense. “And lightning! What happened? What happened to Dralis? And the army at the foot of the keep?”

He looks around, recognizing his own room. Bruamin clears his throat, and Vicmar looks at him.

“Bruamin?”

“I’m sure your queen can explain everything in perfectly sufficient detail,” he says. “But as for now, rest assured that the battle is won for now.”

I can feel Vicmar relax in the bed next to me.

“That’s a relief,” he says, then looks down at me.

Such a gentle, sweet smile passes over his face. He just looks at me for a moment before he looks up at the people in the room.

“Leave us,” he says. “We need to talk.”

It's so abrupt and rude that I shoot him a look.

“If you please,” Vicmar adds.

All the castle staff were already moving out, but they pause when they hear his more cordial wording. There’s a warmth in the air as they leave us alone together.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

The void rings in its utter silence. I have been walking in this abyss for a long time. There's nothing to see and nothing to hear. Nothing to set off any of my bodily senses, actually.

Am I dead?

I'm not sure. I do not know where I am or where I am going. I just know that I move.

That is... until I feel something warm. It's like a ribbon of soft, unburning flame has wound around my body—bringing back the feeling of my body.

It has wound around me from behind and then tightens and pulls on me. A gentle pull. A guide.

Then—

“Vicmar!”

Ebelor?

“Vicmar!”

It is! It is her!

I turn and begin moving toward where I'm hearing her voice, where the warmth is leading me. As I walk, I start to see. A bright glow starts lighting up my vision. But as I get closer and closer, a pain in my right side starts getting more intense. Soon,

keeping myself moving is a struggle. A large part of me wants to retreat back into the blackness, where there's no pain.

Ebelor is on the other side, though.

I keep stumbling on. The pain gets worse... and worse...

I open my eyes, and the first thing I'm aware of is the smell of her hair. I open my eyes and Ebelor is curled up next to me. There's a duvet folded between her—we're in bed together.

In bed...

Why are we in bed? What about the battle?

I start to sit up.

“Lie down. You're probably very weak.”

That's Bruamin!

I look up further. Bruamin is there, but so seems to be half the castle staff. Even the witch is here, looking over me with great interest.

“I'm okay, Bruamin,” another voice pipes up. “I'm not getting up.”

My heart gives a large jolt—it's her voice!

Bruamin sees my expression and grins.

“Apologies, My Queen,” he replies to her. “But I wasn’t talking to you.”

I put a hand on Ebelor’s shoulder. She flinches from under my hand and whips around at me. Her eyes widen for a moment, and then her entire face brightens up. A huge smile spreads across her lips, and her eyes twinkle.

“You’re awake!” she chirps.

I can’t help but grin back at her.

“Somehow...” I reply quietly. “Although the last thing I remember was falling, stabbed in the stomach...”

I’m coming more to awareness. Everything is falling into place.

“And lightning! What happened? What happened to Dralis? And the army at the foot of the keep?”

I scan my eyes around, looking at everyone’s faces. But no one looks pained or in fear. Bruamin clears his throat, drawing my attention.

“Bruamin?”

“I’m sure your queen can explain everything in perfectly sufficient detail,” he says reassuringly. “But as for now, rest assured that the battle is won for now.”

Oh, thank the gods. I know when Bruamin doesn’t mince words about such things.

“That’s a relief,” I reply.

I look back down to Ebelor. Her petite, pixie-like face smiles at me. Soft rose pink

lips...

A hooded, relaxed, desirous gaze looking at me. So beautiful...

And... she saved my life... somehow.

I want to ask her what's going on—and... perhaps...

“Leave us,” I order them. “We need to talk.”

Ebelor glares at me.

That's right. She hates it when I order them like that...

“If you please,” I add.

They all start walking out, Bruamin bringing up the rear. He closes the door, and it's Ebelor and I. But she turns over and rubs her stomach with the lightest groan.

“Are you okay?” I ask worriedly.

“Yes...” she murmurs. “I used our bond to transfer a portion of your injury to me. I'll be all right.”

I stare at her. She's done even more for me than I thought...

“You... did that for me?” I ask.

Ebelor shrugs.

“Why?” I press. “Why would you do that for me?”

She doesn't say anything for a moment. She looks around the room with her beautiful green eyes before she sucks in a small breath and looks back at me.

"I-I care about you," she says quietly.

Why? I want to press more, but... I don't want to know the answer. Instead, I just gently wrap my arms around her and bring her into my chest. She sighs and relaxes into me as well.

After a few seconds, I murmur:

"And I remember Dralis was struck by lightning after our fight. You saved me."

Ebelor laughs gently.

"Well..." She says. "I couldn't just leave you out there."

"How did you cause lightning from the secure room?" I ask. "I had no idea you could summon lightning that far away."

But her eyes duck down, and I get a sinking feeling.

"Ebelor?"

"Um... we never made it to the secure room," she answers.

That hollow feeling gets even worse.

"What do you mean?"

"Dralis found us first," she replies.

My heart jolts when I hear it.

“B-but you never left the castle?!” I exclaim. “Dralis teleported inside the castle?!”

“He did,” she murmurs. “And h-he took me to a tent outside the castle. H-he...” She drops her gaze. “He had me in some kind of illusion and—”

She chokes a little and trails off. I rub her shoulder, but that just makes her flinch.

“He kissed me,” she whispers. “And... I’m not sure I didn’t kiss him back. I’m so sorry.”

I just nod. She rubs her mouth with her hands, tears filling her eyes.

After a pause, she begs:

“Say something, please!”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” I answer. “That sounds exactly like the type of thing Dralis would do—try to get his hands on the lost heir... I didn’t think he’d try to do that, though.”

“Are... you not angry that I kissed him?” she asks.

“If you’d truly betrayed me in that way, then the bond would have killed us both,” I answer. “You said you were kept in an illusion, and Dralis’s expertise is to make someone think something is real when it’s not. Including kissing, if he wanted. I’m just sorry I underestimated him—I genuinely didn’t know he could teleport into the castle.”

I put a hand on her sweet face, and she leans her face against my hand, still crying

lightly. When a tear gets close to my thumb, I sweep it across, taking the salt water with it.

“You know what surprises me?” I chuckle. “It’s the fact that you’re so upset that you possibly betrayed our marriage like that. I didn’t even know you cared.”

Ebelor opens and closes her mouth, then shrugs lightly.

I run my hand up and down her face.

“Thank you, Ebelor,” I say. “Thank you for saving my life and thank you for caring. That makes me happier than you could ever know.”

She smiles tearfully. I lean up and embrace her softly. She pulls herself into me and nestles her sweet lips into my neck. A delightful chill runs down me. Finally, she laughs a little.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Whilst you’re thanking me,” Ebelor says, leaning back with a cheeky smile, “you also need to thank me for casting a ring of lightning around the castle and scaring Dralis’s army away. Oh, and spending a year of my life to get the witch to bring you back to the castle when you were injured.”

I flinch.

“What?!” I shout. “You spent a year of your life?! Why would you do that?!”

“To save your life,” she answers.

I suck in a giant breath—I have so much to tell her about what a bad idea that is—but

in the end, I just release it.

“Thank you, Ebelor.”

She smiles. She pulls herself into me again, her legs settling on either side of my hips. Again, another sharp chill through me. Her lips move down to my ear.

“I like you so much better now you’re not playing the Cruel King charade anymore,” she whispers.

I laugh at the back of my throat. My hands run up and down her back.

“You know...” She breathes. “Dralis really tried with me. But all he could do to make me want him is to make himself remind me of you.”

I laugh gently.

“Oh, really,” I purr. “Well, that’s interesting, isn’t it?”

Ebelor’s soft lips press a kiss on the side of my jaw.

“I prefer the real thing, though,” she murmurs. “The real king. ”

Another delicious shiver as her hips grind on mine. I’m quickly hardening under her, and I’m sure she can tell. She laughs delicately and grinds her hips into me some more.

Oh, yes.

A moan boils in the back of my throat before I let it out. She matches my moan lightly. I tighten my grip on her and start to lean forward, easing her backward,

toward the back of the bed and—

Ebelor shakes herself from our embrace suddenly.

“Ah—no! Not like that!”

“Why not?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” She pauses, then says. “I don’t want to be... pinned underneath you right now. Dralis...He...”

She trails off, but I put the pieces together quickly and lean back.

“Ebelor... He didn’t-?!”

“I’m okay.” She says quickly, “He just scared me.”

“I don’t want to scare you too. I-” But she cuts me off by putting a hand on my chest.

“I know. And I didn’t say stop. I just... want to know I’m safe.” She says.

“You are with me. Always.”

“Good.” She flashes me a wicked grin and pushes on my chest, “Because You’re going down this time,” she purrs, “I want to see you melt!”

My body shudders in her voice. I’ve never had a woman demand things of me like that.

But a throaty laugh escapes me.

“You’re giving me orders now?” I tease.

“I’m your wife,” she answers back. “I’m the only one who can. ”

She gets closer. Her soft mouth plants another few kisses on my jaw, on my neck. Every moment of contact sends another wave of electricity down me. A small groan of delight escapes me.

“Besides,” Ebelor murmurs against my skin, “you said I saved you. Aren’t I owed gratitude? Isn’t this how that works?”

I laugh—but she leans down and clasps my shaft loosely in her soft little hand, and that laugh blends into a moan. Ebelor leans against my chest, and I feel her breasts push up against my chest, her hardened nipples poking into me. Hot pleasure pulses through my stomach. She keeps pushing her petite little body against mine, and I shuffle down until I’m on my back. Ebelor slides herself up my body. Her thighs drag over me, either side of my hips, as she slowly grinds onto me. I’m already squirming, her hand slowly working up and down my length. I gasp. She gives me the most desirous grin, and then presses her fingertips into my chest. The sparks crash through me, my muscles clenching and unclenching, flashes behind my vision – but every spark sends a bolt of sweet adrenaline cascading through me, mingling together with the pleasure to create something sensational .

I let my head fall back and I let the moan spill out. My eyes are closed, but I hear her giggle, a sweet sigh of pleasure leaving her lips as well. I reach forward to touch her, but her thick dress is in the way. I try to work my hands under its hem, but from this position, I can’t. But Ebelor gently moves my hands aside, settling herself over me, and once she has her balance, she bunches up her dress and then pulls it over her head. Her beautiful breasts are freed, the glorious orbs released, her light brown nipples getting even more erect in the air.

They're so amazing.

I lean up a little, and my mouth finds the nipples, just like I know she likes. I toggle the hard little jewels with my tongue. Ebelor gives a yelp of pleasure, and her fingernails rake down my wings. The warm trail of light pain sends another shocking bolt of arousal up me. I grunt as she does, releasing her breast from my lips. I can feel the sparks of power as they dance up and down her body – rattling inside her, from just under her skin, touching mine in sharp, pleasurable little stings.

Then, Ebelor grabs my shaft more firmly—almost too hard. I open my eyes as slits. I watch her bite the corner of her lip in arousal as she lowers herself onto me. I fight the urge to thrust on my own as I feel her warm, tight little body wraps around me.

I settle for my hands snapping to her hips, crawling down until I have a thick handful of her buttocks in each hand. Ebelor gives a breathy moan, and then I feel her lean back. I feel her rock up, the drag of her body shuddering through me.

Oh, gods! Yes!

She bounces up, and the pleasure crackles through me. The powers inside her sink into me – those sharp sparks crackling through me in delicious pain as we join. She moans, and the sound of her pleasure almost pushes me over the edge. It builds; I can feel it inside me. I sink my fingers into her, and she grips my wings in return. Feeling her touch my wings—it's like she's draping her tongue over the inside of my thighs. So sensitive. So good!

It builds more. The orgasm is coming; I can feel it. With every bounce, a breathless moan escapes her—a melodic song of pleasure. It controls me, that sound. A sweet, whimpering utterance, a begging. I feel like I have to answer her call.

With every moan she gives, the encroaching orgasm shudders in thick, hot waves

through my body.

Oh—I-I-!

White fire bleaches my gaze as I orgasm. My hands grab her by the hips as I fill her with my seed. She melts onto my hips with a loud cry, her head throwing back as she orgasms as well.

After a moment, she folds forward, resting her hands on my chest. I'm trying to catch my breath despite her weight on me. It's not working, and I surge up and grab her.

“Vicmar!” she giggles.

I turn over, taking her with me until I'm spooning her. She titters breathlessly, taking hold of my arms around her with her little hands.

“Look at that!” she laughs. “I did what no one else ever could!”

“And that is?”

“I took down the Cruel King!” she giggles.

I laugh back. I dip in and give her neck a little nibble.

“Maybe you won this battle—but you won't win this war!” I growl playfully.

She nuzzles her face into my arms.

“Stay with me,” I say. “We both got horribly injured, so we ought to stay here until we feel better.” I pull her even tighter around me. “Entirely better.”

“I’d like that,” she murmurs, but I think she’s already falling asleep in my arms.

I take a look at her, all curled up in my arms, and I am genuinely shocked by how happy I am.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

When I open my eyes, I realize I am in Vicmar's bedroom. His arms are still around me, and my head is still laid out on his chest. It rises and falls slowly under me as he sleeps, pushing my head up and down. I'm so warm here. Both his wings have folded over my back, and they seem to radiate heat. They're like warm blankets over my back.

No matter how many blankets I had back home, I never got this warm... it was always too cold outside. Usually, beds in Thawallow were just about warm enough to sleep.

Thawallow... Maribelle...

The thought comes to me suddenly. How unbelievable this all is. A short while ago, I was a peasant human in a forgotten village. Scraping a living from day to day. Barely making ends meet. Nothing in the world mattered aside from Maribelle. Her happiness, her wellbeing, making sure her belly was full, and her shoulders were free from as much of the world's burden as I could make them.

My own happiness didn't matter... But now... I'm happy.

And I feel horrible about it. After all, here I am, in a fancy and warm bed in a castle, having spent an amazing night with a king. Is Maribelle suffering whilst I'm lounging around here?

Even if she's just suffering with Weeping Fever, do I deserve to be happy?

My stomach gives a little turn. I shuffle on my spot, and I see Vicmar's sleeping face.

I'm caught by his beauty—he's so serene right now. His features, from his sharp nose to his strong jawline and his delicate mouth... It's as if he's a statue, masterfully crafted by an expert sculptor. With his dark eyes closed, he looks like an angel. I can't believe such a tranquil and handsome face could ever have belonged to the "Cruel King".

Besides, if they think he's cruel... they should meet his brother.

He's why I'm really here. Vicmar is right—we can't let that man get his hands on Faevea.

As I sit here, pondering, Vicmar gives a little shuffle and grunt, and his eyes slowly blink open. He looks at me, bleary-eyed, then smiles.

"Good morn, Ebelor," he murmurs.

I can't help but return his smile.

"Good morn," I reply.

He shuffles up to sitting. I lay my head back down on his chest, gazing up at him.

"You were watching me sleep?" he asks, a little teasing edge to the question.

"No!" I giggle. "Well, perhaps I was this time, but I don't typically."

"Mm-hm," he hums, giving me an incredulous grin.

I laugh gently. His hand starts combing through my hair, trailing my locks out and letting them fall from his fingers.

“What were you thinking about?” he asks me.

“Oh... just... how crazy the change has been,” I answer.

Vicmar chuckles.

“That is all so true,” he replies. “The change has been immense. On my part, I was so scared to bring in the lost heir, so very scared she was going to steal my throne, so I did everything in my power to keep her at arm’s length—and yet we have fallen into each other’s arms.” He gives me a little squeeze. “And beds, speaking of it.”

He leans forward and kisses me on the forehead. I giggle for a moment, then look down.

“Is this right?” I ask.

Vicmar frowns.

“What do you mean? What would be wrong with this?”

“I just...I’m here. In your bed, as your queen...” I murmur. “And I’ve left Maribelle behind... Maybe I should have tried harder to get her back.”

Vicmar runs his hand down my hair.

“You haven’t left her behind,” he says. “She has the best healers in the land at her bedside right this moment. She shouldn’t be moved right now in her state, even if you did sneak out to see her.” He smiles kindly at me. “Ebelor, don’t feel guilty.”

A little spark of panic passes through me when I hear him say the G word. It’s something so deep in my core that I’ve never told anyone before; I forgot that I

blurted it out to him already.

But he understands. I can see that in his endless, dark eyes. It's reassuring, but they're too intense for me to keep his gaze for now. I duck down and nestle myself back into his chest, and his arms curl around me.

"I can't help it," I admit, staring at the curtains drawn around his four-poster bed. "It's all I've ever known since our parents died. It's been my entire life."

"I know. I know exactly how that feels," Vicmar sighs under me, his chest raising my head up and then my head dropping down again when he sighs. "It's hard to break away when it's all you know."

I nod. Vicmar gives the lightest laugh.

"Perhaps... that's why I panicked when I met you," he says like a confession. "I never wanted to be king; I saw what it did to my parents to rule Faevea. I knew that you would return at some point and reclaim the throne, and... at first, when I was younger, I was looking forward to it. But then I took the crown, started ruling, and it became all I knew. Maybe that's why I was so harsh on you when you first came—I wouldn't know what I was if I wasn't king."

"Do you enjoy it?" I ask. "Being king?"

I feel his head turn, and he looks down at me.

"Do you enjoy it?" he asks back. "Taking care of your sister?"

I smile weakly.

"Touche," I answer.

Vicmar smiles weakly at me. His hand runs up and down my back.

“But you can be happy here,” he says determinedly. “In fact, you will be. I know you’d rather go home, but since you can’t, anything that’ll make you happy you can have, Ebelor. Your sister is well taken care of, and you don’t have that burden anymore.”

“Thank you...” I say, and then the thought starts pressing down on me until I start folding up. My eyes start stinging, and the tears start flowing down my face.

“Ebelor?” he asks.

“Oh, god, it’s so terrible!” I sob. “She’s a burden! I don’t want to think of her as a burden! But... B-but—”

Vicmar leans up in bed and pulls me into a tighter hug than before.

“I love her,” I weep. “I don’t want to think of her as a burden!”

“I know you love her,” he murmurs. “But you’ve given up so much of yourself to take care of her and you’re exhausted. It’s natural.”

I choke another sob. He kisses my hair and then moves back to my ear.

“Once everything’s over and done with, and everything’s safe again, you will be with your sister,” he promises. “But you will never have the burden of taking care of her all by yourself ever again.”

More tears come from me, but they’re happy tears this time.

“Thank you...” I murmur. “You don’t have to do that.”

“No, I do,” he says. “It’s the least I can do.”

His hand rubs up and down my back. But I wriggle away to look at him in the face.

“And what about me?” I ask. “What can I do?”

“Hm?” Vicmar hums, frowning.

I look him in the eye.

“You’re not happy,” I say quietly. “No happier than I was taking care of Maribelle. What can I do to take the burden off you? ”

This time, it’s him who has to avert my gaze from me.

“I don’t know, Ebelor,” he says. “You are the lost heir, so you have the right to rule, but learning how to do it is a different beast altogether. I don’t think it’s the type of thing you can just leap in and help with.”

I nod.

“That’s fair.” Then, I crack a small smile. “How about next time you’re in the war room with the counselors and they’re being stupid, you whisper what you want to say to me, and I’ll scream at them for you? It’ll save your voice a little bit.”

Vicmar starts laughing, throwing back his head as he cackles. He looks so beautiful when he smiles, the dour air about his person completely lifting. After his laugh he looks back to me with a large grin.

“I think... just having you here would help ease my burden,” Vicmar answers. “Having just one person with me that I’m not just the Cruel King to... That would

help.”

His hand brushes over my face. I hold onto his hand and lean my face into it.

“I can do that,” I reply.

“Thank you,” he murmurs back.

His gaze changes. It turns desirous, and his eyes move down to my lips. My stomach flickers when I recognize it. His face leans toward mine, and my eyes close. His lips touch mine, and his familiar flavor spreads through my mouth, that earthy musk. My mouth waters and tingles as his soft, wet tongue curls around mine. I gasp lightly in delight. His tongue slowly moves around mine. A sweet chill makes goosebumps prickle my skin. Another pant escapes me, and he reciprocates with a throaty chuckle.

My body starts shuddering with arousal when I hear his pleasure. Sharp tingling crackles up and down me. Our lips unlock—I gasp for breath, and his lips start trailing down my face teasingly, and-

Vicmar flinches. He gives a cry and then a deep chuckle.

“Ow,” he purrs.

“Oh,” I gasp. I lean back and look around and see the sparks dancing around us both.

“Sorry. I... didn’t know I was doing that. I’ll make them stop.”

“Wait,” he chuckles. “Don’t. I like them.”

I laugh.

“You like them?” I ask incredulously.

Vicmar gives me a cheeky grin.

“If you can control your powers, let’s find some different uses for them!” he laughs.

I just give a bemused titter of my own. I lean back and clench my fists. The sparking stops.

“You have gotten so much better at those,” Vicmar murmurs.

I keep concentrating and slowly extend one single finger. I have to draw in another calming breath before the sparks begin leaping around my hand.

“Wow,” Vicmar breathes.

I grin a little and tap him on his shoulder. He gives a little yelp—just a little higher pitched than I expected it to be—and then gives a throaty laugh. He gives me such a wicked smile.

“Ow,” he says again, grinning.

I smirk back. I press my finger into his chest again. He gives another yelp. Another shimmer through his body. I press my other, non-electrified hand against his body to feel how he squirms under me.

I feel powerful, and I have never felt power like this before. I brush my hand down his chest, taking my electrified finger away for a moment.

“M-my stomach!” he begs. “Please!”

I grin widely.

“I don’t know,” I murmur slowly. “Maybe I’ll do that, maybe I won’t.”

Vicmar looks at me, chest heaving and dark eyes sparkling in excitement.

“What?!” he gasps.

“It’s not up to you, is it?” I ask, a smirk twisting my lips.

“ Oh, you’re so cruel!” he laughs breathlessly.

I giggle back and send another wave of sparks over his chest. Both his wings give a sharp beat as he writhes under my palm.

“Hm...” I purr, lifting my finger toward them. “The wings, though...”

“No, no!” He laughs, but it’s playful. He’s still grinning.

I touch on one of his wings. Both of them snap forward. One of them hits me with its bony ridge and I give a playful yelp.

“Hey!”

“Sorry!” he says. “But I told you not to!”

I grin and finally touch the sparking finger to his abs like he asked. Vicmar gives a guttural moan, and his muscles stiffen under my hand. The wings around me close in—suddenly, I’m held by the wings as tightly as his arms embraced me earlier. I’m cocooned in warm, golden wings. I laugh and try to move, but I’m fully enclosed. I give a little wriggle, a little squirm, but I’m fully enclosed.

I don’t mind. I feel so utterly comfortable here. It’s as cozy as a mini home away

from home. And Vicmar's right here. He smiles at me softly as he pulls himself into me. Vicmar chuckles lightly, and his lips touch my neck. I arch into him, and his hands grab my hip.

His strong jaw runs along my neck as his soft mouth moves to my ear.

"Stay here," he purrs. "Stay with me. Be My Queen. I know you have to for now, but there may come a time when you don't have to." His chest presses into me harder. "Stay with me then, too."

I smile.

"Yes," I murmur. "Of course I'll stay."

He gives a happy little laugh. Another soft kiss on my neck sends tingles down my skin.

Vicmar puts some pressure on me and leans on me until I fold backward. He's still kissing me so very softly as his hands drape over the inside of my thighs. My legs wrap around his waist eagerly, and he slides in. A sharp snap of arousal cracks up my spine from where he strokes inside me. It was so untouched until him, and now my body welcomes him with shuddering anticipation. His groan rattles in my ear, and a shiver runs through me in response.

This time is different. He's softer. He pulls me closer, and I am just wrapped up in him—arms, wings, legs. His hot breath fans out over my chest, tickling my nipples. Vicmar sits up, pulling me up onto his lap. It changes how he fills me—different, but still gets me gasping in sweet pleasure, shuddering through me with every thrust. He's so strong; he holds me on him like I weigh nothing. I can barely hold myself up—I feel like I'm melting on his lap, just collapsing as the encroaching orgasm piles up inside me. My eyes roll up into my head.

O-oh, yes! Yes!

It's coming. I'm almost there—just... a little more...

“P-please! Fa-faster!” I'm begging.

A growling laugh escapes him. His hands grip me harder, one pinching into the light amount of fat on my hips. The other moves between my shoulders and grips me hard there, too.

He goes faster. The pleasure swells even more inside me. It's filling my chest—I can't breathe. My head falls back as I moan. My eyes have rolled back in my head. A light growl escapes him.

It's... building... building...

The orgasm bursts inside me. There's a flash behind my eyes. I hear myself scream, and Vicmar cries out. I feel it vibrate through his chest as he leans against mine.

We hold for a moment, the aftermath sending trembles through me. After that, he moves his head to my shoulder. Keeping me close, he starts to lie down on his back. I end up on top of him, my legs resting on either side of his hips. He just lets me sit on top of there—it's truly like I weigh nothing to him; he's so strong.

As we lay back down, he lets me go—mostly. He combs his fingers through my hair and looks at me... lovingly. Yes, that's the word. There's a rich depth of love in there. When his lips part, my heart soars.

“Ebelor...”

I know what he's going to say!

Vicmar just shakes his head a little and closes his mouth again. He smiles at me and then starts again.

“Thank you for staying here,” he says. “It truly means a lot to me.”

“Oh. Yes, no problem,” I reply.

He frowns a little.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I snuggle down onto his chest. His arms wind around me. “Everything’s perfect. ”

Vicmar just sighs contentedly underneath me. I nestle into his warm chest.

Maybe that’s just his way of saying it...

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

Ebelor's lady-in-waiting pulls at the corset of the dress My Queen is wearing. For once, she looks like a queen. She's regal and graceful, with a baroque scarlet dress adorned with gold accents. It ties up at the neck, with long sleeves and a corseted bodice on top of large, layered skirts. Her hair is braided and wound up into a bun on her head, with pearls dotted into her brown hair. Gold and ruby earrings hang from her ears, and a similarly impressive necklace nestles at her throat. Her crown isn't here yet—they haven't found it in the collection of family heirlooms—I suppose, deep in my heart, I never expected to have a queen. What woman would want the "Cruel King" after all?

Fate has its ways. It's funny, funny ways...

Ebelor looks at me, and I am blown away by how the blood-red dress brings out her green eyes. She looks glorious.

"I don't know about this, Vicmar," she murmurs.

"You look beautiful," I answer. "And a queen needs to look like a queen. It befits you, Ebelor. You deserve it."

The lady-in-waiting finishes tying the corset and steps back with a polite bow.

"Thank you, Michharn," she says.

Michharn! That was her name!

It seems to be a constant thorn in Ebelor's side that I've never taken the time to

memorize any of the staff's names. I'm trying to rectify that—but it's taking some time.

Once Michharn has stepped back, Ebelor picks up her skirts and waddles toward me.

"I can barely move in this!" she protests.

I chuckle.

"A good king should make sure that his queen doesn't have to move!" I say jokingly.
"Merely lounge on a throne, being fed grapes!"

She gives me a small smile.

"But that's not the Faevea we're in right now, though, is it?" Ebelor answers.

"I suppose that's fair," I reply, getting up from the chair. "However, we're just having a meeting with the war counselors this evening. In that situation, I think you ought to look like a queen. Garner their respect."

Ebelor gives a light sigh.

"Fine," she says.

There is a knocking on the door.

"Enter," I boom.

A guard walks in.

He is... Garga-something... Damn, I knew it when I asked him to fetch the crown!

“Oh, Gargamint,” Ebelor says when she notices him again.

Gargamint! Of course!

“Gargamint,” I say, “have you found the crown?”

“We have, Sire,” he says.

He presents us with the crown. It’s just as I remember it: many multicolored gems in its spike-like setting. My stomach gives a little squeeze when I see it; the last time I saw this crown, it was atop the head of my mother, her eyes closed and her face smeared with blood.

I shudder and close my eyes before I can remember too much.

“Thank you, Gargamint!” Ebelor says. “Oh, it’s beautiful!”

“Allow me, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Michharn.”

I open my eyes, and the first thing I see is Ebelor. The crown sits so perfectly on her head, like it was meant to sit there. It’s breathtaking. It doesn’t blend into the rest of the outfit, but that is a blessing—it highlights her stunning face even more.

“Ebelor...” I can barely breathe. “I...”

She smiles lightly and averts her gaze.

“I feel a bit ridiculous.”

“You don’t look it. Not at all!” I meet her in three long strides and rest my hands on either side of her waist. “You look like the queen you are.”

A light blush colors her cheeks a rose pink. I lean forward and kiss her very gently on those cheeks—as if I were kissing a delicate rose. She giggles in flattery.

Then, I lean back.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

She sucks in a breath, then looks at me with that flinty look in her eyes.

“Let’s go.”

We walk into the war room, and I can tell by the feel in the air that the state of things is a lot calmer than it used to be. There’s a grim, stomach-churning alarm, but not the bristling feeling of barely contained panic like it was when I was last here.

The atmosphere gives a confusing shift when we walk in. First, it lightens still when I walk in, perfectly recovered. But then they shuffle uncomfortably and look between each other when Ebelor walks in behind me. She doesn’t have the graceful stride of a queen in her dress yet—still a little uncomfortable in it—but her presence is commanding regardless, and they know that they are in the presence of a queen. They haven’t been in the presence of a matriarch for a while.

As we approach the table, I stand at the top of it. They stare at me like a deer in front of a hunter, and when a heavy silence reigns for a moment, I realize I’d usually started shouting at them by now.

“What’s the situation with the army outside the castle?” I call—but I can’t even force the same kind of rage that used to fill my voice before.

They relax, and one of them replies:

“In terms of the army, not one of them succeeded in breaching the castle’s walls, mostly thanks to the electrical barrier that has been set up around it,” he says. “The enemy’s still occupying the castle town, but they still haven’t made many moves toward the townsfolk, so that on its own isn’t the most pressing issue; we suggest we don’t divide our limited forces to save the townsfolk when they don’t appear to be in danger. The more important problem is that the electrical barrier seems to be fading away. We need to replenish it before we do anything else.”

I nod and then look over at Ebelor.

“What do you think?” I ask her. “Can you replenish it?”

There’s a rumbling and a gasp among the war counselors. They look between each other in awe.

That’s right... they probably don’t know it’s her, considering she did it in the heat of the moment on the battlefield. They likely thought that it was the spell I gave the mages on the battlements.

I feel a strange sense of second-hand pride for her accomplishment, but when I look back, she’s looking down, biting her lip.

“I—s-sure I can,” she says.

“I don’t like that stutter,” I mutter carefully. “What are you thinking?”

“I just...” Ebelor says. “I worry. I was fully wrapped up in the heat of the moment when I did that. I worry I won’t be able to do it again.”

I put a hand on her lower back. She smiles lightly.

“Right,” I say to her. “Well, I have every faith in you, but whilst you build your confidence up—” I look back to the war counselors, leaning down over the table again. “—we’ll explore our other options. What else do we have to work with? How many did we lose?”

Another war counselor answers me:

“Stunningly little, thank the gods. A few casualties from the enemy archers—perhaps a handful, with another dozen injured to various severities—but a combination of the shield and the electrical barrier has worked wonderfully to keep casualties low,” she answers. “That means we still have approximately the same number of guards as we did before the start of battle last night, Sire.”

I nod.

“Good,” I grunt. “And what about the enemy? Have we learned anything more about the army?”

“We learned that they mostly consist of humans,” a counselor answers. “There don’t seem to be any dark fae, Naga, or sirens at all amongst their ranks.”

I hear a little murmuring amongst them—close to me, a war counselor sneers to another: “Just little humans? That’ll make things easier! ”

“What does that mean?” I ask sharply.

A ringing silence falls in at my tone. They gawk like brain-dead idiots at me. After a moment, I bark again:

“Well?! Speak up!”

“I—uh... I-I just meant that with it being only humans, we need not worry about aerial attacks or Naga venom, Sire,” he stutters.

I sneer at him.

“Right,” I snarl sarcastically back at him. “I am sure that is what you intended to say when you hissed that, but just in case, let me make one thing perfectly clear.” I stand taller and fold my arms as I boom to them all. “Humans are not to be spoken down to, belittled, or even underestimated. In case you haven’t noticed, my wife is a human. Your queen. She is also the one who raised the electrical barrier single-handedly and saved all our sorry skins.”

They glance over to Ebelor as I’m talking and then straight back to me.

“Humans are not to be spoken to or about like that anymore,” I growl. “That will no longer be tolerated, plainly put. Have some respect for your queen.”

They all nod, and some “Yes, Sire” murmurings echo. Some look to Ebelor and bow their heads at her.

After that, I sigh.

“So, if it’s a human army, then it’s true we are less likely to have to worry about aerial attacks or venom,” I say. “But Ebelor shows that the human capacity for magic is a possible threat to keep in mind. Make sure you factor that into any future plans.”

“Yes, Sire,” they chant.

“There is another piece of crucial information we’ve found out from the battle as well,” I continue. “Dralis can teleport inside the castle despite all our wards and protections.”

More shocked mutterings. They look at each other in horror.

“Sire,” one dares to speak eventually. “How did he do that?!”

“We aren’t sure,” I reply. “But we have undeniable proof that he can. It at least seems to take enough out of him that he isn’t able to teleport any members of his army with him, but teleporting himself is enough. I want our magical defenses investigated thoroughly to see if there are any holes in our defenses that he’s taking advantage of.”

“Yes, Sire,” one says. “We shall put our best mages on it at once, Sire.”

“Next, I want to recall some soldiers from Murbyn Bridge,” I say. “We have to put the safety of the castle first. Don’t bring them directly here—bring them to the outskirts of the city, and I will practice teleporting them myself.”

There’s another grumble amongst the crowd. There’s a touch on my shoulder, and I turn to see Ebelor.

“Can you do that?” she asks worriedly. “Dralis got his power from his trickster god—can you recreate a spell that big even if you don’t have a god on your side?”

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. “But if I can do that, your electrical barrier won’t be so crucial to our protection.”

“I can replenish it,” Ebelor says to me, more firmly this time.

“I have full faith in you,” I assure her. “This will support you, though.”

She nods at me sternly. Looking at her, I’m reminded of something very important.

“One last thing,” I say. “We need to start evacuating the human villages and getting the humans somewhere safe and warm.”

There’s a pause from everyone. Even Ebelor.

“It’s been made aware to me what a dire state the human villages are in,” I announce to them all. “My mother banished the humans there a long time ago through fear of their loyalty to the tyrant that came before her, and the humans have worn that yoke ever since. The humans who live in those villages now were likely not even born when that piece of history happened, and yet they’re suffering endless winter and pestilence.” I stab a finger into the table with a thunk.

“That’s from where Dralis is sourcing his army, I’m sure—from the desperate in the human villages.”

I can’t help but glance at Ebelor before I sigh. She’s looking at me silently, but those large green eyes have so much gratefulness in them.

“And who can blame them?” I mutter. “When they are forced to live as they do? No wonder they glom onto a leader who promises them a better life?”

I clear my throat and straighten up.

“By protecting the humans, we will deprive Dralis of his army recruits,” I announce. “Start with Thawallow and move out from there. Move humans to the safer of our settlements outside of Eyston. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sire!”

The meeting devolves into numbers and details, and as I discuss them with the war counselors, I can feel Ebelor looking at me lovingly.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

I hold my sword for a moment. There's a bead of sweat rolling down my face, and I wipe it with my sleeve. I'm glad to be in something less overbearing than those large queenly dresses—this thinner leather armor I'm wearing is so much more comfortable to move in. I've never worn trousers before, but I can see why warriors do so.

I suck in a deep breath through my nose, and then I practice the drill again—a thrust, then a pretend parry, moving into a slice. The tip of my blade clips the dummy, leaving a long streak in the burlap.

“Good,” Vicmar purrs approvingly. “Remember: it's all in the wrist, not the arms. But you're getting smoother. You're making incredible progress.”

I smirk. I pull the rapier back and hold it at the ready. This time, when I perform the drill again, I try to put a little more into the wrists.

“No, no, don't force it,” Vicmar says. “Relax. Let it come naturally.”

I laugh exhaustedly.

“Nothing about this is natural, Vicmar!” I protest.

“No, I think you took to the rapier quite well,” he says. “I'm growing more confident by the second that if you were caught alone, you could defend yourself.”

I smile.

“Thank you,” I reply. “I don’t know, though... I worry I might drop the sword or make some other stupid mistake if I had to fight with a sword.”

“Don’t worry,” Vicmar says, coming closer. “This is just in case you are caught alone again. If Dralis tries to sneak in and take you back again, you will be able to hold your own. But—” He puts a hand on the backs of my shoulders. “—I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. Anyone who threatens you will face my blade.”

My chest has a warm glow in it. My cheeks were burning with exertion, but now they’re on fire.

I don’t think even my parents have ever shown such protectiveness over me. Even before they died, I’ve been out in the world, working on farms, mostly. That meant that usually, my parents were on one task and I was on another. No one ever stood by my side protectively...

I lower my face with a smile.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

Vicmar nods at me.

“I’ve also been studying the teleportation spell,” he says. “So we can teleport our own army in like Dralis did with his.”

“How’s that going?”

He pauses. “Uh... steady.”

“Steady?” I ask slowly. “What does that mean? My barrier’s expected to crumble in a

few days—are you going to be ready before then?”

Vicmar looks away.

“I’m not sure, to tell the truth.”

“Well, I can replenish the barrier,” I say confidently. “You don’t need to worry if you can’t.”

He smiles and nods softly.

“Yes...” He says slowly, then sighs.

“What is it?”

“I wish I didn’t have to send you back out into battle,” he mutters. “If your powers weren’t essential to our battle strategy, then I’d have been so much more comfortable with you being kept somewhere safe.”

“Well, we found out the hard way that there isn’t anywhere safe in the castle,” I answer. “Not until we discover how he got inside its defenses in the first place.”

“That is true,” Vicmar grunts.

“I’m glad I am going to be out there,” I say. “I want to help. I want to protect you as much as you want to protect me, Vicmar.”

He gives me a crooked half-smile.

“Is that so?” he purrs.

With that, he turns and strides off. He goes over and picks up two practice swords from the rack—both rapiers this time. He easily tosses the blade from one hand to the other before holding the handle toward me.

“En garde, then!” he says, smirking. “Show me what you’ve learned!”

I sigh. I put down my sharp sword, and take the practice one from him.

“Fine...”

I hold my own sword out. The first thing he does is thrust forward, but I block the blade and roll it off, swinging my sword up toward his chin. Vicmar leans his head back, taking a step back—but then he pushes off his back leg, pivoting in a circle, bringing his own blade toward me. I dart backward, giving myself a little distance to think. He doesn’t let up—he steps forward and slashes toward me again. I parry this one, moving his blade aside with my own before launching a front kick. It hits him right in the stomach, and he wheezes, stumbling back.

He grimaces in pain for a second, then looks up at me with a dark grin.

“Are we doing that, then?” he wheezes.

“You wanted to know what I’d learned,” I answer back. “I’ve learned that sometimes, you need to do what you have to in order to win a sword duel.”

Vicmar grins wider.

“But I didn’t know we were doing these things in this spar!” he laughs. “If that is how you want to spar, then let us spar like that!”

Uh-oh.

He comes toward me again.

I hold my rapier at the ready, and Vicmar surges toward me. I keep my gaze actively on his face, but in the periphery, I watch his hands. They move in from my left, and I hold my own sword down to block it. I tip my blade up and roll his sword away. I pivot on the balls of my feet and then slide away. He turns without a moment's hesitation, and the sword hurtles toward my head. My knees buckle, and I feel it swish over my head. It tousles my hair.

But I'm stuck in a squat—when Vicmar pulls his sword back and thrusts toward me, I can't get out of ducking soon enough to escape, so I just let myself fall backward. I hit my back on the floor, and my head smacks into the ground.

But I don't stop moving. As I hit the courtyard, I force myself to roll back until I can scramble onto my feet again.

“Sloppy!” Vicmar barks at me. “Keep your balance!”

Easier said than done—before I can even bark back at him, he comes forward again, and I swing my sword at him. His sword catches mine and forces my sword away. His other hand grabs my wrist and yanks it down. His chest touches on mine.

“Sloppy...” He whispers, his hot breath hitting my closed mouth. “That was a clumsy swing. Keep your balance. If you lose it, then put some distance between yourself and the enemy and think. Don't just swing.”

I start laughing quietly and looking up at him.

“Are you that petty that you need to dominate a spar because I got one clean hit on you!”

“Well...” Vicmar purrs. “If you’re going to go hard on the spar, you’ll have to hold your own better than that!”

“Fine, then!”

I spin—ripping both my wrists out of his hands, and then bring my sword around in a large swing. It doesn’t hit, but it puts a lot of distance between us. Vicmar grins widely and whips his sword back and forth before readying it again. I mirror him, and we both slowly circle around each other. Then, he pulls the sword back and surges toward me again. I brace myself and then block it. After I block it, I draw my sword back and thrust it forward. He slips it, but I keep stepping forward, and as I get close to him, I stick my leg out behind one of his. He stumbles over it but manages to keep his balance. But I keep my assault going, trying to draw my sword back for another swing. As I sweep it across, toward his face, it clangs against Vicmar’s sword.

Damn! I thought I’d taken him off guard enough for that to get through!

His sword pushes mine down. I try to move it away so I can wield it again, but he’s keeping my blade away. I thrust my knee up, but Vicmar is quick enough to loop his arm under my leg and move it aside. Now, he’s standing so close to me, his hips nestled between my standing leg and the one he’s holding under the thigh, his other hand still knocking my sword away.

“Well,” he purrs. “Definitely do not do that to Dralis!”

I give him a sneering smile and try to pull my leg back, but his smile widens and he keeps his grip on me.

“Vicmar!” I insist playfully. “Let me go!”

He just chuckles. He strides forward, and my single foot can’t keep me standing—as

my foot scrapes over the ground, Vicmar lifts me up until my back softly hits something, and I'm rested against a wall, him pinned against me. My stomach gives a little flicker as he presses himself into me. I just grin and open my hand, letting my sword fall to the ground with a clatter. I hear his sword hit the floor soon after, and I link both of my hands around the back of his neck and hang from there. His lips touch mine, and I sigh against his lovely mouth. I open my mouth a little, and his lip dips into my mouth. I can hear the sounds our lips make as they lock, and every time it hits my ears, a shudder of pleasure tingles through me. I fold into him, and he kisses me again. He deepens the kiss, his wet tongue hugging around mine for a long moment. A sharp shudder of delight crackles through me like a bolt of lightning—I have to break the kiss for a breathless moan. Vicmar purrs a laugh at the back of his throat, and his nose trails lightly over my face, taking in a deep breath in my hair.

I laugh lightly.

“Now, you don't do that to Dralis!” I murmur.

Vicmar gives a chuckle.

“Oh, no!” he replies. “Don't even talk about him right now!”

I cackle, and that turns into a sigh of pleasure as his lips glide over my neck. But before he does anything else, he pauses and then moves his sweet mouth to my ear.

“You're so much better than you were before,” he says. “But I will protect you. No one will touch you, Ebelor. I promise you that.”

I just hum contentedly, enjoying the feeling of his warm arms around me. He kisses my neck.

“I don't remember the last time I was this happy,” Vicmar murmurs to me. “I may

have never been this happy in my entire life. It was always just responsibility and duty. But I finally have tasted happiness—solely because of you.” He kisses my neck again. “Thank you.”

I smile wider and run my hands through his hair.

“Me too,” I reply softly.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

The time is coming. Soon, the battle will be here, and either we win right here, right now, or we all die.

Her hand is in mine, and I give it a squeeze. Ebelor looks at me and smiles nervously.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell her.

She just takes a deep breath and releases it slowly.

“Just let me know when I need to replenish the electrical wall,” she answers.

I nod, then look over the battlements. Our remaining army looks slim compared to the sprawling mass of soldiers below the castle. They’re waiting for the electrical wall to simmer down—it’s gone from a gigantic, white circle of lightning around the castle, almost too bright to look at, to a dull yellow ribbon, with only errant sparks keeping them away. They’re waiting for it to die down before they come in.

But I can feel the amount of energy it’s taking out of me, generating this teleportation power, chanting the ancient spell in my head.

I have an idea of how we’re going to survive this, but it’s a risk—if I teleport our own army in now, they’ll probably be sitting ducks in front of Dralis’s army. It takes more than a moment for a person unused to teleportation to recover from it. They would likely be flanked and killed at that moment, especially since this army is already just sitting like hungry dogs waiting for rabbits to leave the warren.

What we need is a distraction, and we have the greatest distraction in the world ready

and waiting for us. It just leaves us entirely open for a moment. Nothing but stone walls and a wooden door to keep us safe for that moment.

I give Ebelor's hand another squeeze, then look over to the soldiers:

"Hold steady!" I order. "Do not move as the magical assault happens! Move on my orders!"

"Yes, Sire!"

I look down at the electrical wall. It's beginning to break apart. I look to Ebelor.

"You move on my order as well," I say. "Let me cast my spell first."

She nods. Her face is white, and her eyes are wide. I put a hand on her face.

"Don't worry," I tell her. "Whatever happens, I will keep you safe. I will."

She just nods at me. The words I want to say bubble up in my throat—but I pause for a second. She can see on my face that I have something to say, and her entire expression is open—she's looking at me, fully listening.

"I... I love you," I say to her.

A little gasp escapes her. A touch of color ekes back into her face, and her eyes sparkle.

"Vicmar!" she gasps. "I-I love you too!"

Warmth bursts inside my chest, behind my armor—followed by the painful squeeze as I realize that... if this goes wrong... I may never say or hear those words again...

No. No, we won't. We are going to make it through this.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, there's a break in the constant sizzling around us. I look down, and the electrical wall finally falls. The army outside charges toward the castle, eagerly attacking the castle walls. They're just hammering the door with their fists and feet for now, but it shan't be long before they bring a battering ram in.

I blow out a hard exhale, and start chanting under my breath, lifting my hand up, fingers spread.

I can feel the magic coursing through my veins—it's like I'm so suddenly aware of every droplet of blood coursing around my body, washing in my ears, twinkling in my eyes as it pulses through them. I'm going to collapse if this lasts too much longer.

I turn my gaze up to the castle town, and there are large purple sigils slowly forming in the skies. The army hammering at our doors doesn't notice them—they're too busy trying to break into the castle doors.

But that might not be enough...

My head is whirring. My vision is blackening.

I-I... can't do this. I'm not-

A hand touches my shoulder. Suddenly, my body floods with renewed strength. As the second wave hits me, the sigils grow brighter, almost hard to stare at—and then they come crashing down to the ground. As they hit the ground, they draw back up, leaving an entire army in their wake. But the enemy at our door is making too much noise to even notice.

As expected, the army I summoned spends a second recovering, reorienting, and

before long, they turn and start charging toward the others, roaring a battle cry.

The other army begins to turn around, but they're already flanked. As the chaos rattles out below us, I look over to Ebelor.

"Now, quick! Replen—"

Her hand is on my shoulder, and she looks a little pale. She's sweating, and as she lets me go, she groans.

"Yes, I'll do that..."

"What happened?" I figure it out as the question leaves my lips. "Did you use our bond to give me some of your power?!"

"I could see you were struggling!" she snaps back. "Now, quiet! Let me concentrate!"

She walks to the edge and growls from exertion, closing her eyes. Before I can do anything, she begins crackling with lightning. All I can do is back off until she's freed the power inside her, lest it electrocute me.

After a second, she throws her hands down the battlements.

Lightning smashes down. The noise it makes is ear-shattering. It ricochets through my bones from as far away as I am. I hear the cries of the army below us, and when I look down, the electricity wall has been restored to its former glory, and the enemy army has been devastated. They are sprawling, and those who aren't are being flanked by our own army. It looks positive.

We could... actually do this!

A gasp rattles out behind me, followed by a light thud . When I turn around, I see Ebelor on her knees.

“Ebelor!”

I dart to her side and put a couple of hands on her shoulders. She gives me a weak smile.

“I’m fine,” she says.

She’s not. She’s white and a few beads of sweat are beading on her brow. When I take her hand, they’re trembling.

Of course. She hasn’t just cast her own spell but helped me with mine...

I grip her arms a little harder and help her up to her feet again.

“Rest now,” I tell her. “You’ve done more than enough.”

She smiles lightly. I look down over the battlements. The fight below is going well—so well that I don’t even think that our archers up here are necessary; if we were to get our archers to fire down, they would be much more likely to hit our own forces than any of the enemy. Our forces are dominating.

“Vicmar!” Ebelor shrieks suddenly.

I spin around. There’s a purple sigil in the battlements in front of her. A teleportation sigil!

I sprint, crossing the distance, drawing my sword. Dralis snaps out from the teleportation sigil, and he’s already reaching for her. I swing my sword, and Dralis’s

hand pulls back. As he draws his own sword, I shove Ebelor behind me. There's a gleam out the corner of my eye.

I just about manage to block the blade before it hits me—but not by much. I can hear Ebelor behind me, gasping.

I am going to keep her safe. I promised.

I lunge forward, ducking down under his guard to thrust my blade up underneath. Dralis snarls and slips the blade. He backs away. He tries to answer my blow with one of his own, but I slam my elbow into his arm and stop his arm.

His eyes widen. He keeps walking backward as I keep up my assault. I don't want to give him any quarter to get any attacks off.

He will not be getting through me. He will not be getting to her.

I throw a pulse of power across him, and Dralis is flung backward. He starts flying to keep himself from falling. I launch off as well, swinging my sword at his neck. But there's a clang. My sword is stopped. Then, my blade is wrenched down, my arm strung out so low that a scattering of sharp nerve pain moves up my arm as my elbow is overstretched. Before I can turn, something strikes the side of my jaw. Deep, muscular pain moves up through my jaw—my teeth aching and the taste of blood spreading in my mouth.

I try to pull my sword up, and I see his weapon hurtling toward me. I lean back. My forehead burns. Hot blood pours down my face. My wings beat, and I hurtle backward through the air. His sword is coming straight for my chest. I slam a parry down onto the sword, forcing it away. More hot pain trails down my skin as it catches my torso on the way down. Blood soon follows. Dralis growls and tries to move his sword up, but I put as much strength into keeping it down as I can.

As we struggle, he sneers at me.

“I should have known better than to think stabbing you would kill you, Vicmar, you cockroach!” he snarls. “But perhaps you won’t live without your head!”

He rips his sword out from under mine with a painful screech of metal. I flap backward and put some distance between us as he tries to strike me again.

“I can’t let you do this anymore, Dralis,” I say. “I wanted to try and work this out. I wanted to come to a peaceful resolution.”

He just scoffs at me this time.

“I don’t need to negotiate with you!” he snaps. “We both know you can’t defeat me!” A dark smirk spreads over his face. “Perhaps, at some point, you could have. But you can’t defeat Mischevil working through me!”

I don’t know if he’s wrong... That teleportation spell was almost more than I could handle.

He comes toward me again, and I block him. Then, I feel his hand push against my torso.

No!

The magic explodes out, and it’s all I can do to work my own magic to absorb it. It still takes me out of the air—I’m shooting toward the ground like a rock flung by a trebuchet. I’m plummeting too fast to straighten my wings to fly, but something hard hits my lower back. I’ve stopped. I fold over it backward, pain tingling all the way up my spine.

I crack open my eyes and wheel around. I've hit the wall on the edge of the battlements—one breadth from falling off it. I try to get off the wall, and I see Dralis swooping down, sword bared. I throw myself to my left, rolling away. There's a clang of metal on stone behind me, and I turn, already holding my sword up as a defense. Just in time—Dralis has swung his sword toward my neck. I feel sparks catch on my skin as the blades grind against each other.

Dralis pushes his sword down harder, and his strength just seems to be increasing more and more. Just as I feel like he can't possibly get any stronger, he does. In fact, he takes a hand off his sword, and his strength doesn't deplete at all.

No...

He grins at me.

"Are you understanding now?" he asks. "As long as I'm the conduit for Mischevil, you can't defeat— AH! "

Dralis's sword eases up on mine. He looks over his shoulder—and I see Ebelor stick a small knife in his hip.

"Ow! You quim!" he snarls at her. "As soon as I'm done with him, you'll pay for that!"

Ebelor looks at me, and a few sparks escape her.

"Vicmar, move!"

I push off, keeping my sword between my body and his blade, but put some distance between him and myself. As soon as there's some space between us, Ebelor cries out.

There's a bang , and I see Dralis hurtling backward. I sprint over to Ebelor as she doubles over.

“Was that your lightning?” I ask.

“Yes.” She grins weakly at me. “Directly into his body! If that doesn't give us a few moments, then nothing will.” Her expression becomes more serious. “Don't we have something to help capture him?!”

“Yes!” I answer back, then offer my hand to her. “Can you help me with that?”

Ebelor's eyes sparkle determinedly.

“Of course!”

She clasps my hand, and we both run over to Dralis. He's slowly starting to get to his hands and knees. As we get close, I hold my hand out toward him, spreading my fingers wide. I start chanting the unknown words—just trying to recall the memorized syllables the witch told me. I can feel Ebelor's power adding to mine, our strength collecting together in my form.

As the spell ends, purple streams of light burst out from the tips of my fingers and soar toward Dralis. He looks dizzy, barely conscious at all—until the ropes of illuminance wind around his body, even around his eyes, blindfolding him. As it attaches to him, it turns into thick black, looking like ink binding him. Dralis cries out and begins writhing in his binds. As his mouth opens, the magic moves in and becomes a gag.

“Don't bother, Dralis,” I say. “You might work for a god, but you're still dark fae, and that spell binds dark fae and our powers.”

He continues to wriggle in his binds, but that's it. That's all he can do.

I feel odd... he's always been such a mythical figure since he went rogue. He felt very godlike in his own way.

But he's just a dark fae—just like he always was...

A weight falls on my shoulders, and I look over to see Ebelor. She looks exhausted, almost sick, as she leans on me. I wind an arm around her waist, sheltering her with my wing as well.

"Is it... is it over?" she asks quietly.

I look toward Dralis. He's as thoroughly captured as he was before, still trying to escape, but his powers are as bound as his body is. It's specially designed. It was made for this purpose, but a part of me still worries.

Then, a cheering starts ringing out from below us.

"What's that?" she asks.

I walk over to the battlements, taking her with me. When we lean over, I feel cool, sweet relief wash over me.

"It's our victory," I whisper.

Our army is cheering. The battlefield looks as bloody and horrendous as any other, bodies littering the ground like autumn leaves, but the enemy army—what remains of them—is fleeing through the castle town. Only our army stands, and they're cheering, watching the army retreat.

As they celebrate, some of them look up and notice us at the top of the battlements. They notice one by one, and once they're all staring at us, I release Ebelor and then walk toward Dralis. I grab Dralis's binds and drag him to his feet. I half-carry him over to the battlements so the army can see him. When they do, they break out into even louder triumphant screaming than they did before.

I look around and find Ebelor. I take her hand with my spare one and raise them into the air. The cheering is even more frantic, and it's just myself and my wife, bathing in the sound of our triumph.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now would it?” Vicmar says, a cheeky grin on his face.

I give a playful scowl back, but I’m not as annoyed as I’m pretending to be. It’s nice to have something else to focus on aside from the battle that happened a few days ago. It’s a little unbelievable to think about now; less than a week ago, I was in a life-or-death, do-or-die battle. Such a short while ago, if someone had said that I would be in such a battle, I would have laughed. It still makes my brain swim when I try to consider it. But I did it. I cast the magic, I wielded the sword, and I got a good blow in on Dralis—the man who was a feared god to some.

I did that. Me. I can’t believe it...

But that means that Dralis has even more reason to come after me than he did before...

“He is secure in the dungeons, right, Vicmar?” I ask nervously.

“For the last time, yes, Ebelor!” he says. “You can check the wards yourself if you want!”

The idea of seeing him again, even in the context of the dungeon, makes my skin crawl a little.

“N-no, thank you!”

He chuckles lightly.

“I know he has teleported in and out of the dungeons before, but the sigils and wards we have up on the walls and on every bar of that cell are meant to bind the powers of dark fae,” he says. “And we know not a single guard here is willing to work with him in any way, so he’s not worming his way to escape that way.”

I nod.

“And... um... what are we doing with him?” I ask. “In the long term, I mean?”

That’s when Vicmar shuffles uncomfortably and hangs his head.

“I wouldn’t know,” he answers. “I just... he is my brother... we grew up together...”

He doesn’t say it out loud, but I understand what he’s trying to say.

“It’s okay,” I say quietly. “As long as he doesn’t escape.”

“We have made sure he couldn’t,” he says. “We have checked and double-checked—teleporting in and out of that place should be impossible. And that’s even if he can still do it now his trickster god has abandoned him.”

I nod lightly.

“Are we... Can we check to make sure that’s true?” I ask nervously.

“I don’t know if there’s any way to check,” Vicmar answers. “But I’ve never heard him wail like that. It’s like he’s dying slowly and painfully, but physically, he’s well. We’ve had healers down there, and none of them can find anything wrong with him. I doubt that even Dralis could fake something so distressing to listen to, and the entire

time, he's begging for mercy from Mischevil."

I nod again. Vicmar nods as well, but he's looking down at the floor, a little pain furrowing his brow. I walk over and put a hand on his shoulder. His tense muscle loosens under my hand. He just smiles weakly at me.

"I apologize," he says. "I should pull myself together. It's just that... I still remember the days when Dralis and I were children. When we used to play together, and he was my big brother... I know he's not the Dralis I knew before, but... I don't know."

"I understand," I say quietly. "I don't know what I'd do if I had to face my sister in the same way."

As I say it, I feel myself shrink down a little as a little homesickness washes over me. His arm winds around my back.

"Thank you, Ebelor," he says. "But let's forget about that for now. We're here."

I look at where we are. I'm not exactly sure where we are—there's just a massive set of double doors in front of me. They're beautifully wooden, ornately carved, swirls framing the doors, with the odd rose in the corners. No sign on it to give me an indication of what is inside.

Vicmar's hand touches my lower back—or so I think, until I turn and see it's his wing.

"Do you like it?" He chuckles. "You're just staring at the doors like you've never seen a set before, but believe it or not, the surprise is inside. "

"Oh," I find myself blushing a little. "Yes, they're lovely. I was just trying to figure out where we were."

“Open the doors and find out!” he laughs.

I walk forward and take hold of the golden handle. When I lower it down, I almost expect it to be locked, but he wouldn't be that cruel, right?

It opens without a problem, and for a moment, there's such a bright spotlight coming down on my face from the majestic windows in the room that I can't see it for a second. Once my eyes adjust, my breath is taken away.

Directly in front of me is a grand arched window, through which the perfect golden light fills in, lighting up the towering furniture in the room. There are bookshelves so large and ornate that I have to crane my head all the way back to see the tops of them. Once I'm looking at their tops I see even more library I didn't notice before—a second floor above my head, a balcony jutting out making up the second floor, with a golden rail curling around. On the wall at the back, more books. The walls themselves are bookshelves.

There are more books than I have ever seen before in my life. Truly books of every kind, some newer ones in vivid scarlets and sapphires with golden titles, others ancient leatherbound types, with yellowing pages and dog-eared from use. There are some scrolls tucked away on top of the books and some loose pages stuffed away on the sides.

I can't comprehend just how many books are in this one room. I crane my head back, looking at so many of them, until my head starts reeling. I realize my mouth has been gaping this whole time from the thick, musty taste of old books on my tongue. Once I tip my head back down, I feel a woosh, and my vision blacks out for a moment. I put a hand on my head, and a pair of hands touch my shoulder, his wing on my lower back.

“Oh! Do you ail?” Vicmar laughs lightly.

“No... I just...” I look back up at the bookshelves. “It’s so incredible!”

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“Oh, by the gods, I do!” I spin around to him and link my arms around his neck. I kiss him on the cheek for a second before I ask. “But why? Why did you do this? How did you know?”

“I spoke with Dronfil,” Vicmar says, chest puffing up in pride. “Once you could decorate your room, you kept filling it with more and more books. I had a talk with all the guards, and I got an entire section filled with the kind of books you like to read.”

I’m already glowing, but I brighten even more when I hear Vicmar saying the guard’s name. When I first met him, he treated the staff like dogs, barking orders at them and never remembering their names, but he’s clearly been trying to improve himself in that regard after I let him know it bothers me. It makes me so happy to see.

Vicmar breaks the embrace and walks over to the nearest section—there are a lot of newer books here:

“I’ve put them all here—your favorites, that is,” he says. “I’ve just been calling it Ebelor’s shelf for now.”

He chuckles, and I smile back, but happy tears are stinging my eyes. I avoid laughing so I don’t accidentally start crying instead.

“But there’s more than that here. The complete history of Faevea is over there.” He points them out as he mentions them. “And the written laws are next to it. On the other side is the complete history of magic, as well as specific spell books and magical crafts.”

Vicmar walks back toward me and puts a hand on my shoulder, then points to the second floor.

“Up there is the philosophy section, as well as miscellaneous books on arts and different races and their cultures,” he continues. “Before your shelf was established down here, the fiction was up there too, but now it’s down here.”

He swings around to look me in the eye. The crook of his finger touches underneath my chin and tips it up toward him.

“This used to be my private library, but now, it’s all yours. Every inch of it, every book, everything,” Vicmar says, then chuckles. “Just do forgive me if I forget to knock at first; it’ll be odd to consider this place your sanctuary from now on.”

“But why?” I murmur, the tears welling up. “You didn’t need to do this.”

Vicmar scoffs.

“Of course I did! You clearly needed a place that suited you,” he says, then his brow furrows a little. “You do like it, don’t you? You’re crying.”

I smile and wipe my eyes.

“Don’t worry, they’re happy tears,” I blubber.

He chuckles lightly and kisses my lips.

“There is another reason I did this,” he says. “Not just because the guards said you loved reading and were hoarding books—it’s because you never had the chance to read. You never had the chance to learn; it was all stolen from you when you had to flee the castle as a baby. You’re so inquisitive, Ebelor—you deserve to reach your

full potential.”

Vicmar looks back to the library around us.

“This place taught me everything I know. Whatever it is you want to study, Ebelor, it’s here. If you want to study to become as knowledgeable a queen as Faevea ever had, you have the means. If you want to master your magic, the best books in the country are merely a few sections over.” He looks back at me and smiles, running his hand up and down my cheek. “If all you want to do is relax and read your beautiful fiction, then I’ll light the fire and leave you to it. Whatever you want, Ebelor, I’ll be behind you.”

The tears fully overwhelm me, and a sob forces its way out of my throat. I can tell my tears are making him nervous, so I wind my arms around his neck and pull myself in close to him. After a second, I cry into his shoulder, but I turn and plant a kiss on his face.

“Y-you’re wonderful!” I weep. “Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Good. I told you I wanted you to be happy here, and I meant it,” he murmurs to me.

He pulls me in even closer, and both his arms and wings wrap around me in one of his all-encompassing hugs. One arm winds around my lower back, and one around my mid-back, his hand resting between my shoulders. His wings blanket my entire back, still radiating warmth. It’s like the glow of a roaring fire, but I know that if there’s any burning, it’s happening between us.

“There is one more surprise heading your way,” he purrs. “It’s just not here yet.”

I give a desirous chuckle and kiss the side of his jaw, moving in toward his mouth.

“Are we sure I can’t make it come a little earlier?” I tease. “Now I’m in the mood?”

“Hm?” Vicmar grunts at first, then gives a light laugh. “Oh, I was genuinely talking about another surprise that’s supposed to be here!”

“Oh!” I laugh.

“But—” He growls, a wicked smile breaking across his face. “ —if you insist, My Queen!”

His arms slide down and hook underneath my thighs. His wings support my upper back as he lifts me up so easily. I giggle, tightening my grip around his neck. He starts walking with me, and it’s like I weigh nothing, his lips feathering kisses down my neck. The tickling of his lips turns very, very quickly into pleasure that tingles up and down my body.

I feel him carry me over and place me down on something. As he slowly releases me, I place my hand down on the cool wooden tables. As I lean down, he towers over me and places his down on either side of my head. My head is boxed in by his strong arms, and I stroke my fingers up and down his muscular arms, giggling.

Vicmar gives a throaty laugh and then leans down. His lips touch mine—softly at first, but I grab his face and deepen the kiss. He moans gently on the end of my tongue. I’m the first to break the kiss and whisper into his ear.

“You’ve done so much for me…” I murmur. “What can I do for you tonight…?”

He chuckles gently. He turns his face to look at me and kisses me on the cheek just before he answers:

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to make you happy,” he purrs. Then, he pulls my

legs up, hitching them onto his hips. “So moan loudly for me tonight! Show me that I make you happy!”

I give an aroused giggle. His mouth moves to my neck, warm and wet, trailing down to my collarbone. As he keeps traveling down, pleasure boils in the back of my throat. But I moan when that happens—loudly, unabashedly—and he gives a small sound of pleasure back.

“Mm... yes... Like that!” he moans. “Just like that! Moan for me!”

I keep going, but I find myself giggling—I’m so happy it’s surreal. It’s not just the pleasure; it’s the bubbling happiness moving through me.

I didn’t think it was possible to be this happy, to feel light as a feather, glowing like a roaring hearth, deep in my heart. I root my fingers into his long, glossy hair as he traces his way down.

“I love you!” I gasp.

“I love you too,” he murmurs against my skin.

Sweeter words had never been spoken—nor in such a sweet way.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:41 am

From the top of my castle, I can see the castle town. Before, I would look down here and despair at the horror I've turned Eyston into. There would be constant small fights breaking out down below, Naga and dwarves specifically duking it out for territory within the city. But now, there finally seems to be co-operation down there, different civilians and races finally working together to rebuild what has been destroyed by the battle with Dralis's army.

Maybe the grand war made the civilians reconsider if they even wanted the territory to begin with—that seems to be the case in Murbyn Bridge; after Dralis's army marched through them, the other races seemed to have eased up on their pursuit of Eyston, which is good since we have withdrawn our armies from there and wouldn't be able to defend it if we needed to.

Maybe it might be because of the humans being returned—they're now finally starting to reach the castle town in droves, and it's been a more peaceful transition than I could have ever imagined.

They're all down there right now, sticking to their own communities, rebuilding buildings. Many of my guards are out there, too, handing out resources, and it's the first time I've seen tranquil interactions between them.

Maybe it's simply having a common enemy that brings the people together. Not the kind of peace I'd strive for, but for now, I relish the quiet out there...

A gentle knock on the door breaks the quiet. I sigh lightly before answering:

“Enter.”

My lord-in-waiting comes in and bows his head.

“Ah, Bruamin,” I say warmly. “Good morn.”

“Good morn, Sire,” he replies, smiling. “You seem in good tempers.”

“Yes, I’d say so,” I say. “Eyston seems quiet this morning. The civilians seem to be calm for... perhaps the first time since my rule.”

“Yes, they’re thankful for the resources being given out, and morale is high after Eyston’s victory,” Bruamin says. “The word of the new queen is spreading too, and they seem excited to have a new monarch.”

I smile bitterly.

“Probably because they despise me so much; any new ruler would be better in their eyes,” I mutter.

“Well, they seem to think these resources being given out are the queen’s doing, which has warmed them to her,” Bruamin says. “Politically speaking, I would encourage this impression. Better for them to think the “Cruel King” has been tamed by the new queen than for them to be antagonistic toward their king for the rest of your rule. We all know what happens to rulers who the civilians grow to hate.”

I give another dry laugh.

“Who’s to say she didn’t anyway?” I mutter to myself.

“Sorry, Sire?”

“Worry not.” I turn fully to face him. “What was it you came to see me about, Bruamin?”

“Ah, yes,” he says, then lowers his voice with a smile. “She’s here.”

I can’t stop the smile spreading across my face.

“Oh, excellent! ” I begin walking out. “Fetch the queen at once. Don’t tell her precisely way, just tell her I need to see her urgently.”

“At once, Sire.”

I walk down the hallway, and it’s a fight to not break into a flying as I go. I’m quite curious to see exactly what she looks like.

Once I get to the foyer of the castle, I see her. She doesn’t look as much like Ebelor as I was imagining—I suppose I was imagining Ebelor as a child, complete with her long brown hair and flinty green eyes, but they look completely different. She has dirty blonde hair, ice-blue eyes, and a completely different bone structure. She looks nothing like Ebelor, but that’s not surprising—I’m just wondering if anyone’s ever thought to mention it to the sisters.

Either way, Maribelle stands in the greeting hall, one arm around her chest and a hand to her mouth, nibbling the tips of her fingers. Her blue eyes are large and watery as they stare unblinkingly. The guards speak softly to her, and they can occasionally get her to look up at them and give a tight smile—perhaps a nod. But that’s about it.

She looks even more like a startled kitten when I approach them, but I smile at them.

“Dronfil,” I say. “I’ll take it from here.”

He bows his head: “Yes, Sire.” Then, he looks to Maribelle. “Things will be fine. I promise.”

They then turn and walk off, clanking as they go. The little girl looks up at me like

I'm about to eat her.

"So you would be Maribelle of Thawallow, then?" I ask her gently.

She nods, but it almost appears more like a tremble. Then, she startles and begins to curtsy, her hands visibly shaking as she pulls her filthy dress out for the gesture.

"Oh, no need to worry about formalities like that," I say, keeping my voice soft. "We're happy to have you here."

She nods. A moment of awkward silence rings out.

"I know you've been suffering with Weeping Fever—how do you feel now?" I ask

Maribelle nods again. She swallows thrice before she finally croaks her first word to me:

"Better."

"Good. I'm glad. Did Dr Gracie treat you well?"

Finally, her tense face softens a touch.

"Yes, he was so very kind," she says. "He gave me blue herbs I'd never heard of before, but everything felt so much better after he did."

"That's good," I say, smiling. "I knew he was the best in his field. If anyone would win the battle with the Weeping Fever, it'd be him."

Maribelle nods, and then her face drops lightly. She looks frightened again.

"Why... did you do that?" she asks quietly.

I look around. Ebelor's not here yet.

"I'm sure it'll make sense soon enough," I say. "How was the journey down?"

She averts her gaze from me.

"Scary."

"Yes, I can imagine it was," I answer. "We would have brought you to the castle earlier, but things were even scarier around here for a while."

Maribelle looks back at me.

"But why—"

"MARIBELLE!"

Her head snaps around. Mine too. Ebelor is sprinting down from the end of the greeting hall. She has never missed an opportunity to complain about how difficult it is to move in her queenly dresses, but it most certainly doesn't seem to be hindering her right now. She wooshes toward us, a flurry of emerald green and gold—and it's all I can do to step back in time because if I don't, I'm sure I will be knocked down.

"EBELOR!" Maribelle cries out.

She runs back toward Ebelor, and the pair smash into a tight embrace. Ebelor is scream-crying into Maribelle's hair, and Mari is pressing her face into Ebelor hard. She's crying now.

"I-I th-thought I'd n-never see you a-again!" Maribelle sobs.

"I was so scared!" Ebelor weeps back. "I was so scared the Weeping Fever had taken

you!”

Maribelle leans back, tears pouring out from her eyes.

“Where were you?!” s he screams.

“I’m sorry, Mari! I’m sorry!” Ebelor cries back. “ I couldn’t come back! I promise I would have if I could!”

Ebelor takes her sister’s face with both hands, pushing up her cheeks. She kisses her forehead, both her cheeks, then her forehead again, then her cheeks—back and forth.

“Ebi!” Maribelle protests, squirming in Ebelor’s grip. “Stop!”

Ebelor chuckles and releases her sister. Finally, she looks at me:

“You did this?” she gasps. “You brought her over here?”

“Of course I did,” I answer. “It’s not right the queen’s sister should be living in poverty.”

Maribelle’s face drops, but Ebelor skips over to me and gives me a kiss.

“Vicmar, thank you! This is wonderful!”

“Queen?! What?!” Maribelle yelps. “What happened?!”

I look to Ebelor.

“I think it’s only right you explain it to her,” I laugh. “Give her the tour, and ask Bruamin to show you to Maribelle’s room when you’re done.”

“My room...” Maribelle says numbly.

I look down at Maribelle.

“I know this is all very strange, but I hope you can come to think of this place as home someday, Maribelle.”

“Th-thank you, Sire,” she says quietly.

“Vicmar, please,” I reply, smiling.

“Vicmar,” she murmurs.

“Come on, Mari,” Ebelor says, walking away with her. “Let us go to the gardens, and I’ll explain on the way. Are you hungry?”

“Yes—is there any food?” Maribelle asks.

Ebelor laughs lightly.

“Oh, there might be some,” she answers.

The pair of them walk far enough away that I can’t pick up their conversation anymore. A significant part of me wants to join them and help explain, but I don’t think that would be welcomed. It’d probably be best if I allow Ebelor to ease Maribelle into this life a little more smoothly. I just hope that Ebelor doesn’t make me sound too terrible.

But just as I begin to turn, a guard half-jogs up to me, pale-faced.

“Sire!”

“What is it, Gargamint?” I ask.

“You’re needed urgently!” he snaps. “Down in the dungeon.”

My heart drops to the ground.

After I see it, I can’t blink for a solid minute.

“Sire?” Gargamint asks. “Your orders?”

I swallow a few times before I answer.

“Fetch Bruamin for me,” I order. “Do not tell the queen or her sister about this yet—leave that to me.”

“At once, Sire.”

He leaves, and once I’m alone, I walk slowly into the empty dungeon. The cell door is open, but it’s not been broken into or out of—unlocked by the guards. It’s fairly obvious that the mode of escape was the gigantic hole in the wall of the fortress. The bricks and other debris of the explosion are on the inside—obviously from a force from the outside. Someone broke the wall from the outside.

When I lean down, I pick up one of the other bricks. Purple magic shimmers over the edges of the pieces.

Wow... this is bad. Not only was this non-elemental magic, but this happened recently. So recently that the magical residue hasn’t had time to fade. This should have made a castle shuddering crash, but I suppose someone with non-elemental magic might have used a silencing spell.

But who else has non-elemental magic aside from Dralis and me? Perhaps Ebelor's lightning counts, but this clearly wasn't hers.

But who could it be?! Who would have helped Dralis when he'd been abandoned by his god?!

My stomach is churning. I can't even fully comprehend how bad this is.

Then, I keep looking at the walls of the cell and see something even worse: a message.

The false kingdom and gods of Faevea will fall

When the last of the light leaves the ice wall.

The last of the light... what? What does that mean?

I have never heard of that. We need to start by investigating the ice wall around the human settlements... Maybe Ebelor will know something about it.

I hear some footsteps, and I turn to see Bruamin standing at the top of the stairs. His old face has dropped as he takes it in.

"Oh, no..." He gasps.

I suck in a deep breath and move to him.

"We don't tell the queen or her sister yet—spread the word amongst the staff," I tell him in a low voice. "Dralis won't launch his attack any time soon since he's still injured, and his army is decimated—but get the mages down here to investigate as soon as you can. We need to know what kind of magic this is and what this message might mean. It's the only way we'll know what we should be expecting in the

future.”

Bruamin is staring at nothing. After a moment, he shakes himself to awareness.

“Y-yes, Sire,” he murmurs, then pauses before he says. “The queen and princess are in the princess’s room. The queen was asking if... if we could think about throwing a celebration for the arrival of the princess.”

I pause for a moment, then reply.

“Yes. Let us do that,” I answer. “Let us gather what we need for a feast and a ball to celebrate her sister’s arrival.” I hang my head. “Since Dralis has escaped now, the peace we have shan’t last forever. Let them enjoy it whilst they can.”

THE END