







# Forced Vampire Mate (Honeyblood Vampires #2)

**Author:** *Electra Cage*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** The cruel Vampire King forces me into marriage...before he impregnates me with his twins.

He got us bonded and tattooed. He's obsessed with claiming and owning me.

I want to escape the prison that he's built for me, but I can't.

He makes me drink his blood...and now I need more.

He broke down my defenses when he took my virginity.

Now our forced wedding vows tie me to him even more.

During our wedding dance, I tell him hell will freeze over before I return to his bed.

And as his dark gaze settles on me, he says he can arrange that.

His rough voice says I'll soon be the one begging for him, just like I did before.

Humiliation floods me, but my body is betraying me once again.

His thumb wipes the blood from my cheek, but I cannot give in.

My sore body is crazed from pain and pleasure, but I cannot submit once again.

Will the Vampire King claim me and our babies for good?

The undying Honeyblood Vampire King is a dark, tyrannical ruler with no remorse and no empathy. When he meets his mate, his aim is clear: claim all of her, until she belongs to him completely.

This series consists of two books that should be read in sequence.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

White wedding gowns hadn't been stylish in Taimarah since some celebrity had decided to have an elaborate green dress to get married in. Since then, jewel tones have been the most popular colors for brides to walk down the aisle in.

I'd been given my pick to choose from. Out of protest, I'd picked up the most out-of-fashion dress available. Now, as I stood facing the mirror, dressed to the nines for my wedding, I wondered what my groom would do if I simply refused to say 'I do.'

My heart hammered against my ribs, my stomach fluttering. The dress was well-made, so white it almost hurt to look at. It washed me out, making my olive-brown tones look sickly rather than have the sun-kissed golden glow I usually had.

Marissa, who styled my hair and makeup for the wedding, had clucked her tongue when she saw it. She'd done her best to make me look better, and her work was terrific. My dark brown eyes stood out as the main feature of my face, which was challenging to do, considering the burn scar covering my lower half.

The dress was high-necked and long-sleeved. The bodice clung to me, and with the corset I wore beneath it, my breasts looked about two sizes bigger. The skirt was a simple flowing chiffon that swept against the floor. It could be detached at a moment's notice, leaving me in soft silk slack. I wore boots beneath, comfortable and able to run in.

"It's unlikely that the wedding will be attacked, but you can't be too careful," Marissa had told me.

The wedding.

I was getting married today. I'd be escorted to the Elven grove in just a little while. I would marry Luken Holakas, the half-vampire, half-elf king of Taimarah. Four years ago, this would have been a dream come true. It should be a dream now, too. I loved him. He sent my pulse racing, and when I was near him, it was all I could do not to beg him to carry me to bed.

Oh, but this was one of the worst days of my life.

I chose the wedding dress, but that was it. I wasn't choosing to marry Luken. He'd decided we were getting married, so here I was.

There were only two days that were worse than this one. The day that my family was slaughtered in an attempt to keep me from Luken, to fulfill the prophecy of being his mate. The day when the only other survivor, Darcie, was taken away to be a tribute to the Gods.

My stomach knots tighter as guilt washes through me. I should be out of here by now, tracking down the temples so I could rescue her. She only had a few months left.

I took a deep breath, embracing the dark feelings that swept through me. Luken might be forcing me to marry me, I might love him deeply, but that didn't mean I couldn't hate him. He made me think he cared. He made me think that we had something special. Something I thought had been proven correct when we were magically tattooed the first—and only—time we had slept together. We were mates, born to be together.

But it was all a lie. I was only a tool to him, something to make him more powerful so he could take on the gods.

He only wanted power. My blood gave that to him. It increased his magic, made him stronger. It made me stronger, too.

\*\*\*

“You give me my strength, and I will not let you go. You will stay here, with me, at all times. We will marry and fuck, and I’ll drink your blood, and it will give me what I need to defeat these false gods.” His grip was tight on me.

I closed my eyes. “Very well.”

“You understand?” His breath was sweet on my face.

“Of course,” I answered, no emotion in my voice. “You have a prophecy to fulfill.”

Luken’s arms fell from around me. “Elara, look at me.”

I kept my eyes shut. I was a fool to fall for him. But no more. I wasn’t going to let him confuse me again.

“Elara,” he whispered, his fingers brushing my cheekbone. “The prophecy says that I can only defeat them with my mate. They know about you, and they’re afraid of us. I can’t sacrifice the kingdom for one person. Look at me.”

“Fuck off,” I said calmly.

Luken growled. “Fine. I have you as a mate and I’m already stronger for it. We will be married in two weeks. You have that long to get used to the idea as well as your new body.”

My eyes snapped open. “New body?”

He arched one dark eyebrow, looking so sinfully attractive I nearly forgot I had to hate him now. “You were pierced through the heart. I had to put my venom in you.

You drank my blood. If you were even a fraction closer to death, you'd be a vampire right now. As it is, with our mating, you have changed. Can't you feel it? You're stronger. You're faster. Your senses are sharper. And I'm assured that you will no longer age. You're still vulnerable to injury and illness, but if you continue to drink my blood as I drink yours, eventually you'll be a vampire, too."

"I don't want to be a vampire," I snapped at him, my head pounding. I looked down at my hands. So much had happened that I hadn't had time to think about it. But last night, I had been impressed with my own stamina.

My stomach swooped. If it was real, if I was changed, then...

I sprang forward and swung. My fist cracked into Luken's nose, sending him stumbling back.

"Ha!" I crowed. "Let's see you try to force me to stay now!"

\*\*\*

I hadn't quite escaped the way I planned. Luken was still stronger and faster than I was. Our ensuing fight had almost been as pleasurable as the lovemaking—fucking—we'd done the night before.

"They're waiting for you," Marissa said.

I turned, taking a deep breath to settle my nerves. I'd been trained to be an assassin. I could get through this wedding without letting my true feelings show. Marissa's glowing silver eyes lingered on me, a slight pinch between her eyebrows. She was one of Luken's most loyal allies in the court and had sort of taken me under her wing, but I still couldn't trust to confide in her.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said gruffly. I shook out my shoulders, rolled my neck, and plastered a smile on my face. “There. Can you tell I’d rather gouge out my eyes?”

Marissa smirked at me. “No. You look every bit the blushing bride.”

I had to laugh at that. Nobody would ever accuse me of being a blushing bride. I was ready, though. Marissa walked with me out of the bride’s room and through a low, covered tunnel toward the glade where I’d be married. Vampires didn’t have much for wedding traditions themselves. They tended to borrow from other cultures.

Luken had incorporated some human elements into our wedding. He’d even offered to have a selkie tradition, in honor of my distant selkie heritage. But I’d refused. So, we were having an elven wedding in honor of his mother.

Marissa left me at a set of doors leading to the glade and slipped away. I would be walking to the altar alone. Once I was alone, my heart started to pound even harder. Would Luken drag me down the aisle if I refused to go? Would he be furious that I embarrassed him? If I did kick up a fuss, would he let me go?

And take another woman into his bed.

My jaw tightened at the thought. Two weeks. He hadn’t touched me or drank from me since our fight. Was he taking from another woman? Marissa assured me he was not, that vampires didn’t really need that much blood, especially born vampires like Luken. He could subsist on regular food for long periods before he grew weak.

The thought of him penetrating another woman, either by fang or cock, made me want to claw her eyes out.

No point in pushing this off any longer. I stepped through the doors, holding my head up high. Only to be met with a blast of glamor that knocked the breath out of me. The



glade dripped in ropes of flower-shaped crystals. Everything glittered. It was so bright that it almost hurt my eyes. A long carpet rolled from where I was to the tallest, widest tree I'd ever seen.

And then there were the people.

Hundreds of eyes were on me, all of them staring and judging. For a moment, I was rooted to the spot, searching the crowd. In the sea of faces, I was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of loss. I should have a mother, father, brothers, and sisters in this crowd. They should be beaming at me. They should have gathered around me in the bride's ready room, giggling and reassuring.

My heart ached. They weren't here. They never would be here.

I almost turned and left. Not out of spite but from the sheer grief that washed through me. Before I could turn, a pair of dark eyes caught me.

Thessa, my one ally in the court. She loved Darcie as much as I did, and we were going to get her back. We had a plan—I just had to get through this.

I strode forward, letting my mask slip back into place. I wasn't going to let a wedding, of all things, disrupt my plans. Thessa and I were getting out of here. We would find the temples and save Darcie. We only had a few months left, but we would be successful.

I passed her and tore my eyes away to look ahead, searching for Luken. I found him standing beneath the tree, next to a low altar that looked as though it was carved from a single piece of crystal. He wore a black tunic and pants, edged in gold. A blood-red sash was tied over his shoulder. His black hair was braided, though from here, I couldn't tell what kind. No doubt, it was as intricate as usual. A golden crown sat on his head.

His lips were curved into a smile, and his amber eyes glowed brighter than usual. My heart skipped. He was always devastatingly handsome, but the way he looked at me right now... he looked happy . Happy to be marrying me. My feet slowed as it seemed as though everyone else disappeared.

Gods, but I loved him. Heat swept through me, pooling between my thighs. Two weeks. It had been two weeks, and my body wanted him again. It was no wonder he'd broken down my defenses so much the night he took my virginity... or rather, when I'd given it to him.

As part of the Blood Trials, I'd killed Thessa. But after I begged Luken to save her, he did. And it was that, more than the intensity of the pleasure from when he drank from me, that had me pulling him closer, begging him to take me. I thought since he saved Thessa, he actually cared about me. I thought...

I started walking again, feeling out my facial muscles to make sure I looked appropriately happy. I wanted him more than ever, but I'd be damned before I let him know that. The truth was, sex wasn't enough. I needed more if I was going to be with him. And he wasn't about to give it to me. He'd said it himself. He was a cruel man. He couldn't give me the warmth and safety I wanted. He wouldn't save Darcie. Wouldn't even try.

"You are beautiful," he whispered to me when I reached him.

"Liar," I answered coolly, quiet enough that nobody else could hear.

Disappointment filled his eyes, and I resisted the urge to punch my fist into the air. Good. Let him see how it felt! He took my hands—fuck, why did something as simple as holding his hand have to feel so good?—and led me to the alter. We knelt on either side, and he picked up a small silver knife.

“I swear with blood that I will protect you,” he said. “I swear I will guard you, stand with you, and support you. I will appreciate everything you bring to my life, and I will not turn my back on you.” He sliced the tip of his finger and held the knife to me. “Do you accept me?”

“I do,” I said. My mouth went dry. I’d also been given traditional vows to memorize, but somehow, they didn’t seem appropriate anymore. “I swear with my blood, I will be your wife. I will...” I faltered over the words. I wasn’t going to be barefoot and pregnant for him. I couldn’t make vows I was unwilling to see through. “I will do what I can,” I finished simply and cut the tip of my finger. “Do you accept me?”

Luken smiled. “I do.”

He pressed his finger to my lips and I pressed mine to his. The taste of his blood was salty and tangy. His eyes darkened as his lips closed around my finger.

A thrill washed through me. One, I tried to fight but couldn’t. I wished I could lean across the altar and kiss him, but there was too much between us. We were married now. We’d made the vows and were bound together even more than we were before. And though I hadn’t thought it would change anything, it had... this intensity, my desire for him, was even stronger.

What was I going to do with myself now?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

There was a feast, and various people toasted Luken, wishing him happiness in his marriage. Some of them tacked me onto the end, but I was just a prop in this game. I didn't say anything; I just smiled as Luken said his thanks and made speeches of his own. We wouldn't be presented to the public until tomorrow, but I didn't have a moment's respite from the many eyes on me as the day wore to night.

Finally, we rescinded to the ballroom. Luken took my hand and pulled me into the center of the floor. Everyone stared at us as the music started to play.

"What is this?" I asked as Luken pulled one of my gloves off. "What are you doing?"

My heart hammered. Some rumors said vampires consummated their marriages with witnesses present. A sick feeling twisted in my gut. If that was expected here, he would have warned me, wouldn't he? Even if he'd proven again and again that I couldn't trust him, he wouldn't go that far, would he? I told him after that first night, I wasn't going to let him touch me. He wouldn't...

No.

I let him take off my other glove, and he tucked both into his belt. If there was any expectation of sex tonight, he would have said something. No matter how betrayed I felt by him, there was one thing I knew for sure. He wasn't going to touch me without my consent. And he wasn't going to force me into a situation where I felt like I had no choice.

"It's our first dance," Luken said, holding his hand out to me. "It's a human tradition, is it not?"

I gulped. As soon as we'd been officially wed, we both put on gloves. Now his bare hand was held out to me. The cut on the tip of his finger was already healed. Skin to skin, though. And his arms would go around me. His hands on my hips. Dancing was an intimacy I wasn't used to. How would I be able to resist him when our bodies were pressed together?

The music still stretched on. Luken smiled at me reassuringly. "We don't have to if you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous," I lied. I glanced over my shoulder; everyone kept waiting. A few people frowned disapprovingly. Clearing my throat, I said loudly, "But I don't know how to dance."

"It'll come naturally, I promise," Luken murmured. "Just imagine me naked."

Heat flooded my cheeks. The image that immediately popped into my mind didn't help. Still, if I was going to bring my plan to fruition, I couldn't fight him too much. He had to think that I was struggling to accept my role, but that I was closer to submitting than I actually was. So I took his hand and stepped in close to him, pressing my body against him.

He let out a soft hiss, his pupils widening. His hands dropped to my hips as we started to sway back and forth. It wasn't really dancing, but there was an intimacy to it that set my blood boiling. The feeling of him so close brought me dangerously close to breaking.

If he had only told me that he would try to save Darcie, I would have believed him. I'd pull him down on top of me right now, in front of everyone. I'd give him everything if he only promised me that one thing.

"You are ravishing," he whispered to me, our cheeks pressed together. "Are you

doing it? Imaging me naked?”

The image flitted through my mind again, forcing me to bite back a whimper. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what? Show my wife how happy I am to have her in my arms?” He leaned back and gave me a winning smile. The glow of his amber eyes was brighter than usual, but the light was soft, a warm glow rather than a harsh shine.

My traitorous heart fluttered at that smile. I inhaled shakily, trying to keep hold of my emotional balance. “Are you? Happy? You didn’t give me much choice as to whether I became your wife.”

His smile slipped for half a moment before he leaned back in and pulled me tighter to him. “I’m trying to protect you, Elara. The Gods have already tried to kill you. They will keep coming after you. You don’t understand how precarious your situation really is. By making you queen, I am declaring to everyone that you are under my protection. You have people loyal to you, know.”

I lowered my face to his shoulder. Every word rang true. But... “You never loved your little brother. You can’t possibly know how I feel about Darcie.”

He spins us, lifting me briefly off my feet, before setting me back down. “You’re right. I never loved my brother. But I love you, Elara. I promise I will make you happy.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“Let me show you, then.” His lips traced over my neck, making me shiver. “Let’s beg off this pompous party and enjoy our wedding night. I can tell you all my plans. How I intend to give you everything you want.”

He really didn't get it, did he? I ran my hand down his strong back to distract him. He shivered, and I felt him harden, pressed into me as he was. If we moved aside, the whole court would be able to see. I leaned back slightly and smiled up at him.

"You already had your wedding night," I told him. "You don't get to touch me again."

To the outside, his expression didn't change. Only I saw the way his eyes hardened. "Is that so?"

"It is. You are the only man whom I will ever give myself to, but you will not have me again, Luken. We will have a marriage, but it will be sexless." I told him calmly and plainly, not bothering to try to hide my feelings from my voice. My face, though, was completely enamored. The many people watching us would think we were whispering the sweet nothings of newlyweds.

Luken's arms tightened around me. "Are you testing me, Elara? Seeing how far you can push me?"

"Nothing of the sort. I'm telling you exactly how I feel," I answered. I curled my fingers into his hair, and he shivered, his eyes half-sliding shut. A surge of power went through me, to see how he responded to such a simple touch. But whatever limited power I had here wasn't enough. "Hell will freeze over before I go to your bed or let you into mine."

Luken laughed breathlessly. "There's a lot we can get up to without any beds involved."

"Ugh, don't be so literal." I rolled my eyes.

"Hell will freeze over, will it?" A dark challenge entered his gaze as he spun us some

more. My hair flowed out around us, whipping toward him. His hair did the same, and together, it made a circle around the two of us. "I can arrange that."

A spark of heat lit in my stomach. He could; I was certain of that. Which only made it more frustrating. I pressed my lips together as I struggled to reign myself back in. I wasn't going to let my hormones get the best of me. I'd trusted him before, and look where it got me. I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"If you can make hell freeze over, why can't you save my sister?" I asked him, my voice low.

Luken's motions didn't slow, but some of the spark left his eyes. He sighed. "I'm not going to promise you something just to get you into bed. Besides, even if I told you right now that I'm working on a plan to save her, would you believe me?"

"No."

He spun me again and brought me even closer to him. "There you have it, then. Why should I waste words on something you don't trust me with? I will prove myself to you. You will come back to my bed, I assure you. Once I've shown you with my actions what you won't believe from my words."

What did he mean by that? If he was trying to be reassuring, it had the opposite effect. I tensed, and it took everything I had to remind myself that I couldn't yank myself away from him, not in front of all these people.

"Do you think marrying me means that my body belongs to you? Is that what you're getting at?" I hissed.

Luken's head dropped toward mine, as though he was going to kiss me. But it was only to hide my expression from the people still watching us. His nose traced over my



cheekbone.

“You belong to me as much as I belong to you, Elara. You hate me, but you still want me. I’m cruel, but I don’t want you until you want to want me.” He pressed a chaste kiss to my forehead. “Do you regret the night we spent together? If you could go back, would you stop yourself?”

I bit my lip, hating that he’d asked me that. The truth of it was that I wasn’t sure.

He searched my gaze for a moment before he sighed. “Perhaps I was too hasty. Perhaps you and I need to spend more time getting to know each other. I always assumed that my mate would understand me perfectly without words or actions. My assumptions have hurt you.”

Why did my heart have to flutter at his words? Why did I have to believe that he didn’t want to hurt me? That he longed for that fairytale love that I used to dream about? He was a vampire king, used to getting anything he wanted. He didn’t have the same dreams as the naïve eighteen-year-old I’d been four years ago.

“Let us put the conversation aside,” Luken said, his voice soft again. “I won’t try to seduce my unwilling wife. I can wait. I will wait. You’ll soon be begging for me, just like you did before,” he said, his lips twitching into a smile.

I gaped at him. Heat flooded my cheeks, and I barely refrained from yanking myself from his arms. All his talk about wanting me to want to want him. Proving I could trust him. And he ended it like that? With that arrogance that said he could override my wishes and wants and put that desire in me?

My nostrils flared. “You’ll be waiting forever, Luken.”

“We’ll see,” he laughed.

The music ended, and he stepped back, his body leaving mine. Only his hand remained in mind. He bent over it formally and laughed again, his eyes sparkling. If I wasn't so humiliated, I might have found it attractive—or been curious about what made him so certain. But the anger bubbling inside of me was dwarfed by the chill that stole over my skin from no longer being in his arms.

Even now, when I didn't want him to touch me, I still wanted him to hold me. And I hated him even more for making me feel like this.

“Thank you all for celebrating my wedding,” Luken called to the gathered crowd. “We are so pleased that you have joined us for these heady celebrations. Now, let's get this party into full swing. Maestro!” He called, turning to the orchestra that had been playing. “Give us something lively!”

Luken kissed my cheek as a modern song started to play. He winked at me and whispered, “Try not to look like you want to murder me, my dear. I don't think that will go over very well.”

“Bastard,” I hissed back.

But by then, he'd already released my hand. He moved off with a group of kings from other kingdoms, all of them slapping each other's backs and congratulating him. I plastered a smile on my face and turned to greet the women who came to flock around me, his words ringing in my ear. I had to get out of here. I had to escape this gilded cage. I had to prove him wrong, to show him I was more than he thought I was.

I was Elara Tideborne, and I would save my sister.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

The sound of the orchestra was still playing as I slipped through the halls of the palace. Guests and servants were everywhere, making it difficult to evade them all, but I finally reached the gardens.

Despite the night still being young, I was exhausted. The cool gardens, with their soft lights, provided a respite from the crowds of people who kept telling me what a good match I was. The ones that pressed their congratulations on me as though they were bestowing me a great favor. The ones that simpered and fluttered around Luken like moths on the flame.

Worse were the women who made no secret of the way they were throwing themselves at him. It was clear from all their behavior that Luken wasn't expected to stay faithful to his new human wife.

Did I expect him to be faithful? I wasn't sure. I didn't want to care if he did or not... but I knew in my bones that if he slept with anyone else, it would devastate me. Despite everything that was between us... or maybe because of it. I just wanted one thing I could actually trust him with. But I didn't know him.

How could I trust him when I didn't know him? All I wanted from Luken was safety, to feel like I had someone in my corner who could take care of me.

"Elara?" a voice whispered behind me.

I jumped and turned. Thessa crept in the shadows, flitting closer to me. I could barely make out her face in the glow from her brown eyes. Relief washed through me, and I rushed over to her, pulling her into a tight hug. I wasn't sure either of us could sneak

away from the party when I'd whispered for her to meet me here.

"Did you get everything we need?" I asked anxiously.

Thessa nodded. "It was difficult to sneak past the guards, but I was able to do it in my panther form. Once they find it missing, though, they'll be able to smell I was the one who took it all."

She passed me a small rucksack. Inside was a dagger, a canteen, and several packs of dried food. The item that she had just taken for me tonight was a map of the kingdom. Not just any map that you could buy on a corner of the city, but one that was magically enhanced. It would show us where we were at any given time and map our route to where we were going, like a GPS.

The location of the temples was a highly guarded secret, but the vampires who collected the tributes had to have a means of getting them to the temples. And this map was exactly how they did it. It was the most vital of all the supplies we'd been building the last few weeks. Even my staff, my weapon of choice, wasn't as important as this square of paper.

"And you have weapons for yourself?" I asked her.

She nodded. "I told Marissa that I didn't feel safe in my room and that I wanted to keep a staff with me."

Her words made me release a short breath. "Are you safe in your room?"

She flashed me a smile. "Oh, yes. Very safe. The king told me right from the start that if anyone tried to mess with me, I was to tell him or Marissa, and they'd deal with whoever was making my life difficult. The other vampires might not be happy with me being around, but they all know I'm under the king's protection."

My heart fluttered at her words, though I tried to push it aside.

“We’ll have to wait until the newness of the marriage wears off,” I murmured, looking up at Thessa. “You’ll have to come to my room tonight so we can make plans for getting out of here.”

“On your wedding night?” Thessa asked doubtfully.

My stomach clenched as I shook my head. “Yes, on my wedding night. Luken already knows that I’m not receptive to him. He won’t come to my room tonight. We’ll have privacy.”

Would he take one of the gorgeous women from the party to his room? I hated this feeling of jealousy, of uncertainty. I didn’t want to care if he slept with someone else or not. If Marissa was to be believed, Luken didn’t even look for a bedmate in the past four years, since he thought I was dead. But it wasn’t as though I could really trust Marissa, either.

Thessa’s fingers brushed against my hand. I flinched back out of instinct, rolling to the balls of my feet as I prepared to defend against an attack. She flinched in response, harder than I had, and bit her lip.

I let out a shaky breath. “Sorry. This whole wedding business just has me on edge.”

“Um, that’s what I wanted to ask you about,” Thessa said uncertainly. “Are you certain you want to do this? Especially with the wedding...”

I straightened, smoothing down the front of my old-fashioned white dress. “We only have a few months before Darcie is lost to us forever. We have to save her. There’s no other choice here.”

My hands clenched into fists as panic threatened to start swelling in my throat. Four years ago, Luken's half-brother Greyson killed my parents, all of my family except my younger sister Darcie, and framed Luken for it. I'd nearly died in the attempt, too. It was only because I'd hidden Darcie earlier that she was able to pull me out of the fire that scared me so badly.

Those days were bleak, but even bleaker was when Darcie had been claimed as a tribute to the gods. The last person I had in this world was ripped away from me. I'd spent every moment of the last four years getting stronger and planning how to get her back. I wasn't going to give up now.

"I don't want to give up on her, either," Thessa murmured. "I know that you gave up your chance to save her when you saved me."

It was true. To win the Blood Trials, I had to stab Thessa through the heart. I killed her, earning myself one wish to be granted. When entering the Trials, it had been my plan to use that wish to save Darcie from being sacrificed. With Thessa's blood gushing over my hands, I'd instead begged Luken to turn her into a vampire, saving her life.

I knew I couldn't regret that choice. Not when Thessa and Darcie were such close friends that Darcie had given her the necklace she inherited from our grandmother. Memories washed over me from the all-too-recent Blood Trials. It had been less than a month, and despite the training I'd put myself through with an assassin's coven, I still had nightmares about what happened. Our teammates Kael and Ysara...

My stomach clenched, and I closed my eyes, breathing my emotions away. "Given what I know now, I'm not sure I would have been granted my wish to free Darcie, even if I hadn't saved you, Thessa. Besides. It's a good thing to have you here." I opened my eyes again and took her hand, squeezing lightly. "I need the reminder that there's still goodness in this world. And I needed you, an ally I can rely on."

Thessa bit her lip, still looking hesitant. “I guess I... I don’t understand why you can’t ask Luken for help, since he’s on our side now.”

“Because he won’t help,” I answered, clenching my hands again. “I made it clear that I wanted to save Darcie, and he made it clear that he didn’t intend to help me. He’s not on our side, Thessa. He just used me.”

“I...” Thessa fell silent, but her expression clearly said she wasn’t convinced.

It didn’t matter if she was convinced or not. I knew the truth. How even though I’d given Luken everything I had left, he wasn’t willing to give me my sister back. Maybe it was jealousy on his side. Maybe he didn’t want anyone around who might compete with him for my affections.

Thessa was quiet, rubbing her chest where I’d stabbed her through the heart. I shuddered as I recalled my own experience. Greyson had flung a knife into my chest, too, seconds after Luken saved Thessa. I hadn’t gotten as close to death as Thessa had, but Luken still needed to feed me his blood and pump the vampire venom into my body to save my life. I was close enough to death that it had changed me, even if I wasn’t a full vampire now.

And most worrisome, the feeling of him drinking from me was the most blissful experience I’d been through. Even regular vampires created a euphoric sense in the people they drank from. Many people said there was nothing more orgasmic than an orgasm from a vampire’s mouth. I’d trained myself against sexual arousal, building up a tolerance so I could control my body.

When it came to Luken, all that training disappeared.

“Elara?” Thessa said.

I shook myself, too swept up in the memory of the sheer delight of Luken's body. Even now, my core tightened, and my breasts swelled, wanting him to touch me, to hold me, to inhabit me. It was like an addiction from the first hit.

"Are you sure?" Thessa asked.

"Am I sure what?"

"That Luken isn't on your side? You said that he isn't coming to your room because you told him you don't want him. Surely, if he respects you enough not to push the matter—"

I snorted. "He doesn't respect me at all. It's just a game to him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I slid the pack onto my shoulder and jerked my chin toward the hiding place where we'd store everything, to make sure it couldn't be connected to us if it was discovered. "I know that he puts on a good show. He even fooled me. But he doesn't care about me, Thessa. He only cares about himself and his goals."

Disappointment hit the pit of my stomach. Tears pricked my eyes. It was a lie to say that I succumbed to Luken simply because of the desire that he created in my body. More than that, it was the desire he created in my mind. I wanted him to love me. I wanted to trust him. I wanted it so badly, I'd let myself believe without evidence.

We stashed the supplies and started back toward the palace.

"You told me that you trained to be able to resist a vampire when they fed on you," Thessa said abruptly while we walked. "How did that work? And how can I make sure that I... I only drink from people who went through the same training?"



Her cheeks went red.

Oh.

Oh.

I hadn't considered what it would be like from her perspective. At the temples, she would have been trained to believe that her virginity was her greatest value. Now, as a vampire, her sustenance would eventually require her to drink from another person.

"I'm not sure how much to tell you," I hedged.

She gave me a firm look. "Please. I don't want to take advantage of anyone."

I smiled slightly. "My training included putting me through pain whenever I was sexually aroused. And that includes having vampires drink from me, and punishing my body for responding. But it's not perfect, you have to know. Most times, I'm able to control my body, but sometimes pain elicits arousal, too. But as for drinking from people," I hesitated, uncertain how she'd take this suggestion, "You can drink from me, at least to begin with. I can handle it."

Thessa opened her mouth again, but closed it. She nodded jerkily. "Marissa says I'll have to drink within the next month. We should try before we leave the palace. In case I can't stop and you need help."

Her breathing was rapid, and as we passed through a beam of light, I saw that her normally golden skin tone had gone pale.

I understood her fear. "We have time," I assured her. "We'll have to wait until our guests leave, and Luken lets down his guard before we make our move, anyway."

“I—” she started, then froze.

Moments later, I heard it too. The sound of voices wafting through the gardens. I cocked my head, triangulating the sound. Guests, maybe? Or it could be servants taking advantage of the party. Either way, I didn’t want word to get back to Luken that Thessa and I were wandering the gardens having secret conversations.

“Go this way,” I said, pulling Thessa to a little-known path. “Get back to the party and act like nothing’s wrong. I’ll just tell them that I needed some air.”

Thessa nodded and scurried off.

I rolled my shoulders and checked my hair before I strode forward, intending to walk past whoever it was and get back to the party. I rounded the corner of one of the hedges to find a party of half a dozen vampires, all men. Their glowing eyes locked on me, and all at once, a shudder ran down my spine. Maybe I should have taken the same path as Thessa had.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

My heart hammered in my throat as I continued to walk, praying my steps didn't falter. I moved to one side to brush past them, and a vampire stepped into my path. I paused, breath catching in my lungs. A light flicked on somewhere above us, and I saw the group clearly. Relief washed over me when I realized my first assessment was wrong. Out of the six of them, half were women. They were simply dressed in pantsuits rather than dresses.

The fact that one of them was blocking my way was less of a relief.

"Excuse me, I'll be missed at the party," I said breezily, stepping closer.

The vampire who blocked my way, a woman I recognized as Lola, narrowed her eyes at me. "The king made a mistake by picking you."

She was one of the women who had flaunted herself in front of my husband during the dancing. I kept my expression smooth as I stared her down. At least I knew they recognized me. They might be messing with me here, but it was doubtful they would hurt me. Not when I was under Luken's protection.

"Take it up with my husband if you think he made a mistake," I answered with a shrug.

Lola narrowed her eyes at me. The vampire next to her staggered forward, making me back away. The scent of alcohol rolled off them. They must have been really celebrating for them to have gotten drunk. It was nearly impossible for a vampire to drink that much. Or... as I took in the hatred that spread over Lola's face, they weren't celebrating. They were drinking for another reason.

A new shiver ran down my spine. The six vampires were all locked on me like sharks scenting blood in the ocean.

“You must have cast some sort of witch spell on the king,” Lola said, her gaze dragging over me with clear distaste. “For him to forsake all others for you? If you were some rare beauty, maybe I’d understand. But your blood can’t be that good.”

One of the others laughed. “Maybe we could see for ourselves.”

He stumbled and fell to his knees, still laughing. One of the others hauled him to his feet and punched him in the gut. He doubled over, wheezing.

“You can’t say that. Do you know what the king will do to us if he hears that?” another of the vampires hissed.

Lola’s gaze never moved from me. Out of all of them, she seemed the least drunk. But no matter how drunk they were, they were still dangerous. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled as I remembered the screams of the other teams during the Blood Trials. The ones that failed their tasks and were hunted down for sport by the vampires.

“Luken is my husband,” I said, drawing myself up again. “You’re drunk. Let’s return to the party, shall we? He’ll be looking for me. I told him I was only stepping out for a moment.”

“Or we could wait for him to find you,” Lola said, sidestepping in front of me again. “He’ll be happy to know that we were here to keep you from getting lost in the gardens. It can be such a maze, after all.”

Even vampires weren’t fully immune to death. I’d seen them come back from blows that would be fatal to any other creature, but take off their head, and they wouldn’t

survive it. If only I had a weapon. My staff would be ideal, but perhaps I could get their weapons. I didn't need to fully decapitate them. Severing the spinal cord would be enough. Once I was back with Luken, he could decide what to do with them.

I was still vulnerable. They were stronger, faster, and could withstand more damage.

Given the look in Lola's eye, she wanted to cause a lot of damage to me.

"You aren't fit to be our queen," she said, advancing now. "You're nothing but a lowly human. It would be a blessing to the king and kingdom both to take you out."

I rolled to the balls of my feet, ready to take her on. One of the others jumped at me from the side, clumsily slashing a knife at me. I dodged, grabbing his wrist. With a quick turn, I'd lifted my knee, snapping his elbow. He released the knife with a howl, and I snatched it before it hit the ground. I shoved the vampire away and angled myself to watch them all, the knife clutched in my hand.

"Luken will see you all dead for threatening me," I said. All the fear was gone, replaced by the calm of impending violence. Adrenaline surged through me.

Lola's lips pulled back from her teeth. Her fangs lengthened as she snarled, crouching. "I would rather be dead than see what harm you will bring to the kingdom. I won't allow you to weaken the king. But don't worry, little human. I'll kill you swiftly, as a kindness to the king."

This damn dress was going to hamper my movements. No time to cut off the skirt. Lola sprang at me, and I spun, ducking under her outstretched hands. She grabbed hold of my hair and yanked my head back. I swung out with my fist, and she caught my wrist with her free hand. As she lunged for my throat, I brought my other hand up. The dagger pierced through her forehead, a splash of blood spraying out as I yanked it back. Lola stumbled, releasing me. I whirled, slashing across her throat, and

knocked her feet out from under her. With a single thrust, I drove the dagger through the base of her skull.

She slumped forward, twitching. The other five stared at me and Lola, eyes wide. I quickly cut at my skirt, opening it up so I had a wider range of motion. That was all the respite I got. The other five all howled and came at me at once. I slashed one across the chest and kicked at another, but my legs were hampered by the skirt. One of them grabbed the skirt from behind and yanked hard, making me stumble. I whirled and put the knife into the face, and snatched their knife from their belt to throw into the throat of another one.

One of the men caught my wrist and twisted, trying to break my hold on my knife. I dropped it, grabbing with the other hand, and jammed the blade between his ribs. He snarled, his grip tightening on me.

His eyes glowed brighter as I yanked it out and stabbed up through his jaw. He fell, half-dragging me with him. My legs got tangled in my skirt, and as I pitched to one side, I threw my hand out to catch myself. The final vampire came at me from behind. Her knife flashed in the air as it stabbed toward me. I rolled but was caught in place, pinned by this fucking dress.

Blood exploded into the air. It settled like a fine mist over me. The vampire woman toppled to one side. Something dark and huge hulked over me. I yanked myself free and rolled to my feet as the figure reached for me. With a howl, I threw myself forward, punching them in the stomach with one hand and swiping at their throat with the knife.

A huge hand closed over mine, stopping the knife as it pressed into soft flesh. The red haze faded from my vision, and I found myself staring into Luken's face. His normally amber eyes snapped golden as I stood there, my knife against his throat, the scent of blood lingering all around us.

I panted, the adrenaline still surging through me. I could kill him. It wouldn't do any good, not least to Darcie, but I could do it. I could make him pay for lying to me.

His hand was still tight on mine. His free hand came up and he swiped his thumb across my cheek. A sting accompanied his actions. Somewhere in the fight, my face had been cut. Luken, his eyes never leaving mine, brought the thumb covered with my blood to his mouth. He sucked on it and his pupils dilated.

A grin crossed over his face as his free hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer. Our hips pressed together. He was fully aroused, his erection pressing against my belly. I gasped, half in disbelief and half as fire burned through my veins.

"I could cut your throat, and you're hard?" I hissed at him.

"Seeing you fight will always make me hard," he answered. "I love the way you move, Elara. Remember the hot springs? The way we fought there? I think about it every night. You're such a fucking warrior. Look at how you took out these fools!"

The pride in his eyes made all the air around me disappear. Nobody had ever looked at me like that, as though I was the most perfect thing they'd ever seen. Nobody but him. Every nerve in my body screamed for him, the blood boiling between my legs. I wanted him so badly.

I drew the knife sharply back, slamming my body into his. Luken caught my mouth before I could decide what I was doing. His fingers tightened around my wrist as he turned me, pressing me up against the lamppost. I hitched my leg over his hip as he ground himself into me, our clothes a regrettable barrier.

His mouth was soft and hot, his body hard as he pressed himself against me. He growled in pleasure as he inhaled my scent, working the buttons on my bodice. The tight fabric fell away, and he cupped my breasts in his hands. My bra was thin, letting

me feel the heat of his hands, but it wasn't enough. I wanted his skin against mine. I tore my lips away from his to kiss his neck, to nibble at his collarbone. The scent of him drove me wild.

When he grabbed the thigh that was slung over his hip, I used his strength to hold me in place, rolling my pelvis toward him. His hard cock rubbed against me as I sought out the friction, wanting more, needing more. My motions were rewarded by a long, breathy growl from him.

I popped open the first button of his shirt and kissed the golden skin it revealed. He was a god made real, his arms tight on me, his desire for me evident. Right now, I don't care for all the reasons why I shouldn't want this. He was mine, and no fucking vampires were going to tell me that he should be with someone else. Watching the women at court throw themselves at him all night left me feeling feral. I swung my other leg up, practically climbing him. The lamppost was hard against my back as Luken pressed me to it, my legs wrapped around his waist.

Too many clothes.

He thrust against me, hard, the way he had when we'd fucked the first—the only—time. His mouth delved into the juncture of my neck and shoulder. I groaned as his fangs scratched against my skin. Yes. Yes, I wanted this. I wanted him to be inside of me, cock and fang. My head fell back as my core tightened. If only it weren't for these clothes. I wanted his hand on my clit, his cock inside of me. I wanted—

Luken let out a sudden, harsh groan of frustration. His grip on me loosened, and he stepped back. My glance fell to his crotch, expecting to find evidence that he'd finished in his pants. The bulge that was still evidence proved that it wasn't the case. Panting, clutching at him, I stared up at him in confusion.



“I won’t,” he said, his voice rough. “I’m not going to take you. Not until you come to me. Remember?”

I gaped at him. What had that been, if it wasn’t me coming to him? Did he want me on my knees, begging for him?

He adjusted my bra, covering me again. At some point, I wasn’t sure when, my breasts had been exposed. Then, with quick movements, he buttoned my bodice and arranged my skirt to cover me despite it being torn. All the while, I stared at him, certain he was going to break any moment. He wanted me. I could see it, feel it.

“I will have someone take care of these bodies,” he said, stepping back from me.

Oh. Right. I’d forgotten about the fight. I looked around, seeing the scene with fresh eyes. Oh, they were dead, alright. I’d done more damage than I realized. It wasn’t the first time a fight had grown more bloody and fierce than I realized.

“I suppose you’ll have to punish me for it?” I asked, trying to bring my body back under control.

“For defending yourself?” Luken arched one dark eyebrow. “No. You are guiltless here, Elara. And if these idiots had thought things through, they would remember that I have cameras in the gardens. If it comes to it, it will be easy to prove to their families that they were traitors.”

I looked up. “All through the gardens?”

He gave me a piercing look. “Not through all of them, no. I don’t know what you and Thessa were talking about.”

And with that, he turned on his heel and walked away.

I stared after him, stained with blood, wet between my thighs. A swirl of sensations moved through me. Lust was at the forefront, but it was being quickly overwhelmed by hurt and confusion. He knew I was planning something with Thessa. I didn't trust that he didn't know what it was about. And now he was just leaving, wanting me to crawl after him and beg him to take me back.

The hurt morphed. It crystallized, burning hotter and growing spiky in my chest. I hated him. I couldn't forget him. This pull I felt toward him was nearly all-powerful, but I couldn't give in.

Screw the plan. It would take too long. I needed to escape tonight.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

We would need to move quickly if we were going to escape on the very night of my wedding. After Luken left me in the gardens, I went to my room, where I changed into clothes more suitable for travel. I was tempted to stuff that damn wedding dress into the fireplace, but I didn't want to risk the smoke alerting Luken to the fact I wasn't in my room. I sent a message to Marissa, telling her to inform Luken that if he tried to come to my room, I would pretend like he didn't exist. I didn't think he'd come, but it was best to make sure.

After that, I sent a coded message to Thessa to let her know our timeframe had moved up. After that, I climbed out my window and kept to the shadows as I slipped back through the gardens, avoiding where I knew cameras were. By the time I made it to our stash, Thessa was already there.

She handed me my staff, and I took it, sighing in relief. I'd like to see any vampires come after us now!

"What happened?" Thessa asked me, her voice low.

"I'll tell you once we're on the road."

All the vehicles on the palace grounds were carefully guarded, but last week, I convinced Luken to let Thessa and me have a couple of dirt bikes that we could use to ride around at our leisure. We rolled them silently off the grounds. The guards were so busy with the obvious—keeping people out and protecting the guests within the palace—that they weren't looking for their new queen to run away.

All in all, getting out of the palace was simple. We made it through the gates, then

jumped on our dirt bikes and sped through the quiet streets of the capital city, Holakas, otherwise known as Honeyblood. I remained tense, expecting to suddenly have vampires on our tail at any moment.

Nothing broke the stillness of the night as we whipped past the large stone structures, through the tall glass skyscrapers, and then between the houses that slowly grew smaller and more isolated, until, finally, we had nothing but trees on either side of us.

Thessa let out a shaky breath as she pulled her bike up next to me. “That’s the first break we’ve gotten, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I murmured, knowing she would hear me despite the wind whipping by my face.

It was too easy. Suspiciously easy. Even though there were a lot of guests to guard, it seemed almost deliberately sloppy for the guards to let us go. Maybe they saw me leaving and figured it was some sort of honeymoon thing? That I was sneaking off to a cozy cabin, and Luken would catch up later?

I could only hope my suspicions were unfounded, that it really was that easy. And that it would continue to be easy. Once I had Darcie away from the temples and we were running with the gods on our asses, Luken would have to step in. He would have to defend Darcie if he wanted to defend me.

We traveled until the sun started to lighten the eastern horizon. By then, we were well and truly away from the capital. I took us off the highway, heading up a logging road that made my teeth rattle. The dirt bikes were almost empty; we’d ditch them and have to continue on foot until we made it across the border and could get on the train again.

In the meantime, we went as far as the road would take us and carried the bikes into

the woods, letting the forest envelop us. As we were heading south, the spruces and pines were being replaced by more and more deciduous trees. There was still the occasional cedar and tamarack, but for the most part, we were surrounded by aspens, birches, and oaks.

We found a place under a fallen tree where we could put our backs and stashed the bikes in the roots. We slumped to the ground, exhausted.

“I’ll take first watch,” I said. “But first, let’s take another look at that map.”

Thessa nodded as she pulled it from her pack. We bent over the map, tracing the route that it showed us. We were about twenty miles from the border of Luken’s kingdom. We’d have to pass into shifter territory if we were going to get to the temples. It was risky, but then everything was risky.

“I’m not a full vampire, so they shouldn’t have too much of a problem with me,” I said, stretching my arms over my head. “You’ll have to keep to your panther form. If anyone asks, I’ll say you lost your clothes, and you’re shy. Hopefully, if you stay a panther, they won’t notice your eyes glowing.”

Thessa nodded, her gaze darkening. The sky continued to lighten, tugging at my wary mind. We had decided to travel at night, when there would be less chance of running into humans in the woods. Moving through the night was as easy as daytime for vampires. For me, it was almost as easy.

“You should get some sleep,” I told Thessa when she yawned. “I’ll keep watch.”

It was a testament to how tired our flight had made her that she promptly lay down. It didn’t take long for her breathing to slow. As her body relaxed, she curled inward, resting her head on her hands. Even though she was eighteen years old, when she slept like that, she seemed much younger.

Even though I was only twenty-two, I knew how young she was. I'd been a completely different person at eighteen when I first met Luken. My heart ached, but a sudden sweep of gratitude filled me all the same.

Luken wanted me to come with him the moment he laid eyes on me. But when I said no, he respected that no. He was going to wait. He recognized that I was young and he wanted to give me more time to come into myself before he came back into my life. How would our courtship have gone if Greyson and his elves hadn't attacked my family?

I shook my head slightly, trying to dislodge the thought. It would only lead to grief and more anger. I needed to concentrate on my mission. Leave the emotions for later. Don't question whether I could forgive Luken, if we could have a happy ending in all this bullshit.

The tattoos covering my torso seemed to warm. An echo of worry rippled through the bond I shared with Luken. He must have just discovered I was missing. Took him long enough. I felt him reaching out, searching for me, and shoved the doors shut. I hadn't asked for this bond, and I wasn't going to let him use it to stop me from saving my sister.

\*\*\*

Two Weeks Ago

Luken came to my door early in the morning, two days after he'd told me I was going to marry him. I'd kept to my chambers since then, plotting my escape with Thessa. Fury flowed through me when I answered the knock and found him standing there. His black hair was in loose waves halfway down his back, his chiseled features extra hot in contrast to the soft tunic and pants combo he wore.

“What do you want?” I snapped at him.

“You’re distressed,” he answered simply. “I want to soothe your distress.”

I was tempted to slam the door in his face. Something he must have guessed, since he casually put his hand on it, to prevent me from doing just that.

“How would you even know I’m upset?” I wasn’t letting him in. If he came into my room, I’d be tempted to close the door. If the door closed, we would be alone, the two of us. In my bedroom. Where I had a bed, which would be all too easy to fall into.

“The tattoos that appeared when we made love—”

“When we fucked, you mean,” I corrected harshly.

His amber eyes glinted, but he continued without comment. “They are a physical manifestation of what is between us. The bond that was formed. I feel your pain, your joys, just as you feel mine. In time, we will be able to speak to each other through the bond, no matter the distance between us.”

I frowned at him. “You can feel what I feel.”

“Yes.”

A wash of cold went over me. If that was true... it meant he could feel how much his words to abandon Darcie hurt. And he didn’t care.

As the thought crossed my mind, his mouth turned down at the edges. At the same time, I felt a ripple of sorts. Frustration that was mine and yet not mine. My eyes widened as I examined the feeling. Was that him? I pulled back from the frustration and felt it shift, like it was something outside of my body.

“You can shut down the bond, yes,” he asked before I could ask. “But I would ask you not to. By keeping it open, we can better understand each other.”

I took a deep breath and slammed down the feelings between us. There was a subtle change, a difference that I hadn’t even noticed. I felt cooler without him. My tattoos had been warm, and now they felt like trickles of ice running over my skin. It unnerved me to know that Luken had been privy to my emotions over these last few days. How would he use them against me?

“It is your right, of course, to keep the bond closed,” Luken said, disappointment heavy in his eyes. “I hope that we will be able to see eye-to-eye, Elara. But just know I am going to protect you first and foremost. No matter the cost.”

\*\*\*

Thessa woke mid-afternoon. She seemed more rested as she stood and stretched her back. She glanced at me, and from the look on her face, I knew how I must look.

“I’ll take watch now. I don’t need that much sleep,” she said.

I nodded, rolling to my side. I didn’t want to think anymore, not when I could feel Luken trying to break through the wall I’d built between us. He was trying to get through, to find me. He wasn’t going to. But even though I knew this was the only way, some part of me still felt guilty for not opening it a little, to let him know I was okay after the attack in the gardens.

I told myself he shouldn’t be so stubborn as I drifted off to sleep.

I dreamt of him. Of his touch on my body, his lips on my neck. In the dream, I was happy to be in his arms. In the dream, he promised me he would save Darcie. He promised I’d be safe.



But it was only a dream.

And it ended as a scream went through the air.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I bolted upright, reaching for my staff. I sprang to my feet, crouching to make myself a smaller target. Thessa had shifted to her panther form, her fur bristling as she backed up to my side. The light was so bright at first that I only saw vague shadows. I blinked, squinting as I heard the rasp of swords being unsheathed. No guns—good. It meant they weren't really trying to kill us.

Who were they? My eyes adjusted to the sudden wakefulness. A dozen or so people faced us, wearing the dark uniforms of palace guards, their faces covered. My heart sank. Luken had sent vampires after us? And they caught us so quickly? I shifted into a fighting stance. If they expected to bring us back, they had another thing coming!

“Hello, Elara. Thessa,” a cool, familiar voice said.

The guards parted as a chill stole down my back. Greyson, Luken's half-brother, stepped through and smiled at us. My grip tightened on my staff. The first time I laid an eye on him was when he slaughtered my family.

They weren't guards at all. Now, I saw the fabric straining at their ears. Elves. Mercenaries, like the ones he'd led to kill my family.

Thessa whimpered and snarled. I opened my mouth, but no words formed. I hadn't seen Greyson since the end of the Trials. He'd been stabbed through the head but resurrected to throw the knife through my chest. He'd been the reason why I was now hovering as not-quite-a-vampire. Through the Trials, he'd worn a false face, but I'd seen what he really looked like. He'd been angry but in control.

Now he grinned, his fangs lengthening. His eyes were wild, glowing with pulses that

didn't seem healthy. His gaze didn't move from me, a predator that had found a particularly tasty morsel to play with.

"Surrender, and I will make this quick," he told me. "Drop the staff, and I'll slice your throat and let Thessa hold you while you bleed out. Fight, and she'll go back to the temples, and you will bleed out alone on the forest floor."

"I thought you were..." I trailed off. Locked away? Dead? I never asked Luken what he'd done to Greyson.

Greyson stalked forward. "Oh, my brother overestimates his strength. I still have friends in the palace. Now come, Elara. Drop the staff and make it easier on all of us. You signed your death warrant when you let him bed you. You could have been spared. Now, surrender for Thessa's sake. Otherwise, she will be a tribute to the Gods once more."

The choice was impossible—and one that I ultimately didn't have to make.

Thessa screamed, her fangs lengthening as she sprang forward. She clawed at Greyson's face, but he sprang aside, and one of the mercenaries jumped in front of him. Greyson laughed as he drew his sword. The mercenaries formed a tight wall around us, but half of them turned their attention to Thessa. The others hung back as Greyson came at me.

I jumped forward, swinging my staff. Greyson spun out of my reach, but I wasn't going for him. The mercenary behind him didn't see me coming in time. The staff cracked down on his head, making it burst like a ripe pumpkin. Gore flew every which way as I spun, using my staff as a vaulting pole to leap behind the mercenaries, landing close to Thessa. With two more smooth motions, I broke the throat of one and crushed the testicles of another. He dropped, screaming and writhing.

“Don’t kill the panther,” Greyson ordered, hanging back as the mercenaries moved out, dodging our blows. “And if you can, try not to injure her too badly. She must be unblemished for the Gods, and my healing can only do so much.”

We fought. We fought as hard as we could. But we were outnumbered. I managed to kill another mercenary before Greyson was there. His sword sank into my staff, and as Thessa sprang at him, he backhanded her into a tree. She dropped, and the elves were on her in an instant, grabbing her paws and twisting her body so she couldn’t free herself.

“Take her to the van,” Greyson ordered over his shoulder. “The Gods will be pleased to have her again.”

Blood rushed in my ears as I leaped after them, remembering the image of Darcie being dragged away. The way she’d screamed and fought, but the vampires who had her wouldn’t release her. Now Thessa was being dragged away. She screamed and fought, but they wouldn’t let her go. Back to the temples, a place she’d been willing to die to escape.

“No,” I gasped.

A bite of cold went through my stomach. Sound seemed to cut out as my grip on my staff faltered. My distraction cost me. Greyson’s sword slid smoothly through my stomach, the blade cutting through bone and flesh. I met his gaze to find his eyes cold. There was no victory or triumph in his face, only grim satisfaction. He withdrew the sword and stabbed me through again.

“Mourn her, Elara,” he whispered as he caught me. He twisted my staff from my hands and pulled his sword out of me again. My legs shook, and he kicked them out from beneath me. I fell to the ground with a spurt of blood erupting from the wounds in my stomach.

Greyson crouched next to me. “I know what you must be thinking. An attractive young girl with all these hot-blooded males. But I will give you this comfort, Elara. She’s meant to be a tribute to the Gods, which means she must be pure.”

Tears of pain blurred my vision. I’d failed. I gave up my chance to save Darcie by saving Thessa, and here I was. It was all for vain. I was dying, and she was going back. They’d end up tributes to the Gods, and I could do nothing about it.

“Is he there?” Greyson murmured. He remained crouched near me, unmoving. “Can he feel that you’re dying?”

A beating came through my bond with Luken. Pain and terror, the likes I’d only felt when Darcie was taken away. I could almost hear his voice, pleading with me to hold on.

“Finish it,” I whimpered, hating that I was putting Luken through this.

Greyson laughed. “So he is. I hope he suffers. I hope he knows that I’m here, that I’m going to watch the life drain from your eyes. Your injuries are fatal, but they won’t be quick. He was too stupid, too slow to save you. Now, all I have to do is wait.”

He shifted to sit cross-legged next to me, his gaze still cold. He meant it. He was going to take his time and enjoy my slow death.

My fingers twitched toward my staff, and he reached across to take it. He placed it behind himself and settled back down. Next, he put the sword aside and drew a hunting knife that he twirled in his hands, ready to strike me again. The bond pulsed, Luken, trying to send me his strength. I felt him as though he was right beside me.

“Greyson,” I gasped, the taste of blood on my lips.

He lifted an eyebrow. “That’s not my name.”

“What is?” My mind raced, rebelling against the coldness that seeped through me. I was healing. Not quickly, but I was healing. Was I stronger than he thought?

His lips pressed together, an amused look crossing his face. “So, Luken never told you my real name? That figures. Sometimes, I wonder if he even knows it. My name is Draven. My mother always called my father her raven because of his black hair. So she named me for him, in her way. Sentimental, no?”

He laughed as he twisted the knife in his hands.

As he spoke, I stretched out my senses. I heard no sound of breathing or movement from the mercenaries. They’d withdrawn to some distance. If I could drink some of Draven’s blood, I’d heal. How could I convince him? I let tears well in my eyes and run down my cheeks as I moved my stare toward the sky. He was doing this to hurt Luken.

There was only one thing I could think of to offer that might be enough to change his mind. But it meant giving up something I wasn’t willing to give up. So I pushed it aside, trying instead to think of my surroundings. I was injured badly, but the pain was fading. I’d be able to move. I would be able to run.

Thessa... I closed my eyes. I couldn’t save her if I was dead. I had to leave her behind. There was a lake nearby. It’s why I chose this place. If I could get into the water...

“Draven?” I let my voice shake.

“I’m not feeding you my blood, no matter what you offer,” he answered at once.

Ah, so he'd had the same thought process I had. I shook my head, emphasizing my weakness. "I just wanted you to know... he can feel it. He can feel me dying. And it hurts him. So please let Thessa go. Please. The temples... scare her..." I made my breathing more labored. "Please..."

I trailed off and made myself go limp, my eyes rolling upward.

He leaned over, his fingers pressing against the pulse in my neck. My hand lashed out, and I grabbed the hand with the knife, yanking it to the side as I threw my head at his. My forehead cracked his nose open, and blood gushed. Draven let out a howl as he recoiled. I brought my other hand forward in a powerful thrust, punching him in the wrist. His grip on the knife loosened enough for me to twist it free. I slashed him across the throat and sprang away, clawing my way through the trees.

A garbled shout came after me. The sounds of pursuit soon followed. I pushed all my strength into my legs, my breathing labored as I dodged trees and crashed through brush. The sounds of the shouting grew closer, and I knew I didn't have much time. I pushed myself harder, envisioning the layout of the forest. I ducked through a pair of birches, and the ground fell out from beneath my feet. A glint of water rushed to meet me, and I had just enough time to suck in a lungful of air before I plunged in.

Bubbles swirled around me. I kicked hard, twisting my body to point downward. The clear water grew murky with clouds of red as I reached the bottom of the lake. I grabbed handfuls of weeds to hold myself down.

Luken's emotions speared through the bond. Pure panic. I closed my eyes and tamped down on the bond, trying to block him out. I didn't need his panic to mess with my head.

And I didn't want him to feel me die.

I wasn't sure how long I managed to stay there, beneath the surface, before my lungs threatened to give out. I kicked off, heading back to the surface. Darkness closed in around my vision as I battled for the surface. Something huge and dark blocked the light, and I cringed back. Draven would not be so kind now that I'd escaped him once—

Strong hands grabbed me and dragged me from the water. I tried to fight the need for air, but my lungs had other ideas. A familiar scent wrapped around my nostrils as I pulled in a sharp breath.

Luken dragged me from the water and laid me on the beach. Water dripped from his hair as he leaned over me.

Fuck.

“No,” I groaned as he lifted his wrist to his mouth. “Don't.”

He bit himself, blood welling against his tanned skin. “Drink it, Elara. You're bleeding out. You need to heal.”

I shoved at him weakly. What was he doing here? How had he gotten here so quickly? Was it a trick? I pressed my lips together tightly, but when he brought his bleeding wrist near me, the scent of it was too much. He smelled like Luken. Hesitantly, I licked out. His blood filled my mouth, and I groaned. The pain faded to the background, and I closed my eyes.

There was one way I could know for certain if this was Luken or if Draven was playing a trick on me. I opened the bond, letting Luken back in. I felt the sharp sting of pain in his wrist, the worries slowly fading as he watched the color bloom in my cheeks.



It was him.

And that was when the desire hit. I sucked hard on his wrist, filling my body with his blood. The lingering pain in my system only made my arousal hit that much harder. It was like a liquid fire in my veins. I wanted more. Needed more.

No! I wasn't going to give in to this. I was going to control my own body, dammit.

Oh, but I didn't want to....

Luken pulled away from me abruptly. We were lying on the rocky ground, my legs wrapped around his hips. He was hard and ready for me, but he pressed his hands to either side of my head and pushed himself away from me. Desire lingered in his amber gaze.

But he still showed more restraint than I had.

"We have to get moving," Luken said harshly. "Before they figure out you went into the lake."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

One of my arms looped around Luken's neck, my head resting on his shoulder as he carried me. We'd heard the elves calling to each other in birdsong some time ago. Luken instantly pulled me into his arms and started running through the forest. I was still weak from Draven's attack, slipping dangerously close to unconsciousness.

"Am I going to be a vampire now?" I asked when Luken started to slow.

"You're closer, but it wasn't quite enough to push you all the way over," he answered. "I can feed you more of my blood if—"

"No." I pulled myself straighter and squirmed in his embrace. "Put me down."

Luken lowered me to my feet. He held my waist until I was steady, then we started to walk side-by-side. I tested myself. I was stronger, almost fully healed. There was still some pain in my stomach, but it would go away soon enough. I just needed to move my body now, to make sure that the scar tissue remained flexible as I healed.

"What's so wrong with being a vampire?" Luken asked. His dark eyebrows pulled together into a V as he studied me.

"I was born human. I like being human. Becoming a vampire will change a fundamental part of me," I said honestly. It wasn't the first time he'd offered to turn me full vampire. Even though I knew I'd be stronger, faster, if I accepted, I couldn't convince myself to do it.

Luken hummed. "It wasn't such a terrible fate for Thessa."

I narrowed my eyes. “And if I’m dying, then I’d rather be a vampire than dead. Doesn’t mean it’s my preference.”

Now that he brought up Thessa, my stomach squeezed. I hadn’t been paying enough attention. How far away from Thessa and Darcie had he already taken me? I pulled to a stop and turned to face him. He was going to try to take me back to the palace. He would lock me up in my room and make me wait out their deaths, then pretend as though he did me a favor.

I felt the shift of his surprise through the bond and realized my sudden anger and fear had seeped through to him. I shut down the bond quickly, not wanting him to feel any part of me.

Luken turned to me, frustration dancing in his eyes. “What just happened, Elara?”

I lifted my chin and stared into his devastatingly handsome face. I couldn’t risk this going on further than it already had. Everything that happened over the past few months had sent me spiraling off course again and again. Luken wouldn’t let me save them if he had a choice, which meant I had to take away his choice, the same way he was trying to take away my choice to go after them.

“If we don’t save Darcie and Thessa, I will kill myself,” I told him. “If you try to take me back to the palace, I will hurt myself any way I can. A sharp rock, running off cliffs, stealing your weapons. I don’t care what I have to do; I will hurt myself, and it will make you weak.”

Luken’s face hardened. He went very still as he studied me, without emotion. I didn’t dare open the bond to try to get a sense of what he was feeling.

“Rather than asking, you jump right to blackmail, do you?” He quirked one dark eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes in answer. He'd already proven again and again that he wasn't going to help me get Darcie back. Why would that change now that Thessa was taken away, too? Threatening him by threatening myself was the only power I had in this relationship. My hands clenched at my sides. I was ready to prove myself if he started arguing.

He didn't fight me on it, though. Instead, he said, "I have a better hiding place for you to regain your strength, rather than sitting out in the open forest. We'll plan how to get Darcie and Thessa back once my brother's mercenaries can't ambush us again."

My fists loosened. Could I believe him? He started walking again, and I followed, struggling to find balance after this. He was right about one thing. If we were ambushed, I wouldn't do much good. I might be healing, but I was still weak. I needed rest and food.

"Where are we going?" I asked cautiously.

"A safehouse near the border."

We arrived at a little village shortly after. It was a quaint little place, full of brightly painted houses and a handful of stores, or at least that's what it looked like from the outskirts. Luken led me to a two-bedroom cottage on a well-maintained property close to the forest. A fence surrounded the property, blocking out spying eyes. Several large trees shaded the cottage and there was a ring of stones just inside the fence that were etched with runes.

"It's protected by wards and charms," Luken told me. "Nobody in the village even knows this place exists. Draven's people won't find us here."

Inside, the cottage was decorated in cool shades of blue and green. Everything was soft and organic. The carpets had vine-like patterns, and the curtains were lacy,

letting in plenty of natural light. The furniture was modest and inviting. The main room was an open-concept kitchen and living room. Luken had me sit on the couch while he went to the kitchen and started to prepare some food for me.

“What is this place?” I asked him.

“A safehouse.”

I eyed the fresh fruit sitting on the counter. “And it just happens to be fully stocked?”

His eyes flickered up at me. “Do you really think I wanted to spend my honeymoon with a million people underfoot?”

My cheeks heated. That was exactly what I thought would happen. That I’d stay in my room, and he’d come every night, trying to convince me to accept him as my husband. I looked around the cottage with new eyes. It wasn’t just some place. It was a honeymoon cottage.

“Oh,” I mumbled.

Luken sighed. “I was hoping we’d have time to talk and get to know each other.”

I didn’t like the uncomfortable prickles of conscience that accompanied his words. It was all too easy for me to fall into the fantasy of what I wanted him to be. I had to be strong, to fight against these moments of quiet. Even if he had planned out a private honeymoon, he hadn’t bothered to tell me about it. And how did he think I was going to be happy here while Darcie was still set to be sacrificed?

If we were going after her, though... he needed to be strong, too. “You haven’t had blood for a few weeks.”

He had pulled some cheese from the fridge and was slicing it thinly for my sandwich. “I have not.”

I braced myself. “You’ll need to drink from me before we go after them.”

“No, I won’t.” Luken nodded toward the fridge. “I have a store of blood bags. Since I haven’t had a personal donor in... a while, I’ve made do with the frozen kind. It’s enough to keep me strong. Like I said...” He looked up at me, his amber eyes smoldering. “Not until you’re begging me for it.”

Heat washed through my system. If he drank from me, it would cause all my hormones to flare to life. I would beg him to take me. I opened my mouth to say just that, only to pause. That was exactly why he wasn’t going to drink from me, wasn’t it? Because he wanted me to beg for him because I wanted him that badly, not because of the aphrodisiac response of being drunk from.

This line of thinking was only going to get me into trouble. I got up and went to the kitchen myself, getting a glass of water.

“They took Thessa. Draven said they were going to give her as a tribute to the Gods again. Why would they want her after she ran the first time?” I asked, my hands gripping the glass tightly. What if it had all been a lie? It made me sick to think of what might happen if it was a lie.

“The Gods choose their tributes the day they’re born. At least, that’s what the oracle says. If they want Thessa, they want her for a specific reason, whatever that might be.” His gaze darkened as he slid the now-finished sandwich to me. “My guess is that since she survived the Blood Trials and escaped the punishment they planned for her, they want her back for their original reasons.”

I bit into the sandwich, but it tasted like ash in my mouth. What original reasons were

those?

“Elara.” Luken’s hand closed over mine. He was warm to the touch, which showed me just how cold I was. Usually, his skin was a much cooler temperature than mine. “If there is one thing I can say about my brother, it’s that he hates rape more than he hates me. He won’t allow them to touch Thessa.”

A shiver ran down my spine. The night that my family was slaughtered, the one comfort I’d gotten from their deaths was that they were killed quickly. None of them had been assaulted before being murdered. It was a small comfort now to hear Luken tell me this. Draven could have changed. But...

“He told me she had to stay pure for the gods,” I mumbled. The mouthful of sandwich was difficult to swallow, but I did it anyway. “He told me it was the one comfort he would offer me as I lay dying.”

Luken looked away. I thought I felt a ripple of something—pain?—through the bond.

“How did he get free again? After what happened at the colosseum, why didn’t you kill him?” I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper. “This could have been avoided. He escaped your dungeons before. Why would you give him the chance to get away again?”

“Are you the only one allowed to love their family, Elara?” Luken’s shoulders slumped. “I know he hates me, but when I look at him, I can still see the good-hearted child he once was. If it’s my fault that he’s become the man he is, then can I not want to save him?”

I lowered my sandwich, staring at Luken’s profile. “I... don’t know how to respond to that.”

He gave me a quick, tight smile. “I don’t expect you to. You’re still very young. You don’t know how these things work. I should have known you’d take unnecessary risks for Darcie. When you love someone that much, what risks won’t you take? But it was foolish,” he continued, his voice hardening as he pulled a blood bag from the fridge. He viewed it with distaste as he opened it up.

“How did you even find me?”

“I had GPS trackers put on your bike,” he answered easily. “I followed you as soon as you and Thessa left the palace grounds. I was going to keep my distance, but I sensed your pain through our bond when you were attacked. The Gods must have seen you and Thessa leaving the palace and decided to take the opportunity to ruin me.”

“Ruin you?” I repeated. That familiar flare of anger washed through me, and I clung to it. “Oh, of course. Any attack on me must be about you. You’re the most important person in the room at any moment, aren’t you?”

Luken sucked on the blood bag, seeming unfazed. He swallowed and, looking in my eye, said, “Yes. They only care about you as far as hurting you weakens me.”

“You—” I lunged for the kitchen knife, and Luken snatched it up before I could get it. He flicked it away, the blade sticking into the wall near the fridge.

A cocky grin crossed his face as he slurped up more blood, then tossed the empty blood bag into the trash. “We really shouldn’t fight when you’re in your state. Finish eating, and you can try to beat me after you’ve had a nap.”

“You condescending piece of shit,” I snarled. I went for him again, feinting a punch to his head, only to check my shoulder into his chest. He grunted and wrapped his arms around me. His hands grabbed my wrist, and he twisted me around, pinning me firmly into his chest. His body was so warm and inviting, his scent overwhelming.



“Let me go,” I spat.

Luken pressed his face into my hair. “Not until you agree to eat and rest before fighting me, Elara. I would love to spar with you. Thinking about how we fought at the hot springs still gets me hard as a rock. But you’re going to need to use your strength if we’re going to get Darcie and Thessa back.”

The fight drained from me. “You’re going to help me?”

“It’s that, or you kill yourself,” he answered dryly. “I still need you to defeat the Gods, and you’ll get yourself killed if you go after them alone. So we should stick together, hmm?”

I grabbed my sandwich and took it back to the couch, resentment broiling in my gut. For a moment there, I’d nearly let myself get sucked back into his charm. He didn’t care about Darcie or Thessa. Didn’t even care about me, not really. Even the fear I’d felt through the bond when I was dying wasn’t about me. I was just an instrument in his quest for power.

He was right about this, though. I needed to eat and sleep. The sooner I fully recovered, the sooner we would get moving again.

I watched Luken as I ate. And continued to watch him when I lay down on the couch. Why couldn’t I keep myself steady when it came to him? I hated flipping back and forth, knowing I couldn’t trust him, but constantly being drawn to him.

Eventually, I fell asleep. But even in my dreams, I wasn’t free from him. They were filled with him and the fairytale ending I knew we’d never have.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

“The map says it’s faster to go through the Porcupine Mountains, not around them,” I argued.

I didn’t know where Luken had gotten the little car, but now he drove it down the highway, the trees getting taller and thicker on either side of the road. The strobe-light effect of the sunlight flashing through the gaps in the branches would have made me feel sick at one point. I guess the more vampire I got, the less prone to motion sickness I was.

“I know what the map says,” Luken replied in a tone of condescending patience. “But it will end up costing us more if we head through the mountains. Shifters aren’t known for their love of vampires, and going through the heart of their kingdom is going to get us in a lot of trouble.”

“If we filled up with gas before heading to the mountains, we could get through the pass in a few hours, rather than adding two more days onto our journey,” I said, slouching in my seat.

With his hands on the wheel, there wasn’t a lot I could do about this. Even if I threatened myself again, he wouldn’t budge. Would only say something like, “You really think that will get us there faster?” and give me one of his patented ‘I’m the smartest person in the whole world’ looks. Bastard. If it weren’t for the map showing us our position, I would have thought he was taking us back to the palace.

It was even more irritating when he gave me a smirk that made his mouth look oh-so-kissable. With a grunt of frustration, I turned my face to the window.

“The shifters will know we’re in their territory the moment we cross the border,” he said. “Your idea would work if they don’t put any barriers in our way. If they decide to let us go straight through. If everything goes perfectly. We can’t assume that. But Draven is half-vampire, too, and the shifters hate elves more than they hate vampires. So he’ll be taking an even longer route than we are.”

“You could at least tell me your plan,” I grumbled. “Why can’t you just talk to me and tell me what’s going on in your head?”

Luken hummed a thoughtful tune. “If you opened up the bond, I could share the plan with you more directly.”

“I don’t want you in my head,” I snapped back. “You have more control over the bond than I do. I don’t want to—”

I cut myself off.

Luken’s hands tightened on the wheel. We were just pulling into another town, this one even smaller than the last. There was one general goods store that boasted hunting gear and daily necessities, and a hand-painted sign that said overnight rooms were available. It looked sketchy as all hell. A two-story building with faded, weathered siding and an old-fashioned gas pump out front. It looked like something off the set of a horror movie.

“Why are you fighting our connection?” Luken asked. For the first time, I thought I heard frustration in his voice.

I glared at him. “Because I can’t trust you.”

His knuckles went white. For a moment, I thought he might say something, get angry at my lack of trust, something. Instead, he turned off the car. “We need to restock our

supplies before we get moving again. We'll spend the night here and get going in the morning. We'll have to ditch the car, so only buy what you can carry."

Surprise rippled through me. "We're ditching the car?"

Luken nodded. "We'll be in the wilds soon enough, and it will be a while before we can return to civilization."

"See, this is one of those instances where it'd be a good thing if I knew what the plan was, so I could actually be ready for these things. Why are we ditching the car? What wilds are we going through? If we're not going through the Porcupine Mountains, where are we going?" I fired the questions rapidly, one after the other.

"I'll explain later. We can't be too careful. There might be spies following us," he said.

"Spies?" I yelped.

Luken unbuckled his seatbelt and shook his head. "I would have thought that being trained in the assassin's coven would have prepared you better for missions like that. Always assume you're being watched, Elara, whether it be by spies or the Gods themselves."

He was out of the car before I could question him further. Infuriating man! He was so used to his word being obeyed without question that he was treating my questions like an inconvenience. I ground my teeth together. After driving all day, I had expected that we'd switch so I could drive, and keep going all night. Draven and the elves were getting ahead of us every minute we wasted.

My door opened, making me jump. Luken had rounded the car to open it for me. He offered me his hand, smiling.

He'd ditched his royal apparel at the honeymoon cottage. Now, he was dressed in a plain brown T-shirt that stretched across his chest. His dark wash blue jeans hugged his thighs and ass perfectly. With his hair pulled into a single braid down his back, he looked... well, like he was trying to be an 'everyman' existing in the kingdom. He'd even put in contacts that lessened the obvious glow of his eyes. He was far too handsome to ever be mistaken for an ordinary person.

But damn, did he look good. I thought he was beautiful in his fancy king's clothes. But these plain, boring clothes seemed to highlight his ethereal presence even more.

I took his proffered hand, and he tugged me to my feet. He didn't let go as we headed into the store. Instead, he twined his fingers through mine. A bored-looking orc stood behind the cash register. She straightened when she caught sight of us. Luken made a beeline for the desk, even though I thought we were going to look around first.

"We need a room for the night," he said with an easy smile.

"Two rooms," I corrected.

The orc sucked on one of the large lower tusks. "We only have one room available."

"Is there anywhere else in town we might find accommodations?" I asked quickly, before Luken could say anything.

The orc nodded. "There's a campground fifteen minutes toward the lake."

"We don't have any gear for camping, dear," Luken said, giving me a winning smile. "We'll take the room. Can you show us up right away? We'll be back down later to buy some supplies for the road."

The orc grinned at us. She kept shooting me, knowing looks that made me blush, but

she didn't seem to think it was odd at all. I wished I could tell her that I really wanted my own room, but causing a scene would only slow us down. Luken kept hold of my hand as we went up a pair of rickety stairs to a creaky hallway. The paint on the walls was fading, the carpet was practically non-existent, and the horror vibes were even worse.

"Here we are," the orc said, unlocking the first door. "Here's your key. You can come back down and pay when you're done with your shopping."

Luken nodded toward her in thanks as he led me inside. It was... nicer than I expected. At least, it looked clean, there were no obvious bloodstains, and the room was in better repair than the hallway or outside of the building.

The problem...

"I'm not sharing a bed with you," I said. It was a double-sized mattress. If we were both in that bed, we'd have no choice but to be pressed up against each other.

"Oh?" Luken asked as he wandered around the space. "There's only one bed, though."

I pointed to a hard-looking chair tucked next to the desk, on which an old TV sat. "You can sleep in the chair."

Luken pulled it out and settled into it. He made a face of exaggerated discomfort as he moved about one way, then the other. "Hmmm. I'm not sure. It's not very comfortable. I don't even think..." He stood and sighed dramatically. "There, you see? There isn't even a cushion. I won't get any sleep on that."

I folded my arms as I rounded the bed, trying to decide exactly how much space was available. "Then you can sleep on the floor."

“Ah, the floor.” Luken nodded, but I knew better than to think that was the end of the conversation. He stalked toward me with slow, deliberate movements. I narrowed my eyes as he came closer. When there was less than a foot between us, he cupped my face with his hand. “Oh, Elara. I didn’t think you were cruel.”

“Cruel?” I spluttered, distracted by the length of his lashes around his eyes. He had such beautiful eyelashes, long, thick, and slightly curled. He had the type of lashes that mascara companies caked on their models.

“To deprive me of my beauty rest,” Luken said, pulling his mouth into an exaggerated pout. “It takes a lot of sleep to look this good. If I don’t get a proper night’s rest, I’ll have giant bags under my eyes. My skin will look like oatmeal. And don’t even ask me about my hair! You won’t make me look like an old hag, will you?”

“That’s sexist,” I said, heart stuttering as he moved closer.

Luken laughed. “What is?”

“Hag evokes images of women specifically, who are viewed as having less worth because of their age and looks,” I answered, unable to tear my eyes from his lips.

“My mistake. How about old geezer?”

“That’s ageist.”

Luken laughed as he stepped back. “Fair point. But the point stands. You won’t deny me the comfort of a mattress on my honeymoon, will you?”

“Bastard,” I groaned. But I was beat, and I knew it. Even though I knew he was exaggerating and faking, I couldn’t deny him a good night’s sleep. Even if it meant I

wasn't going to get any sleep. "But nothing is going to happen. Honeymoon or not."

He sobered as he nodded. "Let's stock up on our supplies, shall we? We'll need to get moving first thing in the morning."

"Finally, something we agree on," I remarked dryly.

I tried not to think about the one-bed situation while we shopped. I found a good hiking pack that was perfect for my size and bought an extra set of clothes as well as preserved food to last for several days. At one point, I saw Luken talking with the orc in a low voice. It was only then that it occurred to me that either this was another waypoint for him or this orc lived under a rock. My face had been plastered all over the news for weeks now, and as for Luken? His profile was on our coins, for crying out loud! How could anyone not recognize us?

That night, I only took off my shoes before climbing into bed. My heart skipped and hammered as Luken climbed in the other side. The mattress sagged with his weight, pulling me toward him. I lay on my side, my back to him. Part of me wanted to roll over. Maybe I should fuck him, as a thanks for going after Darcie and Thessa after all. My body grew hot when I imagined it. I closed my eyes, remembering the night when we made love together in his bed.

But it wouldn't be the same tonight. That night, when I held him in my arms, I felt safe. Fully, wholly safe.

I didn't feel safe with him anymore. I couldn't trust him. Which meant that we could only fuck. There'd be no lovemaking tonight.

Luken shifted in the bed, and my nerves strung out, sensing his every movement. I expected him to put his hand on my hips and press his lips to my neck. My skin tingled in anticipation.



“Goodnight,” was all he said. From the way his voice sounded, I knew he was facing away from me.”

“Goodnight,” I whispered, fighting down my disappointment.

\*\*\*

A commotion outside woke me up. It was still dark, but Luken was near the window. A silver glow lit up his profile as he shifted the curtain away from the window and stared out.

I pushed myself up, shaking my head to wake myself up. “What’s happening? Is it Draven?”

“Worse. They’re my guards,” he said, letting the curtain fall shut. “Fucking hell. I told Marissa to cover our absence.”

“What’s going on?” I jumped out of bed and pulled on my shoes. “What are they doing?”

Luken strode to where our packs were and picked them both up on one hand. “Just telling everyone that the king and queen are missing, and they have to search their homes. Fuck!”

A heavy knock came on the door. Luken sighed and turned on the light. “Leave the talking to me.”

He strode to the door and opened it. A heavily armored guard stepped through the door, whatever he was going to say turning to a shocked cry.

“Your Majesty,” he said, starting to drop to one knee.

Luken grabbed the guard's collar and yanked him inside, shutting the door behind him. "Silence."

The guard's eyes widened, but he closed his mouth.

"My bride and I are not missing. We've decided to go on a secret honeymoon," he hissed. "And you will not disturb us. In fact, we aren't the king and queen. We're just a couple of peasants. We are on no notice."

As he spoke, he lifted his hand. A silver light glowed around his fingertips and went straight into the guard's eyes. He blinked a couple of times before a blank look came over his face. He nodded once. Luken released him and stepped back.

The guard shook his head, and the blankness disappeared from his eyes. When he looked at us again, there was no sign of recognition.

"I apologize for disturbing you," he said rotely. "The King and Queen are on their honeymoon, and we're simply doing a security check."

"Excellent," Luken said, waving his head toward the guard again. "Share that with the other guards before they start a riot."

The guard nodded stiffly, turned on his heel, and marched away. Luken shouldered his pack and mine and glanced back at me. "Shall we?"

"What was that?" I demanded, remaining rooted to the spot.

"They swore an oath to me, and as such, I can use my magic to compel them to do what I wish," he answered nonchalantly.

I swallowed hard. "Can you only do it to people who have sworn an oath?"

“Those who are oath-sworn or have weak minds,” Luken answered.

“Have you done that to me?”

The mirth in his gaze darkened. “Never, Elara. You have sworn no oath, and you are anything but weak-minded.”

“But I have sworn an oath. I married you. Our wedding vows...” I trailed off, shivering.

Luken stepped closer. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t do that to you, Elara. Never to you.”

Maybe it was stupid of me, but I believed him. I took my backpack and slipped it onto my shoulders as he led me downstairs. We encountered a few more guards, but they all had that same blank look in their eyes before ignoring us. It was as though we’d become invisible to them.

The orc met us at the car and passed something to Luken. He tucked it into his pocket and slid into the car. I followed him.

“What did she give you?” I asked as he started the vehicle.

“Fake IDs,” Luken answered. “We’re going to need them.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I glanced at the fake ID card I'd been carrying for the last two days. The face looking back at me was unfamiliar, yet I knew that was what people who looked at me would see now. The woman on the card was my age, but was blonde instead of dark-haired. Her skin was paler, her eyes more prominent, and she had a softer sort of look that made her look naive.

"You'll lose that if you keep pulling it out," Luken said beside me.

I tucked the ID away. Thanks to his glamor, he and I looked completely different. He was shorter, with red hair and green eyes that didn't suit him. He'd put on twenty or so pounds in this fake form, though he was still stockily built. It felt wrong to hear his voice coming out of this stranger. At least I knew my attraction toward him wasn't just because of his appearance. Over the last two days that we'd been wearing these fake faces, it was still next to impossible to keep myself from jumping his bones every time he got too close.

After Darcie and Thessa were safe and I'd resigned myself to being Luken's queen, would he use his glamor to hide my scars all the time? I tried not to be hampered by vanity, but when I looked in the mirror, the burns that marked my body were about more than just looks. They were a physical, constant reminder of the most painful moments of my life.

I wasn't going to ask him, though. Not until I was certain my sister and Thessa weren't going to be sacrificed.

We'd ditched the car and moved into shifter territory two days ago now. With these disguises, we were pretending to be lost human travelers. The plan was to hike to a

nearby shifter village, where we'd get a ride into the city and, from there, be able to take the high-speed rail to the temples. While the train didn't go directly to them, it would take us close enough.

After Luken explained his plan to me, I realized that doing this not only hid us from unwanted attention, but the rail actually got us to the city a few days quicker than driving by car, even accounting for the time we would lose by hiking.

I still wish he had told me all this earlier, but he remained tight-lipped about his plan. Whenever I asked about our next step, or how we were going to get Darie and Thessa out of the temples, all he'd say was that I would find out when it was time.

No matter how many times I tried to persuade him that it would be better if I knew the plan ahead of time, in case things went wrong, he wouldn't tell me. Instead, he was constantly asking me questions of his own. What was my favorite color? Favorite flower? What did I want to have as a career when I was a child?

"When we camp tonight, we should have some sparring practice," Luken said. He smirked at me. "Just to make sure you haven't lost any skills, of course."

"Why does fighting make you horny?" I smiled pleasantly at him, hoping to embarrass him.

His smirk only widened. It was an unfortunate truth that Luken was not easily embarrassed or angered. It seemed as though he found everything I did alluring or amusing. I hated it as much as I enjoyed the way his eyes sparkled, his pupils widened, and his gaze roved over my form when he thought I wasn't looking.

"I could ask you the same thing," he answered.

I shrugged. "I already told you what I did to train myself out of sexual arousal. I

guess the pain from fighting just triggers that response in my body.”

“And this is something you’re unhappy about?” he pressed.

“I just think it’s a red flag for someone to be turned on by violence,” I answered, staring directly into his eyes.

“Then I guess we’re just a couple of red flags. But it’s not just any violence, Elara. It’s fighting with you . The way our bodies move together. Struggling for dominance, the give and take of battle. The way you move, so fluidly, so sensually... you’re fucking stunning, Elara. You’re more of a goddess than anyone I’ve ever met.” His voice ended in a low growl, a bulge forming in his pants as he spoke.

Heat swept through me. I ducked my head.

“And you’re a good fighter, too. You proved that during the Blood Trials,” he said.

I winced, inhaling sharply. “Not good enough to save Ysara and Kael.”

Luken pulled to a stop. His pale eyebrows pulled together, and I wished that I could see his real face. He reached out, placing his fingertips against the hand that was wrapped around my new staff.

“You mourn them,” he murmured.

“Yes. We bonded. We fought together, lived together. I wanted to save them.” My chest tightened as I remembered Ysara’s carefree, almost callous attitude and the gentle way Kael had tended to Thessa’s injuries. “I wanted to save them. But I wasn’t enough.”

I turned away from Luken and walked away. My eyes burned even as I fought my

tears. I didn't have the time for this. But what if being too weak to save them meant I was too weak to save Darcie and Thessa? The odds were stacked against me. Even with Luken on my side, how could we defy the gods? Was this all doomed to end in death and wailing?

"We should set camp. It's getting dark," I mumbled, my shoulders slumping.

"Do you hate me for their deaths?"

I flinched at Luken's question. I turned, opening my mouth, but no words came out. Did I? Did I still blame him, even though I now knew that the Blood Trials were never his idea? The Gods had created them, and he didn't have the power to defy them. For centuries, they had been an annual event, and he hadn't wanted them to exist in the first place. So, did I hate him for this?

"No," I rasped, surprised at my own honesty. "I don't hate you for their deaths. I don't blame you. I believe you when you said you didn't want them."

His shoulders relaxed infinitesimally. He nodded once and shrugged off his pack. As I set up a lean-to, he circled our camping zone, setting downward to protect us during the night. The routine was easy, and soon enough, we had a small fire, a safe place to sleep, and were munching on some of our reserves. We weren't hunting, so we could keep up the 'lost hiker' persona.

Talking about the Blood Trials brought to mind other questions. Or rather, one in particular. One I hadn't dared to ask him before. But one that weighed more heavily on my mind the longer I spent time with him.

"The winners of the Trials. The final Trial is for you to drink from them and see if they can resist your draw," I blurted. I stared at the fire, shutting down the bond hard. If I was going to ask this, I didn't want to feel anything he felt, nor did I want him to

feel anything I felt.

His eyes were like a physical touch on my skin. “Yes.”

“Whenever they were asked about it, they always looked... blissed out,” I said stiffly. Remembering how orgasmic my own experience was, I could understand that. “But what I never could figure out is if you bedded them or not.”

“Ah. I see.” Luken picked up our fire-stirring stick and moved the burning branches a little.

I sighed heavily. “Well? Did you?”

“No. Consent is important to me, Elara. And in that situation, how could I be certain they really wanted it?” He folded his arms over his chest, staring into the flames. “You’re the only one I slept with after drinking from. I was so caught up in the joy of finally having you with me that I forgot my reasons for waiting. And I’m sorry for that.”

I gaped at him. “Sorry?”

Luken turned to me. His eyes were alien, but the determination in them was so wholly Luken that it took my breath away. My mind spun around his words. Did his whole ‘until you beg for it’ come from a place of regret? I thought it was a power thing, a way to prove to me that he owned me bodily, that I couldn’t resist him for any real length of time. Had I been wrong?

“I’ve waited so long for you, Elara. I was looking for you before I ever met you,” he murmured. “And once I saw you, there were no others. That day, I was overwhelmed by how much I needed you. I thought you felt the same way.”



“You regret our first time?” My heart stung unexpectedly. Even for how fucked up everything was, how betrayed I felt by him afterward, I didn’t want him to regret it.

Luken sighed, still not looking at me. “Like at the springs. I took things too far. I always seem to lose sight, and I... I’m sorry for hurting you.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and looked up through the trees to the distant stars. “You once asked me if I could go back and change things, would I have still slept with you. At the time, I wasn’t sure what my answer was.”

“So you do regret sleeping with me,” he murmured.

“No. And that’s the awful part. If I could regret it, then things would be much easier. I felt so... safe . I’d never felt that safe. I don’t feel safe with you anymore.”

He flinched as though I had struck him.

A tear dripped down my cheek. “But I don’t regret it.”

A weight lifted off my shoulders at the words. It was true. Despite how fucked up this thing between us was, I didn’t regret giving him my body, my virginity. I hesitated, wondering if I should open the bond enough for him to know my words were true. But that felt like too much. Too intimate. I might not regret what passed between us, but that didn’t mean I had to invite more.

“And as for the hot springs... I told you to stop because I didn’t understand what you meant when you said you wanted to ‘taste’ me,” I confessed. Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I hunched my shoulders. I might as well get it all out, right? “I thought you were going to drink from me. If I’d known you meant eating me out, I would have told you to keep going.”

There was a moment of silence, then Luken laughed. His posture relaxed as he turned to me, his expression amused and incredulous all at once. “Is that so?”

“It is,” I groaned, hiding my face.

“So if I offered to eat you out right now...?” Luken’s voice grew husky.

I lifted my head to glare at him. “Now is different.”

He laughed again, throwing his head back as he did. It made his hair tumble down in a most distracting way. “Ah, I see. Because you know my cock is better, is that why it’s different?”

I wanted to keep glaring at him, but seeing him so light did things to me. Some of my own tension loosened, and I giggled as well. How easy it was to clear up misunderstandings with a simple conversation.

Would it help with more serious topics of conversation?

Before I could make up my mind, a terrible howl pierced the night. I jumped to my feet, my hands wrapped around my staff. The forest was dark and still, but it must be signaling an attack. Luken was on his feet next to me in an instant. He drew his sword, which was hidden in his walking stick, and listened. The howl came again before it was suddenly cut out.

“There’s magic in the air,” he murmured. He closed his eyes and I felt a stirring, a tugging on the bond. I held it down tightly, but Luken wasn’t searching the bond. After a moment, he groaned. “Ahhh.”

“What’s happening?” More howls rang through the air, making me shudder.

Luken ran a hand through his hair. “The shifter village we were heading to is under attack. I recognize the taste of the magic. Orc hunters. We’ll have to find another way into the city.”

“Orc hunters?” I repeated. “What are they doing? I thought this was shifter territory.”

“Warlocks that specialize in violent magic.” Luken sat by the fire again. “This territory has been under conflict for generations. Both sides raid the other, pillaging, burning, and stealing women and children. Sometimes, they’re traded back to the other side for those women and children. More often than not, they end up sold.”

Horror swept through me. How could he be so blasé about it? “Slavery is illegal.”

“So are a great many things, but that doesn’t stop the demand.” He glanced up at me and tensed again. “I have no authority in kingdoms that aren’t mine. If the elves worked harder at stopping the trafficking rings, maybe we could stop the black market fighting rings. But my focus has to be on defeating the gods. They do more damage to this world than all the mortal gangs and mercenaries put together.”

I gripped my staff tighter. “I’m not going to sit around listening and not act.”

Luken surged to his feet. He grabbed my wrists, yanking me closer. “We have to pick our battles, Elara. If you die saving these people, who is going to save Thessa and Darcie?”

“I can’t just ignore it.” I struggled against his hold.

“We don’t have the luxury of saving everyone,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“I want to be a good person,” I burst out. “I want to be worth something. How can I

do that if I know what's happening and I do nothing to stop it? I want to be good. I don't want to be a selfish person anymore."

Luken's hold on my wrists slackened. His eyes searched mine before his hands dropped entirely. With a groan, he snatched up his sword again. "You're going to be the fucking death of me, Elara Tideborne."

Then he grabbed my hand, and we sped through the forest, away from the safety of our camp, and toward the sound of battle.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

Luken linked his hand with mine as we moved through the forest. We were closer to the village than I'd realized. I repressed the part of my mind that said Luken had deliberately set camp when we could have made it to the village that night. We had a mission to accomplish and it was hard enough pushing through my doubts. Should we be risking everything to save these random strangers?

The scent of smoke grew heavier, and the orange glow of fires lit the night. There was shouting, but not the shouts of battle. Luken tugged my hand, changing our direction sharply.

"They've left the village. If we're going to save the women and children, we have to follow the warlocks," he said.

"And you can track them in the darkness?" I asked anxiously. I squinted, but even though the forest was clearer than it had been a few nights before, I couldn't distinguish any footprints or signs of passage.

Luken pulled me a little closer. "I can smell their magic. It's a very distinctive path. No doubt their camp will be shielded."

We flitted through the trees for another half-hour before Luken abruptly came to a stop. He drew his sword, growling under his breath as he shifted his stance to shield me. I huffed in surprise and moved to a fighting stance, lifting my staff in two hands. We moved forward cautiously. I strained my hearing, but all I could pick out was the quiet of Luken's breathing... and a strange whimpering noise.

The scent of blood hit my nostrils a second later. Sweet, with savory undercurrents.

My mouth watered. I inhaled the scent and barely repressed a groan. If it smelled this good right now, how much better would it be when I was a full vampire? I eyed Luken's neck as we continued to move forward slowly. If his blood already tasted good to me, how much better would it be after this transformation was complete?

Focus , I told myself sharply. I'm not ready to be a vampire yet.

"Who's there?" a voice rasped.

Luken dug into his pack and pulled out a flashlight, which he flicked on. My eyes adjusted to the light almost instantly. A few feet away from us, half-hidden beneath a bramble of blackberry vines, was a man. His yellow eyes gave him away as a shifter. Blood smeared his face and chest as he stared up at us.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I strode forward, ignoring Luken's attempt to stop me. "My name is Lara, and this is my husband, Luke. We heard the attack on your village and came to help."

The man groaned. "I lost their trail. I was trying to follow, but I lost them."

Luken crouched near him and helped pull him from the bramble. "It's alright. I can track them down once you're bandaged up."

"Don't waste time on me, I—" The shifter stiffened as he slumped against Luken. His nostrils flared, and he snarled, suddenly sounding stronger. "Vampires! You're vampires!"

"No, we're not," I said automatically.

Luken dropped the shifter and jumped away as the man punched at him. "You must

have a good nose to smell through my glamour.”

The shifter stumbled to his feet, swaying back and forth. He came at Luken again, swinging clumsily. Luken sidestepped him, an annoyed look on his face. It was easy for him to continue to evade the attempts to attack as the shifter stumbled around as though he was drunk. He kept turning wide circles and punching at Luken, only to nearly fall when Luken stepped aside.

“Really?” Luken said in an exasperated tone. “We’re not the ones who attacked your village.”

“Fucking vampires,” the shifter seethed.

Luken caught the shifter’s fist and shoved him away. “Elara, please pin him down before I accidentally kill him. I can smell the alcohol in his blood; he’s going to bleed out if we don’t tend to those injuries.”

“You might as well release the glamor,” I said as I stepped forward. I grabbed the shifter’s arms and twisted them behind his back as I kicked his feet out from under him. He howled as we went down. I pinned him in place with a knee to his back. “Listen, we’re here to help. Stop fighting and tell us what we’re up against.”

The shifter struggled against me. “All vampires should die!”

“We should just knock him out and go after the orcs,” Luken said.

I glanced up at him to find his amber eyes glowing. He’d released the glamor. I bit back as a flutter of anxiety went through me. That meant my scars were visible again. Shaking my head roughly, I turned the shifter, kneeling over him to pin his arms beneath my legs.

“We are here to help,” I repeated. “I had two shifter friends, and I owe them both my life. If I can help your shifter village, I will do it. How many orcs are there?”

He stopped struggling, glaring at me in distrust.

Luken wrapped his arm around my waist and lifted me off the shifter. “I don’t like seeing you in that position with another man,” he whispered in my ear.

A thrill shot through me, and I fiercely squashed it.

“What’s your name?” Luken said, louder, his arm still around my waist.

The shifter slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. “Bain. My mother and sister... the orcs... they were talking about fighting rings. I have to get them back.”

“How many?” Luken asked, his voice clipped.

“I... I couldn’t tell. It seemed like there were dozens, but when I attacked them, I went right through them,” Bain said.

I pulled away from Luken and inspected Bain’s injuries. Most of the blood clinging to him wasn’t his own. He had a shallow gash across his chest and several lacerations in his scalp, but he was in better shape than I first assumed. I patched him up as best as I could with the limited supplies I had.

“They were using a type of glamor to confuse the village,” Luken said, rubbing his chin. “How many were taken?”

“I think it was just my mother and sister.”

Luken smirked as he straightened. “There can’t be many of them, then. I thought the



magic smelled weak. Elara, take the shifter back to the village. I'll take care of the orcs."

"No!" Bain sprang to his feet. He swayed but steadied himself. The alcohol must be processing out of his system. "I'm coming with you. I won't trust a vampire to save my mother and sister!"

Luken opened his mouth, but I laid a hand on his arm. "No arguing. We don't know how much time we have."

Frustration crossed his face, but he nodded. We continued along, Luken leading us and Bain taking up the rear. I pressed my fingertips to the back of Luken's shirt, not daring to use the flashlight now. My heart thrummed in my ears.

"Let me take out the guards when we get there," I whispered to Luken.

He stiffened.

"I'm the most trained in stealth," I added.

"I'm a vampire. Stealth in my middle name," Luken answered in a harsh whisper.

Bain hiccupped. "What was that?"

"Shh," I snapped at them both.

Luken reached around and pulled me down behind a bush. With an impatient hand, he grabbed Bain and tugged him down as well. His glowing eyes lit the space we were in, and he muttered something, weaving his hands in a complicated pattern. Before us, a shimmering bubble appeared. Inside, vague shapes moved. It solidified in a black-and-white view, like we were looking through night vision goggles.

The orcs were clearly confident in their magic. I counted five bodies lying in sleeping bags around a medium-sized fire. Their weapons lay in easy reach but not directly in their hands, and nobody was standing guard. Near the back of the camp was a large cage in which were the two shifter women. I squinted at them. They appeared to be unharmed, carefully shaking the bars of their cage, looking for a way out.

Luken's arm snapped out, grabbing Bain suddenly. He twisted the shifter to the ground and clapped a hand over his mouth. Bain shoved at him, his eyes alight with fury in the night.

"If you wake them, they could kill your mother and sister before we have the chance to free them," Luken snarled in a whisper.

"I'll go in and kill the orcs," I murmured, resting a hand on Bain's shoulder. "You're still drunk and injured. You stay here until I've taken them out."

Luken turned his eyes on me. I felt the protests in his gaze. He had magic. He was quicker, stronger. He would be at less risk if the orcs woke up before they could all be killed.

In truth, it would be best if the three of us could sneak in and take out the orcs together. Bringing Bain along was a mistake, after all. Out of all of us, he was the one who risked giving us away. Even now, I didn't trust that he wouldn't stumble into the orc camp while Luken and I assassinated them.

"You need to stay here and keep him quiet," I whispered to Luken. He opened his mouth, and I shook my head. "Don't worry. I promise not to die and ruin all your plans."

His gaze darkened, and his lip curled back over his fang. He looked like he was on the brink of saying something, but I slipped through the bushes before he could

speak. My heartbeat was steady as I drew a knife. The orcs were all sleeping as I crept through their magical barrier into the camp. Inside, the light was dim but manageable. A gasp came from the caged women, and I crouched near the edge of the magical bubble, touching a finger to my lips as I glanced at them.

I crept soundlessly to the first orc. In one swift motion, I sprang on him. I straddled him, clapped a hand over his mouth, and slit his throat. His eyes opened, confusion and pain mingling. He didn't have time to realize what was happening. He lost consciousness in thirty seconds. In a minute, the pumping through his carotid artery had slowed. I moved off him and sprang for the second.

Just as I landed on him, knife already slashing through the orc's throat, Bain suddenly stumbled into the camp. He knocked into the cage. What was he doing—

Luken sprang in from the other side, taking out a third of the five warlocks. But the noise Bain made had woken the other two. I lunged for the one nearest to me as Luken went for the final one. As I plunged my knife into the throat of the warlock, his hand jerked up. A flash of light blinded me. Something slammed into my ribs, sending me flying. I landed hard, unable to draw in a breath. Darkness swarmed my vision. Luken's voice shouted and an answering cry of pain.

The orcs were dead. Who was crying out? Bain? No. I fought to breathe as I opened the bond, sending one thought through— don't hurt him .

The emotions that rippled back through were intense. Angry. Afraid. Pain, too. Then Luken's face appeared above me. His hands pressed to my chest.

"This is why I didn't want you to go in alone," he snapped. "Of course, you'd get yourself attacked."

"I?" I protested, but my lungs hurt too much to throw the accusation back at him. If

he'd followed my plan and kept Bain in place, I would have killed the orcs before they knew I was here!

Luken snarled, his frustration snapping through the bond. And... was that guilt? He swept me into his arms before I could fully process it.

“Enough of this,” he said, his voice tight. “I’m taking you home.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

“No,” I growled, pushing against Luken’s chest. “We can’t.”

“I can’t keep risking you.” Luken’s voice rumbled in his chest.

I tried to push against him again, but I felt so weak. His touch was so soothing. His arms were strong, his concern palpable through the bond. It’d been a long time since anyone cared about what happened to me. My head fell to his shoulder as I stopped struggling. The night was too cold, and I was in too much pain to keep fighting him.

“Don’t,” I whispered. “Don’t take away my chance to save them. Please, Luken. Please.”

He said something, but I was too far gone to hear him. Darkness closed in around me, and my consciousness slipped away.

\*\*\*

I woke to weak light filtering through heavy curtains. At first, I thought we were back at the sketchy room rental at the creepy general store. But as I breathed in, the distinctive scent of shifters and smoke curled around my nostrils. I lifted my head; I lay in a narrow bed, thick blankets over me. Luken’s arms were tight around me, firm and solid.

My chest didn’t hurt anymore. He must have healed me. I hoped he used magic, rather than feeding me more blood. We were in what seemed to be a one-room hut. The walls were single planks with no sign of insulation, which made sense, as shifters tended to be more nomadic. These were probably only their summer dwellings, so

they didn't need to be insulated.

He'd brought me back to the shifter village, rather than heading back to the palace. I closed my eyes, letting my relief and gratitude sit in my chest for a moment. Then, I carefully started to twist myself free of his grasp.

"No, you don't," Luken grunted behind me. His arms tightened, pulling me flat against him. My back against his chest, my hips square into his. I gasped. He was hard, his erection pressing into my ass.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked, wrapping my hands around his forearms.

"I haven't slept."

What dirty thoughts must he be having for him to be hard like this? I felt myself grow damp as I tried to think of them myself. The images. It was all so heightened by the feeling of him against me. Maybe it was relief that we were still here, instead of him dragging me back to the palace. Perhaps it was because, at that moment, I just wanted to feel connected, wanted to have his strength. Maybe it was sheer lust.

I reached behind myself, finding him. I massaged him through his pants, feeling the length of him. He shuddered, his hold tightening on me. His breath was hot against my neck, and he pressed his forehead into the nape of my neck.

"Elara," he moaned.

He trembled. Actually trembled. My mouth went dry, as though all the moisture in my body had pooled between my legs. I inhaled shakily. Just how far was I willing to go? I found Luken's waistband and slid it down, tugging his underwear with him. He released me only long enough to help me undress him to the knee.

His breathing was more ragged as his cock pressed along my back, hot through my clothes. When Luken hooked his fingers into the waist of my pants, though, I caught his wrist.

“No,” I said firmly.

He stilled. When he started to pull away from me, though, I tugged his arm closer. I guided his hand, cupping it in the juncture of my thighs, over my clothes.

“Don’t move,” I told him, excitement coursing through me. “If you move, then I’m going to stop. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, but his obvious desire marred his sarcasm.

I took a deep breath, surprised at the sense of power that filled me as I wrapped my hand around his naked cock. His lips pressed against the nape of my neck, and I bit my lips together, enjoying the electric thrill that went through me. It wasn’t really keeping with the ‘stay still’ command but I liked it too much to stop. I slowly stroked my hand up his shaft, feeling the texture of his skin against my palm. The friction made it difficult to move smoothly, so I released him and licked my hand, the way I’d read about in books.

Luken grunted when I grasped him again. He kissed me, the fingers cupping me, playing against the soft flesh there. His other hand moved to my breast.

I pulled my hand away. “No moving, remember?”

Luken grunted in frustration. “I want you to feel good, too.”

“Then do what I tell you,” I said boldly. “You did this for me at the hot springs, remember? Your fingers found my clit and circled it, stroking and touching in ways

I'd never been touched before. Right now, this is what I want. I want to touch you, to feel you respond to me."

As I spoke, his breathing became heavier. He shifted slightly, pressing tighter against me. "Fuck, Elara. Do you have any idea what you do to me when you talk like that?"

"Apparently not enough," I answered sarcastically as he kneaded his fingers into my breast. "Because you're not listening."

"How am I not listening?" Luken complained.

I released him and reached for the hand on my breast, moving it down to my waist. "I told you not to move. If you want me to touch you, you have to do exactly what I tell you."

He growled, a low sound that reverberated through me and seemed to take up residence between my legs. What would it be like for him to growl with his face buried deep inside of me?

"I'm not used to taking orders," he breathed in my ear. "I'm the one who gives them. Maybe you'll be the one who does what I say. Hmmm? Do you like the sound of that?"

By the Gods, I did. My skin felt too tight for my body, and I wanted to rip off all my clothes. I wanted him to do everything his three-hundred-and-fifty years of experience had taught him. I wanted to experience ways to have sex that I never even dreamed of. I wanted him everywhere he could go. The need burned through me so hotly that I nearly came right then, begging him to ravish me thoroughly.

I fought down my own arousal, pinching the webbing between my thumb and forefinger to remind my body I wasn't allowed to be turned on like this. The pain



only made me want him more, wishing that his fangs would nip at my skin. I thought about other things, other methods of pain and pleasure, and wondered if he'd show me that, too.

"I think you do," Luken purred into my neck. He flicked open the top button on my jeans. "I can do such things to you, Elara. Things that will make you forget everything but how good I make you feel."

"What happened to begging you for it?" I breathed, unable to keep the huskiness from my voice.

"Your body is begging already," he answered, as smooth as you please.

I snorted, even though he was right. "Just admit that you're too weak for me. You can't stand that I'm making you wait. You can't give up control, even though I already told you exactly what I want."

Luken laughed and rolled slightly back, putting more distance between us. "You drive a hard bargain, wife."

Wife. The word did something to me; I wasn't sure what that was. All my life—except the last four years—I'd wanted someone to call me wife. I wanted to marry, to have that stability and love I saw between my parents. And when I first saw Luken, I wanted that from him.

If I kept letting myself think, I was going to start thinking of the reasons I shouldn't do this. I didn't want to doubt myself. I wanted to touch him, to be close to him.

"No more talking," I ordered. "Stay still or sleep on the floor."

He stilled once more, laughing again. His laughter did things to my insides that I

greatly enjoyed. “Alright. I won’t move.”

Licking my hand again, I took him once more. He twitched beneath my touch. As I explored him, I found which movements elicited more of a response. I closed my eyes to hear him better, etching the pleased sounds he made into my memory. His cock grew harder, if that was possible, and seemed to grow bigger beneath my touch. Or maybe I was just more sensitive to it. I traced my fingers around his head, followed a vein down his length, and closed my hand around him again.

He moaned, his head shifting forward slightly. He started to lift his leg over mine, but caught himself and went still again. He really was doing it, obeying my word. The thrill of it pooled heat in my core. He was the most powerful man in the world, yet here he was, following my command.

I felt the tension in his body everywhere it pressed into mine. It was a heady rush, knowing I’d commanded him to be still, and he fought to obey me. His breathing was rapid, his grunts and groans shooting straight through me. The hand cupping me tightened and loosened, but in such a way that I was sure it was involuntary.

No wonder he’d been so pleased when he’d touched me at the hot springs. Giving another person pleasure was just as powerful as getting that pleasure.

“Elara,” he grunted as my motions became swifter. “Elara, I’m not going to last long. I’m going to—”

He groaned, throaty and deep. I turned, rolling in his arms. With one hand, I gripped the top of him and pumped him with the other. His eyes widened, his pupils wide, as his face went slack. His back bent, a soft cry escaped him. Hot liquid filled my hand. I kept touching him, stroking him, until he collapsed back into the bed, his eyes at half-mast and a look of satisfaction on his face.

I looked at the sticky mess in my hand. I remembered I wasn't supposed to be doing this. He might have been inside of me, but I'd given in to my lust. Or was it his lust? The bond was open between us. I could feel his pleasure at what I had done. His... hope .

I shut down the bond, and his eyes snapped open.

"I should clean up," I muttered, not looking at him.

Luken grunted, pushing himself to his elbow. "There's a bathroom through that door."

I slipped out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. After I cleaned up my hand, I grabbed a washcloth and brought it out for him. Silently, I handed the cloth to him and sat on the edge of the bed. Desire still ran strong through my body. I'd brought him to orgasm with just my hands. And I loved that I had that effect on him, that despite my inexperience, I could do that.

"Do you regret it already?" The sound of Luken cleaning himself came to a stop.

When I glanced at him, he'd pulled his pants back into place. He folded the cloth, not looking at me, and rolled out of bed.

"Regret isn't the right word," I said slowly. "I... don't know what I'm feeling. It's just... complicated."

Luken went to the bathroom. I watched him from the sliver, and I could see him. He rested his hands against the sink and lowered his head, his massive shoulders slumping. I wished I could go over there, wrap my arms around him, and tell him it would all be okay. But that would be a lie.

“Take the bed,” Luken finally said. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“What about your beauty rest?” I asked weakly.

He didn’t answer. I waited, but the silence became too much. I lay back down, missing the warmth of his body against mine, and struggled to fall back to sleep.

\*\*\*

In the morning, Bain came to the hut. He brought with him a hearty oatmeal that his sister had made, in thanks for rescuing her and their mother. Apparently, the orcs had come looking directly for them. They were dragon shifters, and dragons were in high demand in the fighting rings.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping us,” Bain said meekly. Dark circles smudged under his eyes, and his brows knit together. “I still can’t understand why a vampire would... not that you have to tell me,” he said quickly, lifting his hands. His frown deepened. “I just... You both look really familiar.”

I was at the small table, eating quickly. We had lost time and needed to get to the high-speed rail quickly. By this point, Draven would have gotten Thessa halfway to the temples at least. More, if they had vehicles to switch out, rather than having to stop to fill up with gas.

Luken, eating at a more leisurely pace, quirked one dark eyebrow. “You must not pay attention to the news, then, if you can’t recognize the King and Queen of Taimarah.”

Bain laughed, then stopped. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He backed up a step as his face paled.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I said quickly, jumping to my feet. “We’re... on a secret

mission, of sorts.”

“A secret mission? In shifter territory?” Bain yelped.

Luken sighed. “We will be on our way shortly. We only need a ride to the city, to get onto the train.”

Bain hesitated. “Look, I’m sure that this glamor magic thing you talked about last night works most times, but it won’t fool the other shifters. The moment they smell you, they’ll know you’re a vampire. Glamours don’t hide that scent.”

“In my experience, that isn’t often the case,” Luken answered coolly.

“I owe you,” Bain continued, turning to me now instead. “If you’re discovered by other shifters, they might attack first and ask questions later. Especially if they know you’re the king and queen. I don’t want a war to start between Taimarah. So, how about I give you a ride out to the border? I won’t go into the elves’ kingdom, but I can take you that far, at least.”

“We’re in a hurry. The train will take us to where we need—” I started.

Bain smirked. “I’m faster than the train. And there’s a station right near the border, too. So you’ll be able to board there.”

Luken considered him.

“My family aren’t the only dragons in the area,” he continued. “And vampires are not well-liked.”

Luken’s amber gaze darted to me. His expression hardened as he nodded. “We will gladly accept, then. Thank you, Bain.”

Bain nodded. "I'll be outside when you're ready to go."

"No need to wait. Elara?" Luken turned to me fully. I couldn't read his expression.

I shoveled the last of the oatmeal into my mouth. "I'll be ready in five minutes."

Luken nodded. "Wait outside for us, then. I'll have to put the glamor back on."

Bain inclined his head and stepped outside. Luken cast the glamor while I made sure my things were packed. We didn't speak. I expected to find a dragon waiting for us when we stepped outside. To my surprise, when Bain shifted, it wasn't into a dragon, exactly.

He was a huge wolf, twice as large as a horse. His body was covered in scales except for his head, ruff, and down his back, which had a strip of dark fur. Massive wings spread on either side of him. He nodded his head as he crouched.

"Ahh," Luken murmured. "That's how he smelled through the glamor. Half-dragon. Half-wolf."

He grinned at me as he tugged me toward the shifter. I shouldered my pack, nerves churning in my stomach. I'd been expecting saddles, or at least spikes to hold onto. Now that I was climbing onto his furry, slippery back, though, only one thought crossed my mind—it would be very easy for Bain to throw us off and send us plummeting to our deaths.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I was worried, when Luken settled me tight between his legs, that the flight was going to be awkward. As soon as Bain took off into the air, though, thoughts of how close Luken was and how much of his body I could feel against mine disappeared.

I clung to his arms wrapped around my waist, my fingers digging into him. Below us, the ground whirled by in a flurry of wings that made my head spin. The wind whipped in my face, sending my hair into Luken's face. He pressed his cheek to mine, his arms possessively around me as he laughed. Damn him! How could he be having such a good time? My stomach swooped with every slight movement. I was sure any moment, I was going to be pitched off to fall to my death.

"I've got you," Luken purred into my ear.

"I never liked heights," I admitted, heart hammering in my chest.

Luken's arm tightened. "Then close your eyes."

He used his body to push me forward, spooning me. I closed my eyes, obeying him. When I was practically flat against Bain's back, I was pinned between Luken and the wolf-dragon shifter. All of a sudden, I felt much more secure. The little shifts and turbulence weren't nearly so jarring. Luken had me. He was keeping me in place. The pressure of his weight was oddly soothing and exhilarating.

Not so exhilarating as to make me forget that we were hurtling through the air miles above the ground. But enough so that I could actually breathe again.

We pitched suddenly down, and I screamed. Luken whispered reassurances in my ear

but I couldn't feel them. He pushed at the bond; I felt him, trying to get in to soothe my worries. I shoved him back. I'd take the fear over that any day!

Bain landed roughly, jostling us both. Luken slid easily from his back, but my hands and legs were numb from gripping so tightly. Luken had to pick me off Bain's back and hold me to his side. The shifter retook his human form. We were on a bare hill from where we could see the forest sloping down before us.

"This is as far as I dare take you," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"It's not the train station," I said, looking around wildly.

Bain winced. "There's some sort of barrier. I could see it as we were approaching. I don't know what it is, but I know it's elvish. I'm not going to risk tangling with them. It'll only be a day's walk that way to the city," he said, pointing. "Good luck."

"We don't have the time—" I protested, but Luken took my hand, squeezing softly. When I glanced at him, he gave me a significant look.

Trust me, he said with his eyes.

I hesitated. I'd trusted him enough to touch him last night. I trusted him enough to believe he was going to help me save Thessa and Darcie. I tried to give him a message back. You have to tell me what your plan is.

Bain nodded. He hesitated a moment longer before he retook his winged form and launched himself into the air. He took off, heading back the way we'd come. I couldn't help but wonder if we'd just put extra time on our journey, rather than cutting it down.

"We had best get moving," Luken said. He adjusted his pack and started to walk.



I followed him, noting the tension in his shoulders. He walked slower than was usual for him. Had he been injured during the fight, and I hadn't noticed? I studied the way he moved and realized that, no, it wasn't due to injury or physical impairment. He was moving cautiously as he watched our surroundings, ready for an attack at every moment.

I quickly moved to his side and kept a good grip on my staff, ready to turn it from walking stick to weapon at a moment's notice.

We walked in silence for some time until we reached the edge of the forest. It cut off abruptly, as though it had been clear-cut. Right along the edge was a shimmering sort of light that lifted up toward the sky.

"And here we are, at the border of elven territory." Lukan dragged his hand through his hair. "What do you see?"

I squinted at the shimmering. "A field. It looks like it stretches on until the horizon. It's very... flat. Unnaturally so."

"That's because it is unnatural. Everything within the bubble is an illusion. The elves are secretive. If we went through their territory by train, even the images out of the windows would be false. Bain was right to set us here. As soon as we're in elf territory, they'll know we've arrived. Our glamour won't do us much good."

I turned toward him. "Then what is the plan? If we weren't going to jump on a train and go all the way to the temples in the first place, why haven't you told me what we're really doing?"

Luken grimaced. His fake face was handsome, but not nearly as good-looking as his true form. "Because I've been hoping for another option. There's only one elven queen who will help us, or even let us into her kingdom. The queen of the Silver

Forest.” He turned away from the shimmer and stared back at the thick, green forest. “Her name is Donelle and she’s Draven’s mother.”

“The fuck?” I gasped.

“I suspect he might go to her help. Even if he doesn’t, she will be best suited to intercept him and his mercenaries before they can take Thessa to the temples,” Luken said quickly. “Then we can send her back to Taimarah and focus on saving Darcie without worrying about another complication.”

I shook my head slowly, unable to fully wrap my mind around this. “I thought his mother was dead. Like—” I cut myself off.

“Like mine?” Luken pinched the bridge of his nose. “No. Elves live long lives. And Donelle was very... fond of my father. She’s often expressed an interest in a closer alliance with my kingdom.”

Wouldn’t that give her more of a reason to kill Luken, so her son could be king? He wasn’t telling me something. I didn’t need the bond to know it. He turned back to the shimmer and frowned at it.

“This is new,” he said in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “Normally, elvish magic merely turns travelers around. I wonder...” he reached out, a slight glow in his palm. He touched the shimmer, and a crack like thunder boomed. Light flashed at the point of contact, and he was thrown back into a tree. The tree cracked, and Luken slumped to the ground, gasping.

I raced over to him. “Luken!”

“I’m alright. But that’s some strong magic.” Luken grimaced as he rubbed his chest. “I’ll have to think of the best way to get through that. For now...”

He looked at the sky.

“For now, it’s getting dark, and we need to camp for the night,” I finished.

“We need a place that I can shield and have natural defenses,” Luken said. His mouth pressed tight as his gaze swept over me. My skin prickled, and I automatically drew back and grabbed the staff with both hands. Luken’s eyes flicked back to my face, and amusement entered them. “We don’t have time for a sparring session right now, Elara. As much as I would like to.”

I wrinkled my nose, fighting not to show the way his words affected me. We headed back into the forest and found a lovely space in a circular outcropping of boulders. They formed a natural oblong shape that Luken could use to anchor a shield to, but inside was tight. There was barely enough room for us to both lie down.

It was a warm night, so there was no need for a fire, but the closeness of Luken’s body was... intense. I pillowed my head on my arm with my back facing him. I felt the heat of his skin radiate toward me in the small space. My mind kept drifting to the feeling of his breath on my neck, the sounds of his moans as I stroked him. My palms itched with the desire to reach around behind me.

Eventually, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I jerked to my feet, snatching up my staff as I did so.

Luken lifted his head, glancing over his shoulder. His back had been to me, too. “Elara?”

“I need some air. And space,” I added when it looked like he was going to get up.

“Stay close. Only our camp is protected,” he murmured.

I quickly stepped away through the boulders and headed some distance away. With the full moon, the night was bright enough, but it could have been a cloudy day. I went far enough away that I couldn't see the boulders, then set my staff down and wrapped my arms around myself.

Was this really just lust I was struggling with?

I had so many thoughts running through my head that I felt like it could burst at any second. But the strongest of it was the reluctance I'd noted when Luken told me about Donelle. He clearly didn't like her, yet was taking me to her to get Darcie and Thessa back. If he was willing to make that sacrifice for me, would it be such a terrible thing to let him have what he wanted from me?

I closed my eyes, imagining the feel of his lips on my throat, of his fangs piercing through my skin. Maybe it would be best if I let him feed on me, let us fall prey to the desire we were both fighting against. I had repeatedly told myself I'd give Luken anything he wanted if he would only help me save Darcie. Now he was helping me, but I still hadn't let him touch me. Not really.

If it wasn't just lust I was fighting against, my reasons for fighting weren't just anger and hate.

As I found a place to sit, a shimmer caught my eye. I squinted, frowning. That wasn't where the elf barrier was. I took a step toward it but stopped. It wasn't safe to go off exploring on my own. The pain from the orc warlock's attack still lingered strongly in my mind, enough to warn me off being rash. Reluctantly, I opened the bond just enough to send a summons to Luken, then shut it down quickly again.

In a few minutes, he dropped down beside me, silent in his approach.

"What's that?" I pointed at the shimmer. "More elf magic?"

Luken squinted. In his current glamour, I couldn't see the glow of his eyes. "I'm not sure... oh." He laughed. "It's the ocean."

"The ocean," I repeated.

"The Selkie Ocean," Luken corrected himself. "It's a magical place only visible beneath the moon's light. The elves cast a protective enchantment over it centuries ago, when humans were continually raiding the sea and stealing the selkie's cloaks."

I flinched. My own selkie ancestor hadn't been given a name in our genealogy. It was impossible to know what the story was, because it had never been recorded. "And the elves cast the magic to protect them?"

"Elves and selkies share a distant ancestral magic and have long been allies," Luken answered. "Selkies are a gentle, peaceful people, and they provide the elves with things from the seas the elves crave, like pearls, seafood, and other things. My mother told me once that before the Gods intervened in our world, selkies lived forever, just as elves and vampires do. But then a selkie maiden refused one of the gods, and he convinced them all to curse the entire species for it."

I wrapped my arms around my knees. "I don't know many stories about the Gods. I never thought much about them until Darcie was taken. And then I..." I bit my lip, but I might as well say it. "I thought they were just an excuse for you to do what you wanted."

Luken didn't answer.

"But they are real. And you want to stop them." I twisted my hands and blurted, "Did you know that your sash, the one you wore to our wedding, was embroidered by Darcie? Thessa told me. It was the same sash you wore when you opened the Blood Trials, and she recognized Darcie's work. And you were wearing silk that Thessa

wove.”

“I... knew it came from the temples,” Luken said slowly. “As part of the deal I currently have with the gods, I am to provide them with tributes, and they will provide me with finery. It’s just another way to put me in their debt.”

A soft breeze started to blow. Out here, in the more exposed forest, the night was rapidly growing cooler. “Do you think the elves would be more open to dealing with me because I’m part selkie—wait!” I straightened as an idea popped into my head. “What if there’s an entrance or something hidden in the water? It makes sense that the selkies would have a way into the Silver Forest, for trade and for the two groups to help each other out.”

“I doubt there’s an entrance. More like there’s a door in the barrier and a key hidden somewhere only the selkies know to find,” Luken answered.

“Then let’s go look,” I urged, getting to my feet.

Luken jumped up. “It will be too heavily guarded. The best thing to do is figure out how to force open the door with brute force.”

I narrowed my eyes. “We can at least try. I’m a good swimmer, and I know you are, too.”

“It would be mindless searching and wasting energy.” Luken grabbed my wrist and pulled me back to the camp. “Just once, listen to me. If you’d done as I said, you wouldn’t have been injured by the orcs.”

“I wouldn’t have been injured if you had done what I said,” I snapped back.

His grip was too tight for me to break free. So I let my arm go limp. I slumped my

shoulders and faked a yawn. Then, I gave one more half-hearted attempt to free myself before I let him pull me back to camp. Luken looked at me suspiciously.

“If you can’t open the barrier tomorrow, we’ll search the ocean tomorrow night,” I said as I lay down and buried my head in my arms.

“No, we won’t,” he answered.

But he lay down, too, thinking he won. I made myself go still, breathing deeply to feign sleep. As soon as I was certain he was sleeping, I crept up again. I wasn’t going to waste time. If there was a key in that ocean, I’d find it.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I left my clothes on the beach, except for my panties and bra. The drag of the material would just slow me down. The ocean was cold, the surf rough, but once I ducked below the surface, a sense of calm washed over me. Being in the water always brought a sense of peace, of belonging. I lingered just below the surface for a few moments, getting my bearings. With the full moon, the ocean was clearly lit. The ripples of the waves were etched into the sand closest to me, and further in the depths were beds of kelp and seaweed. Corals were just a little way deeper than that.

I swam to the deeper water and found that my vision wasn't hampered at all. I'd always been able to see clearly underwater, even in the salty sea, but now it was as though there was a soft light emanating from the water itself. Had the changed to my body enhanced my latent selkie abilities, or was this how vampires saw?

Breaking the surface, I took a few deep breaths, expanding my lungs, before I went back under. This time, I kicked hard for the corals. There was no sign of sharks about, not that they normally bothered humans, so I wasn't worried. If there was going to be an entrance for selkies, it would be deep enough that the other species wouldn't easily get at it.

I sliced through the water quickly, and when I glanced at my hands, a distinctive webbing had grown between my fingers. Ahh, so it was enhancing the selkie part of me. Interesting. When I got back, I'd have to ask Luken about it.

The currents beneath the water were strong, but not terrible. I moved about the coral reef, inspecting nooks and crannies for anything that might be amiss. Nothing stood out, and I had to surface several times to refill my lungs. The longer I stayed beneath the water, the more I realized Luken was right. We had to have some sort of strategy



for searching, otherwise it'd just be luck to stumble onto the entrance—if it even existed.

One more time, I told myself, surfacing, refilling my lungs, and going under again. Nothing. One more time.

Would Luken have woken to find me gone yet? The next time I broke the surface, I studied the sky. It was just starting to lighten. Dawn was almost here. I was still close to the shore, the shimmer of the elven barrier stretching like a massive dome, reminding me of the one that arched over the colosseum during the Blood Trials.

Selkies are a peaceful people. So, what went wrong with me? I shook my head. I wasn't a selkie. I was human with a selkie heritage. One more time, then I'm going back to camp. Luken will be furious when he realizes I've been swimming alone in the ocean.

If there was one thing my parents drilled into me and my siblings was never to go into the water alone. They'd be furious, too, if they could see me now. But they couldn't. They were dead, and I had to do what I could to make sure Darcie was spared that fate, too.

I dove again, swimming deeper than I had so far. I caught sight of something that glimmered in the darkness and kicked toward it. The kelp waved its tendrils at me, and I kicked over them, careful not to get tangled up in the seemingly innocent plants.

The glinting solidified into a shimmer, the same sort as the elven barrier. My heart leaped as I pushed harder for it. The shimmer formed a barrier through a narrow entrance into an underwater cave. I crawled into it, pulling in a deep breath, when I found it was an air pocket. The cave was fairly small, just big enough for me to turn around in. A shelf near the bottom held a key that glowed slightly. It was as long as my hand, made of a heavy, shining bronze. Images of ships and seals were carved

into it.

I studied the key, looking at it from various angles. Would the elves put a secondary trap on it, as well as make it inaccessible? Was it really so simple to get it? I was fairly deep in the ocean, and if it weren't for my enhanced sight, I wouldn't have seen the shimmer.

If I left now, would I be able to find my way back? I wasn't sure, and that's what made up my mind. I snatched the key, filled my lungs, and pulled myself from the cave. The ocean was getting lighter, heralding the dawn. I kicked for the surface, and a black shape swam above me. I froze, twisting to follow the shape with my eyes, but it disappeared. My heart hammered as I dove back down, closer to the bottom of the ocean. I didn't want to get ambushed from below.

The shadow didn't appear again, so I pulled myself along the corals, working toward the kelp bed. Suddenly, something burst out of the ground, whipping around me. The current sent me spiraling away from the ocean floor, spinning out of control. I twisted and kicked to right myself, then shoved the key into my bra.

The creature disappeared again, as though it was slipping through cracks too thin for my eyes to see. I kicked out, heading toward the kelp. I could use it to hide from the creature, whatever it was. Its shadow was long and thin, like a snake, but I'd never seen anything like it before. I couldn't get a proper glimpse of what it was.

As soon as I grasped the first strands of kelp to anchor myself, it appeared again. It rushed by me, the water churning and hot around its body. It whirled back around, flaring out in the ocean. And I finally saw it clearly. It had a long, serpentine body that undulated in the water much like the kelp around me, and was covered in a smooth skin, blue, white, and green in color that almost blended in with the ocean. Its edges kept moving and shifting, truly a shadow that I couldn't quite get a grasp on.

The creature shot over my head, forcing me down. I swim into the kelp, hoping to lose it. The shadow shimmered over my head before it disappeared. I pulled myself along the bottom of the ocean floor, keeping a careful watch for the creature. The kelp was thick and wrapped around my limbs as I moved through it. When I reached to pat my bra, to make sure the key was still there, a vine wrapped around my wrist. It pulled me down toward the seabed.

Oh, Gods! The kelp wasn't just brushing against me. It was tangling itself over my body, trapping me. That's what the creature was doing. It wasn't attacking me. It was driving me into this trap. How much air did I have left? I writhed but couldn't free myself. Where was my knife? With a sinking heart, I pictured it on the top of my clothes, waiting for me to return. I yanked one hand free and struggled to get higher, away from the kelp.

It wrapped more firmly around me, holding me in place. I twisted and attacked with my teeth, chewing through the fibrous plant. The taste of sea salt filled my mouth. My lungs were getting uncomfortable. I didn't have too much longer before I ran out of air. Part selkie, part vampire. It didn't matter. I still needed oxygen to survive.

There was only one thing to do.

I opened the bond. Instantly, I was hit by a wave of anger and worry. Luken was awake, looking for me. I had the vague sense that he was near the beach. Good. It meant he could get here faster. I pushed out through the bond, trying to send images. The kelp. The creature. My need for a knife. Concern burned through from Luken.

And censure. I could almost hear him saying, I told you not to go.

The kelp was wrapping faster than ever. I made myself go still, holding that would slow it. It did, the kelp slowing its twisted progress. I kept the bond open as I moved myself slowly to start chewing again. Panic was threatening to well up in me as my

lungs ached, but I forced it down. Luken sent a burst of pure calm through the bond and I found myself irritated. It was all right for him to be calm. He wasn't the one being drowned by fucking kelp of all things!

I cut through a kelp with my teeth and the others started to move faster. One wrapped around my throat and pulled me back. I forced myself to go still again as a few bubbles of air leaked between my lips. Don't fight. Just wait for Luken to show up.

Unbidden, the memory of just a few weeks ago of a situation much like this surfaced. I'd been caught by a kelpie in Wickham Forest, trapped in a murky lake after a magical artifact. And here I was, the bronze key pressed to my breast, trapped in the ocean, waiting for Luken to rescue me. I tried to shut down that feeling, but I couldn't fully get rid of it. It seemed so long ago that it had happened.

So much had changed. At that time, I thought Luken had killed my family. He hadn't, but when I accused him of it, laying on the shore of the lake, he didn't bloody tell me he wasn't responsible.

Why couldn't he just talk to me about these things?

A shadow passed over me. And like I was watching my memories play out again, it cut through the water toward me. But this time, I didn't think it was the creature coming back for me. I felt the determination through our bond, felt his presence drawing nearer. Luken. Relief burst through me, and it was answered with relief of his own, powerful and strong, that seemed to wrap me in his arms already.

Luken soon reached me. Light blazed through the water around him, making the kelp constrict and shy back. The rope tightened around my neck, but he kicked close and slashed methodically through the plants that were keeping me down. I shot up suddenly, freed from the constriction. I started for the surface, looking back once to make sure Luken wasn't being caught by the kelp.

He was right behind me, the blue of his false eyes vivid as he narrowed them. A grin crossed his face even though disapproval came through the bond.

If I had more air, I might have turned around and kissed him right there.

A whirl of current sent me spinning again. Luken shot forward, and I reached for his hand. He pulled me tight into his chest and flung his free arm out. A bolt of red light arched from his palm toward the creature. It lit the animal, showing a bony ribcage within a translucent body. The thing opened its mouth and something dark shot towards us. The light shifted to hot-white and the creature whirled back and fled.

Luken's arm tightened around me, and I felt an echo of pain in our bond. I wrapped my arms around his waist and kicked hard, pulling us toward the surface. When we emerged, the waves crashed against us. I barely got a new breath in before I was driven below again. Luken kicked with me, but his movements were thin and weak. What was happening? He was the strongest man I knew. What was causing these waves of pain to come through the bond?

I managed to get him to the shore and dragged him out. The glamor faded from around him. My hands went cold as his expression twisted in pain, his nostrils flaring. The glow of his eyes seemed dimmer somehow.

"Where does it hurt?" I asked.

He groaned as he touched his chest.

Quickly, I lifted the wet fabric clinging to him. The air left my lungs, and I felt as though I was bobbing back in the sea, buffeted by the current. His normally gold-kissed skin tones were black, the color of rotten meat.

And it was spreading rapidly.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

“Poison,” Luken grunted. “Need to get back to camp. Rest. Warmth. I’ll be...” he trailed off, his breath hitching.

“You’ll be fine,” I blurted, finishing his words for him. I looped my arm around his waist and heaved, helping him to his feet. He leaned heavily on me, his head resting atop my shoulder. My heart squeezed, but I forced myself to laugh. “Oh, I see how it is. You’re faking to make me do all the work.”

Luken chuckled. “Of course. How else am I supposed to get close to you?”

We painstakingly made our way up the beach and back to the boulders. I kept ribbing him, and he teased me back. His skin was unnaturally pale by the time I eased him back to the ground. His pupils were huge, and the pain coming through the bond made my tattoos feel like they were on fire. I cupped his face with my hand as he lay on the ground, staring at the sky above us.

“Luken?” I turned his face so he looked at me. “What do I need to do? What poison is it?”

He licked his lips. “Not sure. I’ll be fine. I just need to rest.”

His eyes closed, and a spike of panic went through my chest. I tapped his cheek, making him open his eyes again.

“You need to stay awake and stay with me,” I told him, breathless with my fear.

A crooked smile crossed over his lips. “Ah, so you do care.”

“I care that you don’t decide to be lazy and just give up on all of this,” I shot back, my hand still on his face. He was always a little cool, at least when our bodies weren’t pressed together, but his skin was cold now. Frigid. “I should start a fire. Warm you up.”

Luken’s fingers wrapped around my wrist. “Don’t leave me.”

Fuck! How could he say that with that look in his eyes? He looked... small. Afraid. The feelings that came through the bond were a testament that he wasn’t sure he was going to be okay. The pain was getting worse, and he was frightened. My heart stuttered. It wasn’t right for him to be scared. He was the strongest person I knew. He was always in control.

“I’m not going to leave,” I told him. “You’re going to get better. We’re going to get Thessa and Darcie back, and then we’re going to live at the palace. We’ll fuck every night and... and we might even have kids. Do you want children?”

That crooked smile grew more pronounced. “Only after the Gods are defeated.”

His eyes shut again. I tapped his cheek, but he didn’t respond. When I checked his pulse, mine skyrocketed. I count fewer than ten beats per minute. What was his normal heart rate? This couldn’t be good. What could I do to—

Oh.

It was obvious.

I glanced around and snatched up the knife that had clattered to the ground. Without letting myself think or fear, I slashed it across my wrist. Red welled in the cut, dribbling down my arm. I quickly put my wrist to Luken’s mouth, opening it slightly so the blood would get inside. I stared hard at him as he lay, limp and unresponsive.

Then, his tongue swept across my wrist. He swallowed and jerked. His eyes snapped open, and he cupped my arm with his hand, bringing my wrist more firmly to his mouth as he began to suck. The pressure was strange at first, painful even. He pulled me tighter and growled as he drank.

His nostrils flared, and I felt a surge of arousal through the bond before he shut it down. I yelped, startled at how quickly he'd done it. Why? Before I had much chance to wonder, he'd lunged. His hard body pressed against mine, pushing me up against the boulder behind me. He growled again as he pressed his face into my neck. His fangs scraped against my skin, and I groaned, heat flooding through me. I tangled my hands in his dark hair and pulled him closer.

"Yes," I moaned, my voice raspy. He needed more blood. He needed to heal.

Luken bit me. My body arched to his, my legs parting automatically. My skin was too tight, and I needed these clothes off. I clutched at him, letting my eyes shut. The sheer relief at having him close, having these feelings sweep away all my confusion, made me moan again. I undulated against him, seeking friction as my clit throbbed.

I closed my eyes, letting myself get lost in the sensation. My tattoos seemed to pulse, calling out for my bare skin to touch against his. My fingers skimmed over his sculpted chest, and it felt like he warmed under my touch.

He pulled back, panting. A prick of pain still stung on my neck and wrist, but it was nothing. Luken's thumb brushed against my cheek, then the other one.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. His voice was rough, pained. "I'll stop."

My cheeks were cool where he touched them, and I realized he'd been crying. I opened my eyes again and stared up at him, at his amber eyes locked on mine. My fingers splayed over his chest, and relief washed through me when I saw the dark



mark was gone. He'd healed.

"That's what you needed," I murmured. "You needed my blood."

His body was still pressed up against mine. The bond was shut tight from his side, but that didn't stop me from feeling his desire. His cock strained against his wet pants. And here I was, in nothing but my bra and panties. It would be so easy—

But abruptly, I was furious. How could he do this? How could he drag me out here without telling me what his plan was, only to turn around and nearly fucking die? How could he shut me out of the bond when I was searching for ways to save him? How was I supposed to save Darcie without him?

"You bastard," I hissed, slamming my fists into his chest.

Luken's eyes widened as he took my blow. "Elara, I—"

"You fucking bastard," I howled, striking him again. "Why couldn't you just say you needed my blood to heal? Why can't you just be honest with me? I'm here because of you! Because you refused to help me save Darcie. She could be safe already, but Thessa is gone now, too, and it's all your fault! You know what Grayson—Draven—is willing to do to see you fail! But you can't fucking tell me what you need."

I went to hit him again, but he caught my wrists and yanked me forward. I slammed into his chest, and he twisted me down, pinning me beneath him in seconds. My legs wrapped around his waist automatically, my body crying out for more.

"You want me to be honest?" he hissed, pinning my hands over my head. "The honest fucking truth is that I hate how vulnerable you make me feel. And there's nothing I can do about it! You refuse to listen, refuse to believe me! I could tell you

exactly what I planned, but what difference would it make? You decided I was a villain and take my every action as proof.”

“You could have told me you didn’t kill my family at the hot springs,”

“And I could tell you right now that I never intended to let your sister be sacrificed, but you won’t believe me,” he spat back. “You’ll look into my eyes and feel my cock between your legs and think I’m just trying to fuck you. You don’t trust me, and I don’t know how to change that!”

His gaze flickered to my mouth. He was still hungry. Still on fire from drinking from me. His body pressed heavier to mine as he panted, his lips curling back to reveal his fangs.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispered. “Tell me to fuck off and stop touching you.”

Words weren’t enough for me to describe how much I didn’t want that. I arched myself, catching him off guard with a kiss. He released my wrists and caught my face in his hand, resting his weight on his elbows as he kissed me. They were hot, desperate kisses. I pulled him closer, tangling my hands in his hair. What was trust, or the lack of it, compared to the sheer weight of lust?

“Please,” he whispered into my mouth. “I have to have you. I have to be inside of you, Elara. I need it more than I need my next breath. Please, please give me hope.”

The heat penetrated deep inside of me. I ached, and I wasn’t sure it was just lust anymore. I groaned into his mouth, pressing my body up as tightly to him as I could. But I couldn’t find my words. I needed space. I needed to breathe, to think. I pushed upward with one side of my body and Luken let me roll him. He clutched at me as we turned, so I straddled him. When I pulled back, his arms fell loosely to his sides.

“I wish I could tell you what I need to trust you,” I said, my hands pressed to his bare chest. There was no sign of the mark anymore, as though it had never been there. “You can’t expect me to spend four years thinking that you did horrible, brutal things to my family and not come out of it with trust issues.”

Luken’s hands moved to my hips. “I won’t hurt you, Elara. Tell me you don’t want me, and I will control myself.”

I closed my eyes. With the warmth of the sun on my back and the slight breeze washing over my skin, I felt more centered. There was a chasm between us, something I wasn’t sure was surmountable. But what I did know was that right now, it didn’t matter so much. He was here, I was here, and we were both on fire for each other. He drank from me, and I didn’t want to fight this.

“I don’t want to fight you,” I breathed. “Not here. Not now. I thought you were going to die, and I want to feel you alive.”

Luken’s fingers moved, playing over the line of my panties as his gaze swept down my body. It traced over my scars, and I swallowed. He started to move his hands up, over the curve of my waist, and I bit my lip. He caught the movement and paused.

“Can you take them away?” I whispered. “My scars. Can you heal them?”

One hand moved to my back while the other traced the line of the burn. “In time, perhaps. It will take a lot of surgeries. I don’t think that it can go away entirely.”

“But you could use glamor, right? To hide them, at least?”

“Is that what you want?” Luken asked me, his voice gentle.

I nodded. “I hate them. I hate looking in the mirror.”

He cupped my cheek. "You're beautiful."

"I don't care. I hate them. I hate the way they feel, and how much they remind me of the past." I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. "I want them gone."

"I can use a glamour on them," Luken murmured, sounding apologetic. "But it won't be constant. Glamour is a difficult magic. I don't have the strength right now."

I ran my hands down his chest. "Do you have the strength to fuck me, then?"

Luken laughed breathlessly. "You can only make me stronger."

"Then tell me what to do." I opened my eyes again and stared into his eyes. "The first time, you did all the work. This time, I want to do more. I want to be on top."

"You did a pretty good job knowing what to do when we were in the shifter village," he told me with a grin. "Do what feels good, Elara. If there's anything in particular, I will let you know. Explore what you want to do, how you want to move. Although first... we should take off these wet clothes."

I laughed as I lifted myself slightly, enough to grab the waist of his soaked pants. I pulled them off without ceremony, shimmying down his legs to get them off him. His skin was back to its gold-kissed tones, looking so supple and tempting that I had to bend over him and press my lips to his thigh. Luken shuddered as I moved up, peppering kisses over his abdomen and torso to reach his mouth again. His hands tightened on my hips, then, with a firm movement, tore my panties.

Laughter bubbled in my throat as I reached behind myself to get my bra as he tossed away the scraps of cloth. The key fell from the loose cups to his chest, and I brushed it aside before dropping my bra. There was no tenderness, no hesitation as Luken slid his hands between my legs. His fingers sought out my clit. The bundle of nerves was

already hard, and when he touched it, I jerked.

“Ooh!” I gasped.

“Fuck, you’re already wet,” Luken said, his eyes hungrily between my thighs as he pushed a finger into me. I rocked, wanting more of that feeling inside of me.

“Of course I’m wet. How could I not be when you drank from me?” I groaned, grinding myself against his hand.

He pushed a second finger inside of me, his thumb working against my clit. It felt so good and my movement grew more frantic, chasing that high, wanting more. The bond started to open from his side and I closed it on mine automatically, not even thinking about it. The look in Luken’s eyes didn’t change, nor did the rhythm of his hands, so I let my head fall back and didn’t think about it.

I reached between us and took his cock in my hand, matching the rhythm of his fingers inside of me. Our movements were frantic, quick, and desperate. The desire that burned through me was almost too much to bear. How was I not bursting into flames right now? I grunted as I moved my hips, wanting more, needing more.

“Elara,” Luken grunted, lifting his hips to slide his cock through my hand. “You have no idea how fucking amazing it is.”

I opened my eyes again and looked down at him. His eyes were half-shut, the look in his eyes akin to awe. A sense of power swept through me. Luken Holakas, king of the vampires, was helpless with his desire for me. He looked at me as though I was a goddess, someone innately deserving of worship. It was a heady feeling, making my need for him reach an even higher peak.

“Luken,” I groaned.

He shuddered beneath me. Keeping his hand between us still, he wrapped his other arm around me, pulling me closer as though he didn't want any space between our bodies. His mouth found mine, hungry and demanding and insatiable. Something inside of me snapped. There was too much distance between us. I needed him more than my next breath. With a groan, I pushed myself tightly against him, so much that I couldn't stroke him, and his hand was forced to stay still.

"Elara," he laughed, groaning. "Move back a little. I want to make you climax."

"Not with your hand," I whispered back to him.

His gaze searched mine, his breathing growing ragged. "Are you sure? I don't want regrets between us."

"I'm sure," I panted.

Both his hands grabbed my hips, and he twisted, putting me on my back again. The fingers of the hand that had been inside of me were wet. I enjoyed the feeling of it, the knowledge that he'd gotten me so aroused. The scent of his arousal filled the camp, and I grinned.

Luken took my wrists and pinned them over my head again. His jaw worked as he moved down my body, kissing my skin. He stopped at my breast and leisurely tasted my nipple, making it harden. The nipple on my other breast followed suit, aching to be touched. I tried to pull out of his grip, and he held me tighter as he moved to the other breast. The feeling of his mouth on this sensitive part of me made me gasp and writhe beneath him.

He moved lower, kissing the ridge of scar that just barely missed my breasts.

"Oh," I gasped.

Luken adjusted his hold on me and looked into my eyes. “Is that alright?”

“I can’t really feel it,” I admitted. “The nerve endings didn’t survive. So I can’t feel it when you touch me so softly on my scars.”

He kissed the top of my breast and moved between them, kissing and licking in a way that made my skin feel like I was submerged in a pleasant bath.

“I know you said you wanted to be on top,” he whispered into my ribs. “But I...” he trailed off, as though he wasn’t sure what to say.

I lifted my hips, thrusting against him. “It’s fine. I want you too badly to care what position we’re in. But I get to be on top next time.”

He returned to my mouth as he held both my hands in one of his. He reached down to guide himself to my entrance using his free hand. He thrust all the way in with one smooth motion. My body tensed, and I gasped at the barest hints of pain from the suddenness of his actions. But I instantly began to undulate, thrusting my hips up, seeking for the friction of his cock moving inside of me. Luken matched me, both of us moving with intensity and purpose. His free hand moved to my hip, holding me in place as he moved hard and fast. I felt as though I could feel him in every inch of my body, all the way down to my toes. My chest and face flushed as he gazed intently into my eyes, as though he was devouring my soul. Even my tattoos pulsed with orgasm.

“I’m coming,” he growled, starting to pull out of me.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him closer. I didn’t want anything to break this connection. I didn’t want him to put any space between us. It was like a ball of light was sitting inside of me, and I couldn’t lose it. I thrust my hips up hard as he came down. His rhythm stuttered, and the tendons on his neck stood out.

All at once he roared, his cock pulsing inside of me. I felt his release and let myself fall back, my muscles answering as I followed him into bliss.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I woke to a pleasant, unhinged sort of feeling throughout my body. The smell of smoke and cooking food made my stomach rumble, and I rolled onto my back, stretching my arms over my head. Luken was close by, working over a fire. My stomach clenched as I remembered our fevered activities. And now he was making me food again. My cheeks warmed. I hadn't had anyone take care of me since Mom died. Even the nuns who looked after me while I was recovering from my burns were cold.

Luken glanced over at me and smiled. Everything about him was relaxed, and my stomach squeezed again. I did that. He was so relaxed because of me .

“Morning,” he said. “You slept for a while.”

I glanced at the sky and started. The first tendrils of darkness were beginning to tinge the horizon purple. I jerked into a sitting position, crossing my legs. Ooh. That let me know just how deep Luken had been; I could almost still feel him inside. It caused my clit to swell, but I pushed aside my lust. I was still stark naked, and he was dressed.

“Where're my clothes?” I grunted.

Luken pointed. “I remembered them just before the tide came in. Didn't you pack extras?”

“I did, but that doesn't mean I want to change out of them. Especially if we're going to see this elf queen.” I wrinkled my nose as I smelled my clothes. “Yeah, I'm going to have to put on clean clothes before seeing her.”

“Oh, I doubt we’ll have the chance for that. But...” He leaned back and let his eyes trail over me. “We could have another romp before you get dressed.”

I rolled my eyes. “What happened to me begging you for it, huh?”

Luken shrugged. “I’m allowed to change my mind. As it turns out, all you have to do is say you want me, and I’m putty in your hands.”

Heat rose through me, turning my chest and face red. As tempting as it was, I pushed those thoughts aside. We’d lost a whole day. I couldn’t believe I’d let myself sleep so soundly. I yanked on my bra, now crusty with salt, and my shirt over it. After I pulled on my pants, I glanced at Luken again. He was still in his true form, no more glamor. The self-satisfied smirk on his lips did weird things to me, things I didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Here, I found some oysters and clams,” he said, handing me the pot. “I’ve done a serviceable job of making you a seafood stew. Though...” He looked me up and down, his smile widening. “Maybe you’re going to want something a bit... stouter?”

I wrinkled my nose at him and grabbed the spoon. The food smelled heavenly, or maybe it was just because I was so hungry.

“I hope that you’re full,” I mumbled between mouthfuls. “We wasted so much time already. We have to get moving.”

“Wasted time?” he repeated, lifting one dark brow in what was becoming a very familiar gesture.

I narrowed my eyes and pointed upward. “I slept all day!”

“After swimming all night, then donating enough blood to heal me from a serious

curse, and then some rather... enthusiastic exercise. I wonder why you were tired.” He winked at me before settling cross-legged next to me. “How are you feeling? Are you sore? Or...?”

There was a serious note to his voice. He wasn’t just asking me physically. I avoided thinking about the gentleness with which he asked me as I pointed my spoon at him. “I’m pissed that you ruined my panties. Am I just supposed to run around commando?”

“I thought you packed extra. Though I must say, commando suits you. I certainly enjoy the thought that there’s nothing but skin under your clothes.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Underneath your clothes, you’re naked. How scandalous.”

Luken leaned over the pot of food and pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead. It made my skin tingle, and a shiver ran down my spine. I closed my eyes, feeling myself relaxing despite myself. I didn’t want to waste time with these feelings, but how could I simply push them away? After our connection earlier, it was harder for me to hate him.

Even though he was only helping me because of my threats.

Even though he forced me to marry him.

Even though...

“I was thinking, it might be a better idea if you were to return to the palace,” Luken said casually, putting handfuls of sand onto the fire. “It will be more efficient if you are safe and I can continue on this quest by myself.”

By himself? I paused with the spoon in my mouth. Did he really think that it would be that easy to make me forget about this? He was oh-so-determined to see me locked away safely so that he wouldn't get hurt. He wouldn't become weaker.

"No," I said, struggling to keep my voice level. I didn't want this to devolve into a fight. Not yet, at least. "You'll waste more time taking me back and then coming back here. Time Thessa and Darcie don't have."

"They won't be sacrificed for a few months yet—" he started soothingly.

I turned on him. "If the Gods are out to get you like you think, what's to stop them from killing them early? If this is all about you, then don't you think they'll do whatever it takes to drive further wedges between us? If anything happens to them because you delayed us, I will never forgive you. I'm not letting you off the hook, letting you pretend like you're going to get them back only to turn around and make up a story about being too late!"

Luken's jar tightened. I resisted the urge to push aside the food he'd made for me as I stared challengingly into his eyes. Refusing to eat was stupid. He was right. I needed strength. So I angrily shoveled a few more bites into my mouth, not breaking eye contact. He was going to have to answer sooner or later.

"If the Gods are after me?" he repeated. "I told you, there was a prophecy. With my mate, I can defeat them. And you are my mate. Why else would they keep sending Draven after you?"

"Then you agree they are targeting Thessa and Darcie because of you," I said caustically.

Luken roughly covered the remains of the fire, smothering them. "Why are you so convinced that everything I do is a trick? I want you to be happy with me, Elara. I

don't want you to lose your sister. Why would you make love to me if you don't trust me?"

His voice rose with frustration with every word.

"That wasn't making love. It was just fucking," I said, making my voice go flat.

Luken opened his mouth, but apparently couldn't find a good way to argue because it was true. Our union had been desperate, reckless, full of primal lust. It wasn't tender the way lovemaking ought to be.

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy it? That you wish we hadn't?" he asked, his voice growing deeper and gravelly.

His questions brought me up short. My chest constricted as confusion swirled through me. Neither of those things was true. Even now, when we were on the brink of another fight, I was glad we'd been intimate like that. It was what I needed at that moment, what I craved. Yes, part of it was because I knew that it helped him recover from his injury, but there was more than that. It was proof that he wanted me for more than just my blood.

"That's not what I mean," I mumbled, breaking eye contact. "But just because we fuck doesn't mean that anything has changed between us. You can be hungry for my blood and body and still be mostly interested in using me as an instrument against the Gods."

It didn't mean he loved me or cared about me beyond what I did for him. Not the way I wanted, at least.

Luken closed his eyes, his body going very, very still.

“What do you mean?” he gritted through his teeth.

“What I mean is that I’m not going back to the palace.”

Luken nodded once. “And about us? Is what you’re saying that it’s just sex and will only be just sex between us?”

“It’s the only thing I can see between us,” I said, slumping.

If he heard the wistfulness in my voice, it didn’t change the tense way he helped himself.

I wanted to explain, and that only made me more frustrated with myself. The simple truth was I wanted far more between us, and I didn’t know how that could happen. Not without me reverting to the naïve girl I’d once been. There was only pain and disappointment in that path.

“I want you to be happy, Elara. And that means getting your sister and Thessa back,” he said finally, opening his eyes.

“But you’d kill them yourself if it meant keeping me alive and by your side,” I said.

He opened his mouth and closed it. He didn’t need to say anything for me to know I was right.

“That’s just the problem. You’re interested in me being happy on your terms. You want me happy so I don’t leave you. Not because you want me to be happy,” I said, trying to convince myself at the same time.

“You are cruel.” Luken’s words were clipped.

I clenched my fists. “Prove me wrong.”

“You won’t let me.”

“I can’t stop how much I want you. That doesn’t mean I’m going to let my hormones blind me.” I bit the tip of my tongue to stop myself from saying more. Cruel. Was I being cruel, or was he just turning this thing on its head, making it my fault?

I wished it could be as easy and simple as sexual desire. I felt him playing the bond, trying to ease it open. No. I held it tighter shut. Our bond was something I couldn’t stop, but I wasn’t letting him in so easily. Except when I thought I was going to die, apparently.

A bitter laugh burst from my throat. “On the bright side, we’re sure to end up in life-and-death situations as we continue.”

“That’s a bright side?” Luken snarled.

I shrugged listlessly. “It seems like we only come together when one of us is dying. Maybe we’ll be lucky next time and won’t start fighting afterward.”

He stood and grabbed his sword. “I’m going to check around the barrier and see if there’s any evidence of anyone else around. Stay in here this time. And don’t worry. I won’t make the mistake of trying to connect again.”

He stalked out of the boulders without a word. I scrambled to my feet, fully prepared to argue, but I stopped myself. There wasn’t anything he could do to convince me otherwise, and if we kept talking, I’d only say more hurtful things. Honest things, at least from my perspective, but hurtful all the same. Just outside the camp, he looked back. This time, I prodded our bond. This time, he was the one who put a wall of steel between us, leaving me nothing with his burning gaze.

And in that gaze, anger and hate.

He walked away, leaving me to slump over my food. Of course, he hated me. He hated how I made him feel vulnerable, how I was able to resist his charms. He wasn't used to people telling him no; he wasn't used to people falling all over themselves to love him because he was the most important man in any room he stepped into. I had no reason to wish he actually cared about me more than his ability to gain power.

So why did my heart feel as though I'd sliced open my chest and ripped it out?

\*\*\*

Luken didn't stay gone for long. I'd just finished eating when I realized he'd taken the key with him. I didn't have time to work up any sort of accusations, though, because he returned moments later.

"All we have to do is touch the border with the key, and a door will open," he told me, packing the still-dirty pot.

"That's good, right?" I said cautiously.

Luken nodded once, but the movement was jerky. "It means we can get to the Silver Forest easily. But it also means there are other methods of protection that we'll have to be wary of. We'll have to move quickly."

I grabbed my stuff and pulled the pack onto my shoulders. Luken moved around the camp, removing the magical protections. As I watched him, I knew I had to say something. Maybe we couldn't have any sort of real emotional connection, but... but this bond was still powerful.

"If you need to drink from me again, I have no objections." My cheeks flushed as I



spoke. “If we can’t get along, at least we can still have sex. So whenever you need to drink from me, let me know. And we can decide to fuck or not before it reaches that point. Because regardless of everything else, I do like it when we fuck.”

Luken didn’t answer. It was probably for the best that he didn’t.

“Are you ready?” he asked, shouldering his pack.

I nodded, picking up my staff, and we headed back to the shimmering barrier. Once there, Luken held out the bronze key. He touched the tip of it to the barrier, and a ripple appeared in the shimmer. A hole opened at the point of impact and opened wider and wider, until there was a large enough space for a person to step through. Luken wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me up close to him. I yelped in protest, but he ignored me as he stepped through, pulling me with him. The door shut instantly the moment we were free. The key disappeared from Luken’s hand.

“Welcome to the Silver Forest,” he said, releasing me.

I looked around, and my jaw dropped. No wonder they called it the ‘silver’ forest. Everything was soft and pale, even the light. It looked as though we’d stepped into something spun from moonlight. Giant ferns surrounded us, and the trees were unlike anything I’d seen before. They were fuzzy, the trunks covered with rippling tendrils that reminded me of a moth’s antennae. No branches crowded the canopy, just these tall, straight trunks that seemed to reach up forever. It was also quiet, no sounds of animal life anywhere.

“Is it always like this?” I asked as I inspected the white fronds of the fern closest to us.

“Yes. Elves see color differently than the other species, so this place is bursting with color to them. And magic.” He touched my hand, bringing my attention back to him.

“I believe that if we were to open the bond fully, you’d be able to use and sense magic the same way I can. This place is beautiful, if you would let me show you.”

It was an olive branch. But if he was sharing that much with me, how much would I share in return? “I think I’d rather stick with the status quo right now. I’ve never wanted to use magic.”

If he was disappointed, he didn’t show it. Instead, he started to walk. I followed after, our footsteps unnaturally loud in the forest. How did he know where to go? I kept close to him, not wanting to get lost. My eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, but when I glanced back the way we’d come, I saw no sign of our passage.

I wasn’t sure how long we’d been walking when the ferns ahead of us shook.

“Halt.” A man dressed in leather armor stepped in front of us. He carried a spike, holding it upright in a way that would make it easy to swing it into action at any moment.

“I am Luken Holokas, King of Taimarah,” Luken called, his expression disinterested. “My wife and I have come to see Queen Donelle of the Silver Forest.”

More guards materialized around us, all heavily armed. Their armor was the same design as Draven’s mercenaries. My heart jumped to my throat as I gripped my staff tighter. The first of the elves viewed us both with a gleam in his eyes. No surprise showed on his face.

“The Queen is expecting you,” the guard said. “Hand over your weapons, and we will take you to her.”

Luken hesitated, but unsheathed his sword. I made no move to hand over my staff. The elf cast me a dismissive glance and didn’t seem to think I was a threat. Good. My

greatest strength was people underestimating me. I leaned on the staff, trying to make myself look weaker.

“Come,” the elf said, turning on his heel. He marched through the moonlit forest. Luken tucked an arm protectively around me, and we followed.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

Queen Donelle's palace was just as grand and impressive as anything I'd seen. Like the rest of the Silver Forest, it was shades of paleness, from white to silver. While the vampire palaces I'd been to were built like huge mansions, with sprawling estates, this seemed to have grown into a massive tree. A real tree this time, with broad branches and leaves as wide as I was tall.

The guards walked in a tight formation around us. Luken's arm kept tight around my waist, his eyes never staying still as he took in everything around us. He showed no sign of awe or nerves, and I couldn't read him.

"Have you been here before?" I asked him.

Luken nodded once, his jaw tightening ever so slightly. It seemed like it wasn't exactly a pleasant experience. I wanted to question him more, but he sent me a warning look, and I swallowed my questions. We were approaching the large doors to the palace.

"Brace yourself for luridness," Luken told me. "Elves are shameless, at least the ones in the Silver Forest."

The head guard glanced back at us and snorted. "If you mean we're not ashamed of our bodies and the pleasure that can be derived from it."

"What sort of—" I started to ask, but we were through the entrance. And I got to see for myself what Luken meant.

It seemed as though we had just walked into an orgy. My jaw dropped as the sounds

crashed into me from every angle. Moans, groans, grunts, and screams of pleasure. The smell was just as strong and made my face grow hot. There were no couples, at least not that I could see. The smallest group of people fucking each other was four, three men with one woman, filling her from every angle. I clenched instinctively, thinking it seemed unpleasant. But the look on her face said she was enjoying it in great detail.

Lurid wasn't enough to describe what I was seeing. But I couldn't look away. With every new act I saw, I wondered how it would work between Luken and me. None of the group sex stuff would work—I had no desire for that—but otherwise... What sort of things did he want? What sort of things did he have experience in?

I finally ripped my eyes away and dropped them to the floor. It seemed that even my wildest fantasies about sex were... basic . The two times Luken and I had been together weren't adventurous at all. All at once, I wondered if it had been a very underwhelming experience for him, if maybe he was frustrated at how much he'd had to hold back because of my inexperience. If he wanted to bring in handcuffs and whips and use positions I'd never considered.

I didn't have long to sit with my feelings of inferiority. We were whisked from the entrance up two long sets of stairs, where we were finally deposited in a spacious apartment that the guard announced was the queen's chambers. It was decadent and plush, filled with furniture and elaborate art pieces. It was so packed together that I had difficulty navigating the minefield.

Queen Donelle sat on a low sofa, wearing... very little. Her gown was made of a gauzy material thin enough that I saw the shape of her areolas and the dark triangle of curls at the juncture of her thighs. Her hair was loose, spread out around her as several maids brushed it. It was so long that she could have wrapped it around herself like a blanket several times over. Her skin had a mother-of-pearl sheen, constantly shifting colors. Her face was exquisitely beautiful.

She was, simply put, the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. Even more beautiful than Luken, though I didn't feel any of the same sexual stirrings for her as I did for him. I couldn't stop staring at her. Even more so when Donelle's eyes latched onto Luken. Her pupils darkened, and a smile twisted her lips as she slowly looked him up and down. Luken's posture loosened, his arm dropping from me.

"Queen Donelle." He bowed. "It's good to see you again."

"My dear little Luken. You've grown since I saw you. Became a man..." The queen waved her hand, and the maid started to braid her impossibly long hair. She crossed her legs, the translucent fabric shimmying up her legs as she did so. "You look exactly like your father. I was so very disappointed to hear when he died. He always promised to bring you to visit me again, you know, when you were old enough."

Luken chuckled, sounding utterly relaxed. "He planned to do it, too. Unfortunately, there was that... incident that made him feel it was unwise to bring his heir to your courts."

"And now you've brought yourself." Donelle touched her collar, sliding her hand down over her breast, and her gaze finally flickered to me. "With your human wife. I saw the account of your wedding. It was rather..." She paused, tilting her head to one side. "Quaint. White does so complement your skin." Her gaze lingered on my scars. I had to bite back the urge to defend myself. She kept staring at me as she spoke. "I would very much like to hear how you found yourself married, Luken. I always thought you'd be like your father. He only married your mother for political reasons, but this little girl can't have given you any sort of political edge."

I bit back on surprise. I'd never considered how Luken's parents got together. But it made sense. Marriage for the elite was all about forming alliances and connecting kingdoms. Had Luken spurned the other kingdoms by marrying an innkeeper's daughter?

“A man must make himself into his own image,” Luken answered smoothly.

Donelle’s gaze snapped back to him, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It was nearly impossible to meet her gaze. The expression on her beautiful face might be smooth, but I got the distinct feeling that she was measuring me up. And I was found lacking.

“What brings you trespassing in my kingdom?” Donelle asked, arching an elegant brow.

By this time, the maids had braided her hair into several ropes, which they were weaving together. They moved with such efficiency, I wondered about it. Donelle’s hair was still long, but growing shorter as they worked it. How heavy must it all be? How did Donelle hold her head so still? Was it magic?

“We are searching for the temples where the Gods’ tributes are kept,” Luken answered. “My wife has a sister among their number.”

Donelle frowned. “What are you doing that for? She should have already said goodbye. Nobody goes to the temples unless they are invited by the Gods.”

“Or,” Luken said slowly, “they plan to challenge the gods.”

Donelle grew very still. Even the maids stopped their work. She clapped her hands, and the maids left at once, filing out. It was only then, as they brushed by us, that I realized each one of them was wearing togas woven out of their own hair. The guards filed out after the maids, leaving us alone.

“You plan to challenge the gods?” Donelle asked, rising to her feet. Her hair magically floated behind her. Ha! I was right.

Luken smiled. It was the cocky smile I knew all too well and made my body respond

instantly. His shoulders went back, and he lifted his chin slightly. “I do. And I plan to win. You must know about the prophecy that was made all those decades ago. It’s going to be fulfilled.”

Donelle glided forward, her gaze never leaving him. It moved up and down his body. Her nipples hardened beneath the sheer fabric, and her pupils dilated. A surge of jealousy roared through me, seeing how she obviously wanted him. I moved closer, wishing I had more of an inspiring presence to warn her off. Luken didn’t show any sign he was uncomfortable with her interest.

“This is very... fascinating information.” Donelle started to circle us, but her gaze continued to skim over me as though I wasn’t there. “You are certainly powerful. Your father chose well to mate with us elves, even if your mother...” She paused before Luken and cast one more glance over me. A satisfied smile spread over her face as she dismissed me as a threat once and for all.

Anger bubbled beneath my skin, and I tightened my grip on my staff. We needed her. Bashing her head in right now would not be a good idea.

“The night I conceived Draven, useless as he is, was one of the greatest of my life,” she purred.

Luken’s jaw tightened.

“Where is your half-brother?” Donelle asked, a knowing smile on her face.

“He’s one of the reasons we’ve come here, Donelle,” Luken answered. “Draven has been causing trouble. I suspect he’ll be coming through Silver Forest on his own way to the temples. Perhaps he’ll even seek your aid.”

“He’d be a fool if he tried,” Donelle replied dismissively.



“You are his mother,” Luken answered. “Is it really that foolish?”

“After what he did the last time I let him into my halls, yes.” She shrugged one silvery shoulder and continued before either Luken or I could ask what she meant. “I knew you weren’t just here for a visit, but I must admit I’m disappointed. You’ve been king these three hundred years, and you’ve never once tried to come to be before. One might even think it’s an insult.”

Luken bowed slightly. I wondered how much it grated on him, playing the submissive act. “I’ve been busy. Rebellions, attacks on my crown, and of course, the Blood Trials to oversee every fucking year.” His voice grew bored as he spoke, and he spread his hands with a wry smile. “And of course, I couldn’t come to you unfed. I’ve had a difficult time keeping my personal donors alive.”

“I’ve heard. But you really oughtn’t think I’m so opposed to being drunk from.” Donelle laughed as she ran a hand down Luken’s arm. “I wonder how much of your father’s skill you inherited. Is he a good ride, little human? Though I suppose to you, all vampires are a good ride,” she said with a laugh.

Fury and jealousy reared through me, and my jaw clenched. I wanted to bash her over the head, but I managed to stop myself. She must not have watched the Blood Trials if she didn’t know that a staff was my weapon of choice. “I wouldn’t know. He doesn’t let me be on top,” I gritted through my teeth.

Luken twitched. Some emotion flashed through his eyes, but it was gone before I could fully see it.

Donelle’s eyes widened in surprise, probably because she wasn’t expecting me to be so bold. Her gaze flashed to Luken, but she focused on me again quickly. Her lips twitched and she let out a high, silvery giggle that made me flinch.

“Oh, I’d top him,” Donelle said casually. “It takes a strong woman to tame vampire men, and you...” Her giggles grew to an all-out derisive laugh. “You simply don’t have what it takes.”

“I have enough to be his wife,” I spat at her. “He chose to make me his queen. So what does that tell you?”

Donelle smirked. “It tells me that he must be very... pent up.”

She ran her hand down Luken’s arm again. Her eyes darkened as she lifted her other hand and pressed it to his chest. She tilted her head slightly, and I knew she was going to kiss him. Luken shifted slightly, moving his feet. But he didn’t pull away. Donelle ran her hand down his torso. As her fingers brushed against his belt, a murderous rage washed over me. No way in hell was I standing by to watch this happen!

I didn’t have a plan before I attacked. I was moving before I realized what I was doing, swinging my staff at her. She moved quicker than I anticipated, too. One moment, she was groping Luken, and the next, she had my staff in both hands. She wrenched it from my hand and spun, kicking me in the stomach. I was thrown back, slamming into a large vase that shattered.

“Don’t,” I snarled between gasps, “put your hands on my husband.”

Luken rushed to my side and pulled me to my feet. Worry flickered in his gaze, but also anger. “The fuck do you think you’re doing?” he hissed.

I gaped at him. What did he think I was doing? I was trying to keep that woman from feeling him up!

“You are my husband,” I snarled at him, shoving at his chest. “Mine.”

Donelle laughed. Her gauzy clothes floated around her as she twirled my staff expertly in her hands. My heart sank. It wasn't that she didn't watch the Blood Trials. My first assessment was right. She knew what I was capable of and utterly dismissed me as a threat. It was clear that was the case with how easily she disarmed me.

"How do you expect to tame him when you can't even top him?" Donelle asked.

Luken turned. "Enough. I didn't come here for my wife to be beaten up. I have things I need to discuss with you, Donelle."

"Then we will discuss them." She dropped my staff and clapped her hands. The servants and guards streamed back in. "But for her attack on the queen, your wife will be imprisoned."

My hand tightened on Luken's arm.

He was silent.

Silent.

The guards grabbed me and dragged me away. The last I saw of Luken, he'd turned to Donelle, and she had her hands on him again. Fury and jealousy rushed through me again, but I was overpowered by the sheer pain of knowing he wasn't going to try to stop it.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

If I opened the bond, what would I feel?

I growled as my hands started to shake, and my makeshift lockpick slid out of my grasp. Anger was like a living beast inside of me, prowling and snarling and caged. My ribs were too tight, my lungs were unable to fill properly. That bastard had just let Donelle feel him up in front of me, flaunting that our wedding vows meant nothing to him. Of course, they didn't. I was a tool to him, something to make him more powerful.

What else made him powerful? Alliances with other kingdoms. Alliances that apparently meant he'd fuck the elvish queen with her unworldly beauty.

So it came back to this: What would I feel if I opened the bond? Would I get an insight into what Luken actually wanted sexually? What if it was utterly depraved? Would I feel worse for not being enough for him, or relieved that he was letting things between us progress at my pace instead of his...?

Also—why the fuck did I care?

My chest ached. I focused on my anger, trying to hold onto it. If it slipped away, all that would be left was the pain. I snatched up the lockpick again and went back at it. The dungeon wasn't as far away from the queen's chambers as I'd thought it would be. It was a large, empty space on the outside branches of the tree palace, with nothing but cages hanging in the air here and there. No guards. Skeletons filled the cages, but no living thing except me was out here.

I was lucky that the former occupants of my cage had been, by this time, stripped to

the bone.

The lock suddenly sprang free. I pushed the door open and stretched out my arms, reaching for the closest branch. It was covered in a slippery slime, and I couldn't get a good grip on it. No matter. I turned back to the corpse and stripped off its clothes. I made myself a rope and glanced at how far I was from the ground. A wind shifted the cage, making the heights seem even more dizzily high. There was a thinner branch about twenty feet beneath me. If I could get to it, I'd be able to ease myself along to the trunk, even if it was covered in the same slime.

I knotted my rope to the cage and started to climb down. The wind picked up, buffeting me. I gritted my teeth as I lowered myself, hand over hand. Finally, I reached the thin branch. It bent under my weight but held. I released my rope and clung to the branch, scooting myself forward inch by agonizing inch. My hands and torso were covered by the slippery stuff by the time I reached the trunk, but from there, I was able to wipe the worst of it off my hands and reach for a nearby window.

Once I was inside, I collapsed to the floor and sprawled on my back, gasping for air. That had been almost as bad as flying—no, it was worse, because I didn't have Luken's strong arms around me.

Breathe in. Hold. Release. I grounded myself, knowing I didn't have time for a meltdown. The danger of falling to my death had passed, and now the danger was being caught and put back in the cages. I pulled myself to my feet and glanced around. I was in some sort of pantry. Jars of dried fruit lined tall shelves, along with bundles of herbs and jerky. The stars blessed me today. I scraped as much of the gel off myself as I could, wiping it on the walls, before I got to my feet. My shoes were slick, too, but after grinding them against the wooden floor for a few minutes, I was able to walk.

A quick search of the pantry brought me two more strokes of luck. One was a

shoulder yoke with two burlap bags attached to either side. I loosened one from it and filled it with reserves, then tied the bag to my hip. It made me feel lopsided, but I needed the food. The second was a broomstick with a head that could be screwed off. Not exactly a staff, but better than nothing.

Now, all I had to do was sneak out of here and get out of the Silver Forest. I still had the map I'd gotten from Luken's palace. I could make my way to the temples myself. I didn't need Luken.

Even though Draven was still out there.

Even though the Gods themselves were gunning for me.

Even though I had no idea how to navigate the Silver Forest, Donelle was sure to send people after me when she realized I had escaped.

Okay, so maybe it was stupid to leave without Luken. But it wasn't like I had a choice. He'd made his bed, and now he had to lie in it. I reached for the door handle.

The way Luken's jaw tightened when I asked him if he'd been here before made me pause. My stomach tightened as that protective anger slipped. He hadn't looked happy about coming here in the first place. Didn't seem like he had fond memories of his previous visit. Sure, he'd smiled and was charming with Donelle, but... but... what if?

What if she didn't want to sleep with him? What if she wanted to kill him? He'd mentioned an incident that prevented his father from returning to these courts. What if it was because Donelle had tried to assassinate Luken's father? Or his mother? She had certainly been derisive enough about his mother. There were political strains between Taimarah and the Silver Forest; I knew that much.

If I opened the bond, what would I find?

My chest constricted, and my stomach churned. I closed my eyes, fighting against myself. I should open the bond. I should feel what he was doing and feeling, and use that information to make my decision. But if I opened it, what would I find? There were two options, as far as I could see, and either one would devastate me. I couldn't do it.

But if I was going to get out of here, find Darcie and Thessa, and make it out of the temples with all of us alive? Well. I needed him.

Mind made up, I steeled myself and flung open the door. The long hallway echoed with the moans and cries of sex. I shuddered and headed toward the nearest stairs. The queen's chambers were two or three levels above me. I'd been taken down one to go to the dungeons, and I'd passed another layer of windows, climbing down the rope.

As I neared the stairs, a group of people stumbled down them. They were stripping off their clothes, kissing each other. Several were naked already. I dodged into the nearest room, hoping they were too busy with their amour to have noticed me. I hid around the door as they drew nearer. Oh, Gods! The noises they made!

Please don't let them come in here.

The group passed by me. I peeked out the doorway in time to see a woman jump onto the back of a man and start pegging him. My cheeks went hot, and I pulled back. Would Luken like that ?

Nope. No more of those thoughts. The orgy had disappeared into another room, without bothering to close the door. But they wouldn't see me now.

I wanted out of this kingdom. Now!

There were no guards on the stairs or in the next few hallways. I recognized where I was quickly and stole along the edge of the hallway, listening and watching warily. Where were the guards? They should be here somewhere. It was all so quiet. Suspiciously quiet. My nerves ran ragged, making the hair on the back of my neck prickle.

I reached the queen's chambers; the door was open, and I gripped my broomstick handle tighter. It wasn't much of a weapon, but I could at least—

A moan came from inside the room. Deep, masculine. The sound of a man in the throes of passion. It was answered by a series of sharp, feminine cries. The queen. She was breathless, excited, and cried out for more. The moan came again, the man answering in a voice too low for me to understand. I peeked around the doorframe. Donelle mounted a man on the floor, her back toward me. She was utterly naked, bouncing as she fucked the man. His hands were tight on her hips. I couldn't see his face, but his hair was rich and dark.

Luken.

I pulled back, sagging against the wall. My blood felt like ice, and I couldn't breathe.

"Now, isn't this better than that ugly little human?" Donelle crooned.

I thought I knew what a broken heart felt like. But this was unlike anything I'd experienced. The betrayal cut to my very soul. Luken might as well have opened my chest and ripped out my heart. Now I wanted to open the bond and push these feelings through, so he'd know I knew and... and... what? It wouldn't change anything.



The man groaned again. His voice was husky with sex, strangled. “So much better.”

I whirled, unable to stand another moment. Tears blurred my vision as I raced down the hallway, only to crash into something hard in just a few steps. Hands caught me, steadied me, and I struggled against them. I didn’t want to be taken back to that room, to have to—

“Elara,” Luken’s voice hissed. “What are you doing here?”

I blinked the tears from my eyes. The man who held me so tightly stared at me with wild eyes. Wild amber eyes.

“Luken,” I gasped, freezing once more.

A loud groan echoed down the corridor. He wasn’t in the queen’s chambers. He was here, with me. His hair was in disarray, the braids undone, and that wild look in his eyes didn’t dim. His clothes were in perfect order, but why was his hair like that? He pulled me to the wall, glancing behind me as his jaw tightened.

“Why aren’t you in prison?” he demanded, pulling me close.

“I escaped. And came looking for you,” I mumbled. Too much emotion. I didn’t know what I was feeling, so I tried very hard not to feel anything at all.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Luken hissed.

“So I should be locked up in a cage while you fuck another woman?” I spat back.

He hadn’t fucked her. Or had he? Was that the reason his hair was like that? Why were his eyes crazed? Or was he coming to her chambers to join her and the other man? Accusations pressed against my lips. Now, listening to the queen cry out in

orgasmic pleasure, I couldn't recall the exact expression that had made me decide to come after him.

Luken's hands tightened on my arms. "I didn't fuck her."

I opened my mouth, but before deciding what to say, a cool laugh came from behind me. I flinched and turned. Donelle stood in her doorway, naked, the evidence of sex on her body. A dark-haired man who looked suspiciously like Luken lingered behind her, nuzzling her neck. Clearly, he was ready to go again—maybe she hadn't let him finish.

"It looks like we're going to have a regular orgy, aren't we?" Donelle cooed, not bothering to hide her nakedness. "She might be amusing at that. Although I must say, I'm disappointed you would defy my orders to keep her locked up."

I snarled under my breath and shifted to the balls of my feet, ready to spring across the room and snap this broomstick over her head. Then, use its jagged end to stab through her heart.

Luken's arms snaked around my waist, and he pulled me back tight against his chest. The residue of the slime made it difficult for him to hold me. But I felt the thumping of his heart against my back and stilled. His arms were tight, and for a moment, I wondered if it was more than just preventing me from attacking.

"Queen Donelle and I made a deal," he whispered in my ear. "I can't have you messing it up."

A deal? Meaning, if he hadn't already slept with her, he'd been coming to her chambers to sleep with her now? Numbness swept through me. A sinking, sick feeling that left me cold and emotionless. Okay. He'd made a deal. How could I be surprised when he kept making all these plans without telling me? From what I'd

seen at this palace, my inexperience had to be annoying for him. Of course, he'd go to bed with this stunning woman.

Or maybe , some part of me whispered, we shouldn't make assumptions and make an ass of ourselves?

"What sort of deal?" I whispered through frozen lips.

Donelle looked down her nose at me. "I know you said it was prophesied, but really, Luken. You should just compel her to obey you. Forget this nonsense about a sister. I can't understand why you didn't just use your talents to wipe her mind. She'd be easier to control that way."

"He can't do that," I protested.

But when I turned toward Luken, I caught his flinch.

He could.

Memories of how he compelled the guards at the sketchy motel store flooded me. He could do that to me, too. And I wouldn't be able to stop him.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

“What does she mean?” I demanded, my voice high and strained. I knew exactly what she meant, but my mind was so full of awful possibilities that my heart raced. “Luken, did you—”

“Hush, child,” Donelle said, looking down her nose at me again. “Let the adults finish their conversation.”

My lips pulled back from my teeth. Luken’s arms tightened. He needn’t have bothered. As much as I’d like to go for Donelle again, I wasn’t that stupid with anger. I’d have time to demand answers later. I was so caught up in sex and Luken and feeling betrayed that I’d forgotten my true mission. Let Luken fuck Donelle if that helped me get Darcie back. Let him compel me to do his bidding—just so long as he didn’t, as Donelle suggested, make me forget I ever had a sister.

Donelle lifted one eyebrow at me, as though waiting for my snarky reply. I sealed my mouth and lowered my head. I wasn’t going to give her an excuse to throw me into one of those cages again. She waited before snorting, as though disappointed. Then she stretched, arching her back in a way that brushed her breasts against Luken’s arm. The arm that held me. Subsequently, they brushed against my breasts.

I jerked away, hissing between my teeth. Luken pulled me back a step, putting distance between the queen and the two of us. Her lover had leaned against the wall, slouching. His cock had gone soft, and a petulant pout jutted his lip out.

“Has the payment been made?” Donelle asked, suddenly all business.

What payment?

“Yes,” Luken answered. His voice was level and emotionless.

Donelle bit his thumb and looked down at his body, ignoring me. Then she sighed. “Then I suppose you’ll want to get going, hmmm? Fetch my robe,” she ordered over her shoulder.

Her lover sighed dramatically and went back to the room. He returned shortly with a knee-length robe that actually hid her body. Donelle shrugged it on, sent the man away, and led Luken and me down the hall. She strode swiftly, the length of her stride twice as long as mine. I struggled to keep up, cursing my short legs. Luken matched his stride to mine, his arm still around me. It would be comforting that he didn’t release me, if it wasn’t because he expected me to lose my temper again.

For a moment, I was just so tired of it. Tired that the one person in the world who could help me save Thessa and Darcie was the one person I wanted the most... and the one I trusted the least. At least with people like Donelle and Draven, I knew something about what to expect. I could read their motives. So why was Luken, the man I had a literal bond with, so difficult?

We finally came to a stop after climbing three more staircases. As fit as I was, my legs burned, and I struggled to control my breathing. Donelle led us into a large room dominated by a huge table covered in a topographical map of the continent. Borders were drawn in magic threads that hovered over the maps, and dozens of pins moved about on their own. I didn’t need to ask to know that this was a war room of some sort.

Donelle leaned against the table, her demeanor changing completely. No longer did she have a seductive sway to her movements. She was all business, harsh, and focused.

“Funny how it all works, isn’t it?” She looked up with a humorless smile. “In trying

to kill you, your brother saved your life.”

Luken chuckled. “I don’t think you’d have killed me so easily.”

I looked between them, confused.

Luken caught my look and finally released me. “Donelle and the Silver Forest had plans to invade Taimarah and dethrone me a few years back. That is, until Draven betrayed them. He took half of Donelle’s army and started a civil war. It’s why he didn’t come after you again, even though you survived his initial attack.”

“Oh,” I murmured.

“He thinks that he’s owed my kingdom.” Donelle’s lip curled back. “We’ve kept it quite secret, this little rebellion of his. He plans to see me dead, the ungrateful churl. We’ll see how well the vampire side of him heals when I put his head on a pike.”

She smiled, enjoying her mental image. And as much as I hated Draven and feared him, I couldn’t stop a twinge of sympathy. Maybe Donelle was less callous before he attempted to coup her. But she certainly didn’t seem like much of a mother. I kept my expression smooth, making sure none of my thoughts were on my face.

“It will do us all some good if he dies,” I agreed.

Luken twitched.

Donelle caught the movement and arched one of her delicate brows. “Don’t you agree, Luken? It’ll be safer for your little mate if your brother is dead.”

“It will be. And he will die before this is over,” Luken answered stiffly.

“So much trouble... I should have tossed him into the sea the night he was born. He’s always been so... needy.” Donelle smoothed her elaborately braided hair and shook her head. “But we should continue the discussion, should we not? Draven is more powerful than you realize.”

Luken rested his hands on the map and studied it. “He’s found a way to bypass your security measures, hasn’t he?”

“Oh, he has indeed.” Donelle’s pretty mouth twisted in disgust. “There is no way for anyone to enter the Silver Forest without my knowledge. As soon as they pass through the barrier, they’re marked. With the same sort of magic that allows the channels to stream the Blood Trials, in fact,” she added, smiling at me now. “I’ll have to go back and rewatch yours. You were certainly the least interesting contestant this year, but maybe I missed something.”

I gave her a blank look back. She was trying to provoke me; that much was clear. I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction.

“How did Draven manage to take half of the army? I thought males weren’t permitted to inherit in the Silver Forest,” Luken said.

Weren’t they? I suppose it made a little bit of sense if people were concerned about inheritance staying in the bloodline. If you were having group sex in the hallways, it was kind of hard to determine which child belonged to what father. Tracing lineage through the mother was much more secure. Although now they had blood tests for that sort of thing—did elves even use blood tests? I seemed to recall something about blood magic being strictly forbidden, which included scientific breakthroughs like transfusions.

Donelle glared at the map. “Oh, they can’t. But Draven has made promise after promise to elven folk. He gives them just enough for them to give him what he wants,

then turns around and betrays them. He's hated, but he was chosen by the gods as a child. He's seen them, talked to them, and they corrupted. They promised him power that he's too weak to hold. And now, too many people fear crossing the gods to challenge him."

Luken nodded, but something about the way Donelle said it made me suspicious. I hesitated, not wanting to draw too much attention. My nerves were worn thin already, and it wouldn't take much for me to snap again. Donelle and Luken seemed to have come to some sort of agreement— what kind of agreement, and what was the price? —and I didn't want to jeopardize that.

"How exactly was he chosen by the gods as a child?" I asked.

Donelle wrinkled her nose.

"It might be helpful to know. It might give us an insight into how to kill him," I added quickly.

"It started with his dreams. He'd be given... prophecies, I suppose, when he was a young child." She folded her arms, plumping up her breasts. "Then, as he grew older and matured, he began acting so strangely. He spurned any advance, telling everyone he must be 'pure' for the gods to speak through him. His prophecies became more precise. And all the while, never having sex." Here, she snorted. "As though the gods, who fuck whoever they want, are really so pure themselves."

I frowned. He'd made several attempts during the Blood Trials to get me to sleep with him. Why do that if he was supposed to never have sex, according to whatever strange belief this was? Simple, I realized. The gods told him not to have sex, and then they said he could have sex. With me, to prevent me from fully realizing the mating bond.



I glanced at Luken. If I hadn't been a virgin when we slept together, would the bond have come so strongly? Luken wasn't a virgin. Would it matter if I hadn't been one, either?

No, more likely the plan was to stop me from sleeping with Luken at all. Give me someone else to love so I would have more of a reason to resist the draw to my mate.

"There's something wrong with him," Donelle said, shaking her head. "Not to want sex? It's disgusting."

Annoyance prickled through me, and I spoke without thinking. "And it's so normal to want to fuck your son's brother."

Donelle's eyes flashed. She lunged to slap me, but Luken twirled me away, stepping between me and her quickly. It all happened in less than a second.

"Stop that," Luken snarled. He glared at me. "The Queen is willing to help us defeat the man responsible for your family's death. What good is it for you to antagonize her? Apologize, Elara."

I hated the way he said it, as though I was a dog to command. I glared back but bit out, "Sorry."

Donelle grunted. She pointed to a space on the map. "There's a hidden portal here that leads straight to the temples. Draven had it built when he was younger, and thinks I don't know about it. I've sent people in. Most have died. There are challenges that you must complete to access it. What challenges, I don't know."

Direct access. I gripped Luken's arm in excitement, my anger disappearing. "That means we can get there tonight!"

“If you survive the cave.” The queen went to the wall and plucked a furled map from it. “This will show you the path to get to the caves.”

She handed the map to Luken, who quickly unrolled it. I leaned in, pressing tight to him to read over his shoulder. The path was marked clearly, with notes about landscape formations marked on it. My heart beat faster. This was it! It wasn't that far from the cave. With any luck, we'd be at the temples soon enough.

Save Darcie, Thessa, and then get home. And once the dust settled, Luken and I would finally be able to really talk about things. Talk and fuck and maybe even... well. We would have to wait until we actually trusted each other to begin thinking about having children of our own. But it would be a possibility.

“But this is as much help as I will give you,” Donelle continued, her voice low and unemotional. “There's enough political and religious turmoil in the elven kingdoms to destroy us all. I can't be seen to take sides, not when one side is my own flesh and blood. It would be different if you put a child in my womb,” she added, shooting Luken a reproachful look. “But I won't risk my kingdom for a vampire, no matter how good of a fuck his father was.”

All semblance of gratitude I felt toward her disappeared. She'd tried to convince my husband to get her pregnant? I clenched my hands around the stupid broomstick I still held. Would it really be so bad to... yes. Yes, it really would be that bad. I breathed through my nose, trying to still myself.

Stop lashing out, I told myself. Stop being so emotional.

“If you win against the gods, consider the Silver Forest one of your allies. I will openly support you then.” Donelle cast me one more derisive glance before she focused on Luken again. “But until then... I have to keep up appearances.”

A distant alarm bell started to ring. I turned, glancing out the doorway. Shouts began to ring through the palace. When I turned back, Donelle was just disappearing through a doorway that swung shut behind her, leaving no trace it had ever been there. I clenched my teeth as I turned to Luken.

He shoved the map into his tunic and grabbed my hand. "Time to run."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

Being chased by hordes of naked elves was less than a pleasant experience. We ran into a dozen guards on our attempt to get away. My broomstick broke right away, so I ended up with a short sword instead. I wondered if we should try to avoid killing them, but when Luken used magic to blast off the head of one of our attackers, I decided staying alive was more important.

I wish the elves hadn't taken my staff. The sword didn't give me as much reach and was far less versatile. It was only thanks to Luken's magic that we could escape the palace in one piece. Once we were in the forest, we were running. Endlessly running, until I was panting for breath and stumbling over my own feet.

Luken scooped me into his arms and twisted me neatly onto his back, and kept running. I clung around his waist and shoulders, making myself as small as possible so I wouldn't get caught on the foliage. I wondered at his stamina. It seemed like he could go forever... which only made the relatively short sex we'd had more suspect.

I was fragile in comparison to him. Even though I was part vampire now, I was more breakable. Could he even enjoy himself with me? Was that why it was so much easier for him to fight the draw that kept bringing me back to him? He couldn't want me as much as I wanted him, because otherwise, how could he hold back? He said he wouldn't have me again until I begged for his touch, but the truth was, he could easily make me beg for him.

And this was the last thing I wanted, to feel sexually inadequate for a man whom I didn't even want to want.

We came to a stop, and I blinked. My legs were stiff around his waist, but I quickly

unwound myself and lowered to the forest floor. We were in among a group of ferns twice as tall as I was, with feathery fronds that reached out to tickle my cheeks. Ahead of us was a dark slash in the otherwise silver forest, a narrow opening that must be the cave.

Luken folded the map Donelle gave us and tucked it back into his tunic.

“That didn’t take as long as I expected,” I said suspiciously. “Are we sure this isn’t a trick?”

“I can assure you it’s not. The real trials will come once we’re inside.” Luken nodded toward the slash.

I stepped toward it. “We should get started, then.”

Luken caught my arm. “We have some time before the elves catch up. They won’t follow us into the cave, so we should rest out here while we can. We’re both exhausted and we need to have clear minds for what comes next.”

“But we don’t have the time. If Draven has gone in already...” I clenched my hands. “We’ve lost so much time already.”

“I know. But dying because we’ve pushed ourselves too hard won’t save Darcie or Thessa.”

He was right. My shoulders slumped, and I ran a hand through my hair. I caught several knots and glanced at him again. The crazed look from when I met him in the hallway was gone, but his hair was still a mess. What happened?

Thinking about that was a mistake. How could I rest when I still had all of these questions and fears bouncing around in my head?

I wasn't ready to ask that one yet, so I jumped on another. "The queen said she was surprised that you hadn't compelled me back to the palace."

Luken grunted as he stepped into the ferns. "We should find a place that isn't quite so exposed. We don't know if Draven has come through, and I'd hate for him to find us sleeping."

He held back the fern for me to follow him. I was tempted to be stubborn, but he was right. The best thing we could do was hide ourselves. We left the path and wandered a few meters away until we found a nice pile of bramble that would afford us a little protection. There was a hollow scooped out from beneath it, and we wiggled our way in. The bramble was deep enough that when we got to the back of it, we were surrounded on all sides with thorns, so thick I couldn't see any of the forest. It was dark in here and cool enough that Luken's body was warm.

"We need to talk," I said softly. It felt important to be quiet now that we were hiding.

Luken sighed. "I suppose we do."

"Can you compel me?"

He shifted toward me so both our faces were bathed in the light from his amber eyes.

"I haven't ever compelled you. And I will never do it."

"But you can," I whispered.

He flinched but nodded.

Despite the warmth of his body, goosebumps rose on my arms. He could make me do whatever he wanted. It would be easy for him. After what I witnessed, I knew it would be. And if he could do it, then what was stopping him? If he was really so

obsessed with keeping me alive...

“Why don’t you just compel me to return to the castle with you?”

Luken sighed but didn’t answer.

“You can’t do that,” I complained, frustration making my voice rise. I grabbed hold of his tunic as though I could shake the answers from him. “I just learned that you can compel me to do anything you want and now you’re refusing to talk to me about it? Don’t you understand how terrifying it is, knowing that someone else can just take something so important? Why don’t you do it? Answer me.”

Again, he didn’t answer. Instead, he asked, “You thought I slept with Donelle.”

My cheeks went hot. “That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“But it’s related. You don’t trust me.”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, trying to work up a good lie that would put an end to this line of questioning. It wasn’t any of his business what I felt or what I thought or... or was it? “If I answer you, will you answer me?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Yes. Yes, I thought you were sleeping with her. I came to her room and I saw her riding someone with dark hair. I couldn’t see his face, but she was all over you before I was dragged out of there and... and she’s so beautiful,” I muttered, hating how petulant I sounded.

“You were jealous,” he murmured.

“No.” The lie was obvious.

The corners of his mouth twitched. “You were jealous.”

“I was angry,” I said, not wanting to admit just how tied up my feelings were.

“Why?”

I snorted and rolled my eyes to stare past his head. “Because of everything! Because you didn’t tell me why we were there, you didn’t warn me about what to expect, because there were people fucking on every surface in that palace, and it made me feel like an unwilling participant. Because you forced me to marry you. You didn’t ask, you didn’t give me time to adjust, you just commanded, and I had no choice.”

“I had to marry you quickly, to protect you,” he answered. “I’ve never been... exclusive with my blood donors and I didn’t want any of the others to get the wrong idea. I had to make sure everyone in the world knew I would burn them to the ground if they tried to touch you.”

“You didn’t tell me that.” I resisted the urge to move away from him. The thorns at my back proved it wouldn’t be a good idea. “And now we’re married, and I think those vows are sacred. So I’m not running off fucking other people, but if you slept with her, it means that our vows mean nothing to you.”

Luken touched my cheek, and I slapped him away, scratching my hand on the brambles for my efforts.

“Elara, I didn’t betray you. Those vows mean something to me, too. I’m not my father,” Luken said. His voice was low, gravelly with... anger? Was he angry with me?



I searched his face but couldn't tell if it was anger or something else.

"It wasn't me you saw. I didn't sleep with her. You're the only one I want." He reached for me, pulling me tight against him. "If there was room in this place for you to top me, I'd say let's fucking do it. You are the only one I want to fuck. The only one I want to kiss and hold."

"Even though I'm only—" I cut myself off, unwilling to admit the insecurities that had reared their ugly heads. I started to pull away, but he let me, so I stopped. It felt too nice to have his arms around me.

Luken rubbed his nose along my jaw. "Only what? Divinely sexy? Strong and stubborn? Quick? Even though you know exactly what you want, and you let me know it?"

I shivered as his breath wafted over my neck. "Only one person?" I offered, lifting my chin to give him better access.

"I've never been one for group sex."

I pushed slightly, wanting to see his face. "So you have had orgies?"

Luken's jaw tightened in the way I was coming to realize it meant he didn't want to talk about it. "Yes. Three hundred and fifty years is a long time. I've done many things, Elara. But all of that is in the past. Holding you like this is better than any wild sex parties I've attended."

"Just how many wild sex parties have you attended?" I shuddered. "And was she part of any of them?"

Luken growled. "What does it matter what happened before we met? If I slept with

Donelle, do you really think I would want to? Open the bond, and I'll show you how I feel."

The implications of his words made me go cold. I pulled away as best as I could, staring into his eyes. They were bright, searching my face, anger, and defiance and pleading all at once in his expression. He was right. I'd seen the way he reacted to the elves, and specifically Donelle. He didn't want her to touch him. He'd tolerated it because of the situation we were in.

Shame welled in me.

For one thing, his past was in the past. If I'd been that old, I doubted I would still be a virgin, either. I'd have probably joined in a few of the orgies they had at the assassin's coven, too, if I wasn't holding onto my virginity like it was some precious treasure. If I hadn't been a virgin in his bed—if I'd slept with a hundred, a thousand, others—it wouldn't have changed the way Luken felt for me. Why should his past partners be something that I worried myself over?

But most of all... I'd been angry at him. Blaming him for Donelle's attention. She was the one who held all the power in the Silver Forest, and yet I'd thought the worst of him.

I started shaking as the cold went through me. "If anything happened, it would be my fault."

Luken pulled me close again. He touched my chin, his thumb running along my lower lip. "Nothing happened."

"But it could have. We were only there because of me, and if she'd demanded—"

"Shhh." He pressed his fingers over my lips. "We can't drown ourselves in 'ifs.' We

need to rest, regain our strength, and face what comes next. Dwelling on what might have happened will only freeze us.”

I pressed my face into shoulder, continuing to shake. What made it worse was that I knew this wasn’t going to change anything. Not really. I savored his warmth and the feeling of him close to me right now. I believed him about Donelle and wanting nobody but me. But as soon as tomorrow came—or whatever counted as tomorrow—I’d be back to being as prickly as the brambles around us.

I was many things, but honest wasn’t one of them.

Luken adjusted his hold on me, laying his arm beneath my head, changing our positions slightly so I’d be more comfortable. He was so tender about it all that I found myself relaxing, despite the guilt that still ate me up inside.

“I’m going to hate you again when I wake up,” I warned him as my eyes started to close.

Luken chuckled. “I know. But maybe you’ll hate me a little bit less. Maybe you’ll trust me a little more. Sleep, Elara. I’m here. Everything is going to be okay.”

Oh, I wanted to believe him. So much that right now, in the moments before I fell into slumber, I let myself do just that. I still hated him—didn’t I—but maybe I wouldn’t hate him forever.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

Flames licked at my skin, and the dead eyes of my family stared at me. Darcie was being dragged away by a figure that was all too familiar. She screamed as she reached for me. The vampire king laughed as he threw her to the ground and drew a knife. He lifted it above his head and brought it down—

I woke up screaming.

“Elara?” Luken had to hold me still as I thrashed. “It’s just a nightmare. It’s just a nightmare. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

Sweat clung to my clothes, soaking me through. Its chill made me shudder as I pressed my face into Luken’s shoulder. I didn’t want to look at him, not when the revulsion that rippled through me would be plainly visible. It wasn’t real. None of it. I didn’t see my family dead. Darcie was safe in the forest; the mercenaries never touched her.

And Luken hadn’t been there.

“It’s okay,” Luken murmured again. “It was just a nightmare.”

Not just a nightmare. It was the nightmare. The one that I’d had nearly every night while in the nunnery. The one that kept creeping back to me at the most random times. I thought with the events of the past few months, it would be replaced by another nightmare. I hadn’t had it in over a year. But it was back. Why now? Why, when I had no choice but to trust Luken, did I have to have the nightmare that left me not knowing if I could even trust myself?

“I need air,” I choked and army-crawled my way from the brambles. My stomach rolled and for a moment, I was certain I was going to hurl.

Luken followed me out. He brought the bag of food I’d collected with him and divvied up enough rations for both of us. I chewed the jerky without looking at him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“No.”

Luken took his sword and started to step through the ferns, but paused and looked back. “I’m going to find a sapling that I can carve protective talismans on. I’ll be back shortly.”

I opened my mouth, then clicked my teeth shut and nodded. At least he was telling me.

Once he was gone, I pressed the heels of my palms to my eyes. I didn’t cry. I didn’t let myself. Instead, I breathed, emptied my mind, and focused on the here and now. My stomach settled. The clear, fresh air of the Silver Forest relaxed my tight muscles. It wasn’t real. Luken wasn’t the enemy who had murdered my family.

I didn’t have to fear him anymore.

By the time Luken returned, I’d gotten myself regulated again and helped prepare the sapling. Luken carved two flat disks out of it, etching them with protective runes. There was a troubled furrow to his brow as he worked. Twice, I opened my mouth to ask what it was, only to close it again. I didn’t know how he’d react; I was still too fragile to turn this into another fight.

When the talismans were done, he strung them with a little bit of vine he’d found and

handed one to me. I slipped it over my neck. “So what will these protect us from?”

“Everything, hopefully,” Luken answered dryly.

“And here I thought you were the most powerful man on the planet,” I replied just as dry.

Luken smirked at me. “I am. But even a lion can be taken down by meerkats if they have enough numbers.”

I gasped in mock horror. “We’re going to have to fight meerkats? But they’re so cute!”

Luken laughed as he helped me to my feet. He kept his hand in mine as we returned to the cave. And I let him. If we were going to get through this, we’d have to stick together. The nightmare still crawled under my skin, but that’s all it was. A nightmare. He’d braided his hair sometime while I slept, and—I touched my head—apparently, he’d braided mine, too. He must have been very gentle to do that without waking me up.

“Ready?” Luken asked me as we came back to the dark slash.

“Ready.”

Luken eased into the cave first, and I followed cautiously afterward. Inside was dim and damp. The sound of water dripped from somewhere in the depths of the cave. Luken pulled a flashlight from his pocket and switched it on. The beam of light seemed thin in the deep, dark of the cave. It lit on smooth walls and what appeared to be a furry floor.

“I don’t like this place,” I murmured, my voice echoing off the walls.

Luken tugged me a little closer and released my hand. “Swords out, I think.”

I drew my sword and held it loosely in my hand. My grip was firm enough to keep hold of the blade if we were suddenly attacked, but not tight enough to cramp up my hand. I stuck close to Luken as we moved cautiously forward. A minute turned to half an hour, and my nerves started to jangle like a badly-tuned guitar.

“Where are the challenges Donelle mentioned?” I hissed under my breath.

The words had barely passed my lips when a shrill noise filled the cave. I gasped, reaching to cover my ears. Movement caught my eye, and I whirled, raising my sword. Something flung itself at me, and I swiped at it. The blade bit into something solid and wet that slumped backward with another shrill cry. I felt something wrap around my ankle and I jumped back, stabbing downward. I cut through a thick vine that quickly retreated.

Dozens of creatures came at us from all angles. Bolts of light shot at us, only to be turned aside by glittering shields that appeared from the talismans. The physical attacks weren’t so easily dissuaded. There were so many of them, and they moved so quickly that I couldn’t see any of them clearly in the dark. I spun, stabbed, and sliced. Vines kept creeping up through invisible cracks on the floor to grab at my feet.

Luken let out a strangled shout. I cut off the grotesque head of one of the creatures and turned just enough to see. The creature on his back was mottled grey, illuminated by the flashlight on the cave floor. Bony arms wrapped around Luken’s neck. He yanked at the thing, but it held him too tightly. I spun closer and stabbed through it, careful not to hit Luken. It let out another of those shrill cries and fell away.

“Enough!” Luken roared. He grabbed me around the waist, pulling me tight against him, and then spun us both, one of his hands outstretched. A burst of flames arched from his palm, illuminating the cave. The heat made sweat break out over my skin,

and I gasped. The creatures screamed and fled. The vines crumpled to ash.

When Luken pulled back the flames, silence echoed around us. I panted, clinging to him as I trembled. My scars burned, and my lungs ached, feeling as though I'd been in the flames themselves.

"Are you okay?" Luken asked, his arm still tight around me.

I pulled away, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself. "I'm fine."

Luken nodded. He took a step, and his leg shook. I quickly grabbed his arm. He must have seen the worry on my face because he gave me a pained smile.

"That spell is a little difficult," he muttered.

"You didn't sleep, did you?"

Luken glanced away. My fingers tightened on his arm, and I repressed the urge to tell him we couldn't have him running around fighting whatever those were and blasting out magic while he was running on no sleep. He was strong. And we didn't have much time. It didn't stop my stomach from twisting as we continued. A few times, I heard a strange skittering noise but all Luken had to do was snap his fingers, bringing a single flame to his palm, for the noises to stop.

"What are those things that attacked us?" I asked when the silence became too much.

"I... don't know," Luken admitted, sounding frustrated. "They feel magical. I guess that Draven created a hybrid beast that attacks anyone that's not with him."

We passed by an empty suit of armor laying on the floor, next to a pile of scattered bones. Gnaw marks were visible on both.



A short time later, we came to a room. It was large, lit with a bright golden light that emitted from the ceiling. The light formed a perfect circle in the center of the room, over a slightly raised dais. The walls of the room were smooth, no sign of a door anywhere. Luken circled the light, squinting at it. I followed close after, keeping an eye out for more traps while he studied the contraption.

“It’s a revelation spell,” Luken finally said, stopping. He reached back to twist his braid up into a bun at the back of his head. “Basically, a truth spell. You step in, and it goes through a series of levels, forcing you to reveal your truths or be riddled with pain. The memories associated with your answers will be shown in the light.”

“What sort of truths?” I asked warily.

“Impossible to know until we’ve activated it.”

I nodded once, bracing myself. Luken was already in a weakened state. And if this thing was magic, we needed a magic user to have a clear head. As much as the idea of having my truths revealed made me flinch back, there was only one option here. I sheathed my sword and stepped into the light.

“Elara,” Luken snarled, reaching for me. A spark emitted from the light and snapped to his hand. He drew back, hissing.

“Subject: Elara Tideborne,” a cool, mechanical voice said. “Truth: Luken Holakas.”

Oh, no. My heart sank as I looked at Luken. His expression went blank. What was this thing going to make me reveal? For all the times I thought we needed to be just honest with each other, I wasn’t ready for that! We needed to save Darcie first, so this threat and heartache wasn’t lingering over our heads like a guillotine!

“Speak your truth,” the voice ordered.

Maybe there was a workaround? “Luken Holokas is the vampire king. And my husband,” I said nervously.

A shock went through me, making me yelp.

“Speak your truth,” the voice ordered again.

I clenched my hands. “That is the truth. He’s my husband and the vampire king.”

The shock came again, stronger this time. I flinched and resisted the urge to step out of the light. “Fine! Fine, he’s... the moment I first met him, I wanted nothing more than to be with him. He was the most handsome man I’d ever seen. I wanted to be with him, and when he asked me to go with him, I only said no because I thought my family needed me. But I regretted it.”

Luken’s expression was still blank, emotionless. What was he thinking? I wished I could ask him.

“Speak your truth.”

“I am!” I protested. Another shock, this one even stronger. It was enough to drive the air from my lungs. I fell to one knee, grunting. “I... I thought he killed my family. I hated him for it, but I wanted him even when hating him. It felt like a betrayal. Not only was I betraying my family, but my body was betraying me. It was humiliating how much I wanted him.

“But even now, when I know that he’s not the one responsible, I don’t know how to heal. I want him with every breath, and it still feels like a betrayal to give in to my desires when my sister is still in danger. And worse is knowing that even if he locked me in the palace and killed her himself, I’d still want him.”

The emotionless expression melted away, replaced by... shame. Luken turned his head quickly so I wouldn't see, but it was too late.

Truth, the voice said. This was only part of the truth. "I don't regret the times we've been together. Every memory of us being together, every time he's touched me, I cling to it. I might be broken, but at least sex brings us together. If I can't trust myself with him, at least I can trust him with my body. If I'm incapable of love, at least I'm capable of pleasure—getting as well as giving. It's the only thing that hasn't been taken from me."

Another shock made me whimper. Gods! How much more did it need? But even as I bent my head, panting against the pain, I knew exactly what it wanted. Incapable of love. That's where the lie was. I'd been lying to myself. The truth felt too much like a weakness. I groaned as I struggled against the need to say it out loud.

"I don't," I choked, then stopped. "I want—I need—I—"

The words were there, ready to burst out.

Luken grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the light. I yelped, startled by the sudden movement. He released me quickly. His expression was a mask again, harder than I'd seen it before. It was only then that I remembered that the light was supposed to show memories attached to the words. What had he seen? I hadn't seen anything in the light. What did it show him?

"You're taking too long," he grunted before I could ask.

"Wait," I gasped, but he ignored me, stepping into the light.

I whipped around. The movement made me so dizzy I could only slump to the ground further. The coolness of the stone felt pleasant against my cheek. I gazed at the light,

waiting for the voice to speak. Luken lifted his face upward and closed his eyes. His lips moved, but I heard nothing. An image started to shimmer above him in the light, and I braced myself.

What truth would he be forced to reveal? No doubt it was related to his plan to defeat the gods. If there was anything he needed to keep secret, it was that. Did the light have the power to project our truths to anyone else? Would the Gods see his plans to—

But it wasn't any sort of plan or scheme that appeared in the light. Instead, it was... me . A series of images appeared in rapid succession. Me smiling. Me laughing. Scowling, rolling my eyes, trying not to smile, glaring. Me naked at the hot springs, fighting. His hands caressing my cheeks as he lay over me. Me sleeping in the bed next to him at that sketchy motel. His fingers tracing my tattoos and my hands on his chest. Everything was me .

Then came our wedding night. The way we'd spun in each other's arms. And later, he knocked on the door to my room. I heard the whisper of words emitting from the light.

"Elara?" he said. "Elara, please come talk to me."

He waited and knocked again.

"At least answer me. I need to know you're alright."

My heart hammered.

"I'm not here to fuck. I'm here to talk. Elara, please. I know you're angry with me, and you've got every right to be. But if you'll just let me explain..." he waited, then opened the door. "Elara—"

He stepped into the empty room and stopped. It was instantly clear I wasn't there. He reached out, gripping the doorframe. And even though I couldn't see his face, couldn't hear his thoughts, I knew exactly how betrayed he felt. I was running away from him. All his worst fears were realized; I thought he was a monster and wanted nothing to do with him.

The light died. Luken groaned as he slumped to his hands and knees. He rested his forehead on the ground and panted lightly. I remained where I was, frozen.

He thought I saw him as a monster.

He loved me. I was his world, and he thought I was repulsed by him.

"Luken," I breathed, crawling forward.

"I'm fine," he grunted, still in his prone state. "Just... tired."

"What happens now? I don't see any doors or portals," I said, reaching out.

I put my hand on his arm, and he flinched back from me. He cleared his throat. "The revelation spell will have changed. The portal will appear here, I'm sure, once it draws enough energy from the cave. There will be a safe place nearby to wait it out, where Draven would have protected himself and his men from being sucked dry of their magic."

"Okay." I scrambled to my feet and searched the area. Finally, I found a small depression on the far side of the room. A button gave way beneath my thumb when I pressed it, and a door popped open.

Luken was still weak, so I looped his arm around my shoulders and helped him to stand. He leaned on me heavily as we made our way into the second room. I closed

the door after us. There was a light switch, which I happily turned on.

The room was large enough to hold a dozen people, with chairs that lined the walls. A cupboard stood next to the door with several bottles of water stacked in it. I pulled out the food I'd brought from Donelle's palace and offered some to Luken. He chewed a piece of fruit, but I knew it wasn't going to be enough.

"You should drink my blood," I told him as I helped him to one of the chairs.

He shook his head.

I winced. "You need to be stronger."

"No." His voice was flat, hard.

I leaned back on my heels. He wasn't going to drink from me. Even if he needed my blood, he wasn't going to do it. "What did you see when I was in the light?"

"Enough."

"What did you see?" I repeated, grabbing his arm.

His amber eyes flicked up to my face. His expression was so closed off that it took my breath away. Whatever he'd seen, he wasn't about to share. He'd been reaching out to me again and again, and I was too stubborn to answer him. I'd hurt him more than I realized.

"Luken, that light... it wasn't the full truth," I said, gripping his arm tightly.

He laughed. "Really? You're the one with the knowledge of magic now? I guess my training is nothing, since you know so much better."

I flinched at his mocking tone, but my anger flared up quickly afterward. “It wasn’t the full truth because I wasn’t telling the full truth. Why else do you think it kept hurting me?”

Luken frowned and didn’t answer.

I reached to cup his face with my hands, and he jerked away. “Don’t touch me, Elara.”

“You need to drink,” I mumbled, unsettled with this change.

“Not from you.”

“Why not?” I exploded. “You need blood, and we both know that drinking from me makes you stronger. So why not take it?”

Luken grasped my shoulders and pushed me back, creating more distance between us. “There’s a reason I told you I wasn’t going to take anything more from you until you begged. I already broke that vow once. I won’t do it again.”

Vow?

It wasn’t a vow, was it? Understanding flooded me. I’d thought he was just cocky. But now, as I stared into his eyes, I understood why he had said it. Why did he ask if I regretted our times together.

“You want to make sure I want it,” I whispered.

“And I know you don’t,” Luken growled, looking away again. “So I won’t drink from you. I won’t put you through that, Elara. I will never touch you again.”

That's not fair!

I bit back on the protest. Not fair to who? Not fair to me, when I wouldn't even tell him I wanted sex? Or was it not fair to him, whose past struggles and trauma ran far deeper than I realized? How would I feel if the person I loved more than anything else in the world treated me like a monster? It wasn't fair to him to put him through that.

"Honesty isn't my best strong suit," I blurted. "I'm an excellent liar. Even to myself. I didn't use to be. But I'm not who I used to be. I'm not even sure who I am anymore."

Frustration and confusion warred in his gaze.

"Please touch me," I whispered. "There are only two things I want. For Darcie and Thessa to be safe and for you to know I want you, more than I have words to express."

"You're only saying that to convince me to drink from you, because you think it's necessary to save them," Luken answered roughly.

I lifted my hand and hesitated. "Can I touch you at least?"

His eyebrows pinched together, but he nodded.

Carefully, I lowered my hand to his chest. He felt cool again, the normal cold temperature. Was it because of how long it had been since he last drank? I watched the fabric pull against the friction as I traced my fingers over his chest, enjoying the



feeling of his sculpted muscles.

“I’m afraid of how much I want you,” I murmured. Honesty, right? “It’s not the sex and the pleasure. At least, not just the pleasure,” I corrected, my thumb tracing the outline of his nipple beneath his shirt. “When you’re holding me, when you’re inside of me, I feel... I feel...” I hesitated, the truth so vulnerable. It might break me if I told him and he didn’t believe me. “I feel connected. I’ve been lost for so long, Luken. Saving Darcie was my only purpose, but I never saw a future. It was always just saving Darcie and then ghosting my way through life until I die. But with you, I see possibilities . And I’m so scared of embracing those possibilities, because if I lose them, I won’t ever recover.”

Luken let out a shaky breath.

“I’m so scared, Luken,” I whispered as tears slid down my cheeks. “I’m scared I’m too broken. That I will only ever push you away and that I’m not strong enough to...”

“You asked me what I saw in the light. I saw... I saw myself killing your sister. I saw myself throwing you into a fire and murdering your family one after another. In between, I saw me over you, fucking you. And fire. So much fire.”

No wonder he reacted like that! From his view, it must look like I was putting them both at the same level. Our times fucking were just as traumatic as if he had killed my family. I went cold at the realization. Fresh tears spilled down my cheeks. When was the last time I cried this much?

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

Luken started to shift away from me.

“Don’t pull away,” I begged. “It’s a nightmare. It’s not real, Luken. I don’t blame you

for their deaths. I don't... I don't want you to think I was wrong for us to be together. I felt like there was something wrong with me, that I craved your touch so much, even when I thought you murdered my family. It's not because I don't want you to fuck me... to make love to me."

His eyes moved back to my face, but I still saw the doubt in them.

"Sex is the one thing I can count on. The one connection I know will let me feel whole, even if it's only for a little while." I slumped forward, resting my cheek against his shoulder. "If we can't save Darcie and Thessa, it's the one thing that will bring me back to you. I know this has to be confusing for you. It's confusing for me, and I'm the one in my own head."

Luken pulled me into his arms. The relief of him touching me was enough for me to choke on a sob. I pressed myself to him, not caring about sex right now, just needing to feel him.

"If we opened the bond—" he started.

"I'm not strong enough."

Luken pressed his face into my hair. "I think you'd be able to use magic if we did. It would make understanding each other so much easier."

I shook my head. "It must seem ridiculous to you, but I can't. It's... it's too much. I can't hold it."

"You can. You are strong enough."

"I'm not," I insisted.

Luken sighed as he tucked his finger under my chin and lifted my face to his. “But I’m meant to believe sex is something you want?”

“More than my next breath,” I told him fervently.

“Fuck,” Luken breathed, catching me closer. “Why can’t I resist you?”

“Don’t resist,” I begged him. “Hold me, fuck me, make love to me. Want me, Luken. Please, want me.”

Our mouths crashed together. Luken’s hands were rough as he explored my body, as though a desperate man searching for the one thing to keep him sane. The pain left over from the light made my muscles ache, but in a way that only highlighted the delicious feeling of his touch.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered. Then he laughed as he bent into my neck. “You can be on top this time.”

I straddled him, ignoring the order about clothes. I wanted to be close. As I ground myself against him, I remembered how drained he’d been after the last challenge. With him kissing my neck and working his hands under my shirt, it was hard to remember. But... but I wanted it to be good for him, too.

“Wait,” I whispered.

He stilled.

“Do you want this? Are you ready for it?” I pulled away and cupped his face in my hands.

“How can you feel this—” he thrust up against me, letting his erection grind into my

core. “And wonder that?”

“Because I want to be certain,” I answered, slightly breathless with desire.

Luken stroked his thumb over my cheekbone.

“And because you were exhausted,” I admitted. “And I don’t want to push your physical limit.”

He nuzzled into my neck again. “I should drink first.”

“Do it,” I said.

His fangs scraped against my throat. “Take off your clothes first.”

I was more than happy to obey. I quickly disrobed, taking everything off. I moved back to straddle Luken, my husband. Mine—but he grasped my hips and stopped me. His gaze traveled over me slowly, as though savoring every inch of my skin exposed to him. He took hold of my left hand and moved it; I realized I’d been hiding part of my scars.

“This time is going to be different,” he promised me. “We’ve only ever fucked in the past. This time, I want to make love to you.”

He started off with gentle touches. His hands moved over my shoulders, down my arms. They skimmed the flare of my hip and brushed the undersides of my breast. He pulled me closer, one hand supporting my waist and the other touching my lips. It was feather-light, so tender that it made me gasp.

His eyes darkened with lust, but he didn’t rush things. It was as though it was the first time he’d ever seen a woman, the reverence in his face, the gentleness with which he

touched me. When he put his face back to my neck, he breathed in my scent deeply and kissed my pulse. I let my head fall back, my hands resting on his shoulder. Part of me wanted to beg him to take me, but I was enjoying this soft touch too much. It was almost as pleasant, having him run his nose over my collarbone, as it was to have his fingers on my clit.

When he bit into me, his cock sprang to life. It strained against his pants. A shudder of pleasure moved through me as I rocked myself over him, seeking out the friction of our bodies moving together. I wished he'd taken off his clothes before starting to drink. He made greedy sucking noises as my skin tightened all over my body. One arm stayed around my waist while the other dropped between my legs. I arched myself, giving him more access.

He plunged two fingers into me and curled them upward, igniting all my nerve endings. I gasped and moaned, clutching at him and tearing at his clothes in rapid succession. It was too much and not enough all at once. Somewhere in my pleasure-fevered mind, I knew how much he was holding back. How he was focused on my pleasure, rather than taking his needs. Even his drinking from me was controlled.

I managed to get his shirt off as his thumb ran circles over my clit. My thighs were already shaking. I reached for his belt, and he thrust his fingers deeper into me with one final pull. All my muscles were released, and I cried out, slumping against his chest.

Luken withdrew his fingers from me and kissed the spot he'd been drinking. His touch was gentle again. Light and like butterflies tracing over my skin.

“More,” I begged. “I want you inside of me.”

I tugged at his belt, still half-blind from the orgasm he'd already given me. Luken laughed as he lifted our bodies together. Somehow, he managed to get the rest of his

clothes off. Then he settled back down and smiled up at me. Waiting. His cock was hard, already leaking with his desire.

I angled myself over him and lowered down, groaning as he filled me. It felt so good! I may not have been as experienced as he was, but I was going to make this good. I settled over him, our bodies connected like pieces of a puzzle. Luken kissed my collar; otherwise, it was not moving. He was letting me have control this time. Letting me explore this connection between us.

Tentatively, I moved up, feeling him slide partly out of me. I thrust myself back down and was rewarded by Luken tightening his hold on me. He grunted, his expression intense as he stared into my eyes. I did it again, enjoying the way his jaw went slack. Again and again, I rode him. My thighs started to burn, and I dropped, grinding in a way that set my clit on fire.

“I love the way you’re looking at me right now,” I told him.

He kissed the top of my breast as we moved together. He was starting to thrust upward, matching my rhythm. “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold back.”

I caught his face and kissed him, thrusting my tongue into his mouth. He tasted of my blood and pleasure. I whimpered as the tightness built in my belly.

“Don’t hold back,” I whispered into him. “Fuck me now. Fuck me as though our lives depend on it.”

And he did. He grabbed my hips, stilling my motion, and took over. His hips rammed upward, thrusting into me with such force that I bounced. I grabbed his shoulders to keep myself steady, screaming as the orgasm hit me suddenly. There was a violence to his motions that thrilled me, him taking from me as much as he was giving. He pulled me tighter, his arms like steel.

“You will never leave me again,” he snarled as he kissed and bit my shoulders. “You belong to me, Elara Tideborne.”

“Yes,” I panted, hardly able to speak. He reached between us, circling my clit, and sent me into orgasm again. I arched my back and screamed, my fingernails digging into him. “Luken! Oh, Luken! I’m yours. Forever, I’m yours. Don’t let me go. Never let me go. Please!”

“Mine,” he growled, biting me again.

He drank deeply, greedily, sending my orgasm skyrocketing again before I came down from the first one. I’d never felt anything so intense. I was helpless before the pleasure, and I never wanted it to end. Luken was inside of me. He was pushing my body further than I thought was possible. He was claiming me, and I loved it.

We were like that for hours. We alternated between so tender it made me cry to wild, bordering on utterly animal. Through it all, Luken kept me on top of him. Sometimes, he was in control. Sometimes, I was. I learned more about my own body in those hours than all the training the assassin’s coven had put me through. It exhausted me, thrilled me, took me over the edge over and over again.

By the time I reluctantly told him I had to stop, my body ached with a delicious pleasure. Every inch of me was sore, and I revealed in the pain.

Luken washed us both with the store of water, then helped me dress. I sighed in disappointment as he covered himself, but smiled when he pulled me back into his arms. I rested my head on his shoulder as we lay together, cuddling.

“Will I have as much stamina as you when I’m fully vampire?” I asked. For once, the idea didn’t fill me with dread.

Luken chuckled into my rumpled hair. “That’s a dangerous idea, isn’t it? We might never stop. Who will run the kingdom if we’re always... busy?”

“Marissa can,” I said flippantly.

I buried my face in Luken’s shirt. The warmth that spread through me was more than just the physical relaxation of sex. It was more than a pleasure. I couldn’t lie to myself anymore. I didn’t hate Luken Holakas. I never had. I loved him.

And I always would.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him. “I know it can’t be easy for you, with... me. I’m not what you wanted your mate to be, am I?”

Luken ran his fingers down his spine. “That’s where you’re wrong. It’s the circumstances I wish were different. You are exactly what I wanted. I wish I had protected you better. I wish that I could have spared you all the pain you’ve been through. And I hate that I’m the reason for your pain.”

I pushed myself to my elbow. “Are you really?”

“If you weren’t my mate—”

“Shhh.” I put my finger on his lips. “Were you the one who killed my family? Were you the one who sent Darcie to the temples? Were you the one who thought up the Blood Trials? No. It’s the gods. Everything... even what Draven has done, it’s not because of you, Luken. It’s because of them.”

Luken sighed heavily. “When you say it like that, it makes sense.”

I grinned. “I can be pretty smart, you know.”



Laughing, he kissed my swollen lips. His smile died quickly. “There’s something else you should know before we continue.”

I rested my chin on his chest. “Mmm, you’re serious. What’s this about what?” I teased.

Luken pressed his lips together. “I have no real way to prove it. But I think you might be pregnant.”

“What?” I bolted upright, heart pounding. “What? No! I’m not ready to be pregnant. Gods—” Ice washed through me. I’d been feeling sick more often. I thought it was just stress. But if I was pregnant... “Oh, Gods! That means I’ll be a mother. I’m going to fuck it up. I shouldn’t be a mother. You can’t trust me to take care of a kid!”

Luken pushed himself into a sitting position and took my hands in his. “Elara, breathe. I don’t know for sure.”

“What makes you think I’m pregnant?” I demanded.

“The way the revelation spell was acting, for one. It reacts to living organisms, but is designed to ignore the functions of the normal microbes that exist in a body. But the way it changed color when you were in it indicated there was something else in with you. Your scent has changed, too. Subtly, but it’s still changed. I don’t know any spells that can confirm it.”

I trembled, both my hands pressed to my stomach. I wanted kids eventually, but not when we were about to come up against the gods! Not when we still had a life-and-death mission to complete. A pregnancy only complicated things. What was I supposed to do? Run back to the palace to protect something I didn’t know for certain existed, give up on Thessa and Darcie?

No. That wasn't an option.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to drop my hands and looked back at Luken. "I'm not abandoning the mission. Pregnancy or not, I can't turn back."

Luken nodded, looking troubled and defeated. "I know. But I thought you deserved to have all the information. The good news is that vampires are hardy. The baby you may or may not be carrying is a vampire, which means they're strong. It's nearly impossible to terminate a vampire pregnancy. So you don't have to worry about fighting."

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

"We never talked about children," I murmured, biting my lip. "Do you even want to be a father?"

"I..." He shook his head, as though trying to shake out his thoughts. "I haven't put much thought into it. I assumed I would be someday. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'll worry about that when we get home with Darcie and Thessa."

"But do you want me to be pregnant?"

He cupped my cheek and ran his hand over my lip. "I want to give you everything, Elara. If that includes children, then I want that. But I understand if it's too early. If we're too shaky, you and I. I'm a patient man. I can wait." He smiled and leaned forward to kiss me. "After all, I waited over three hundred years for you. I can wait again."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

We both rested as we waited for the portal to open, wrapped in each other's arms. Luken was still sleeping when I woke. I gazed at him, feeling hopeful for us in a way I hadn't before. I still hadn't told him I loved him—I was worried it would sound too much like a lie—but we'd come together in ways I hadn't known possible. After our frenzied lovemaking, I told him about every sexual fantasy I'd have. The boring ones, the ones that I was slightly ashamed of. He had grinned at them all, promising me that we'd do each and every one.

A strange crackling noise pulled me away from Luken. I opened the door to the main chamber to find the portal was open, rippling in shades of purple and pink. I hurried back to Luken and woke him, then yanked on my clothes.

"Looks like we were a little enthusiastic," Luken noted as he pulled on his own clothes. The top buttons of his tunic were missing, and my shirt had somehow managed to get torn into a crop top.

"When we get to the palace, we'll have to get some second-hand clothes that exist only to tear off each other," I told him, leaning over to kiss him.

Luken laughed. "Why do they have to be second-hand?"

"Because we shouldn't waste brand-new clothes, obviously."

He laughed again and kissed me. Heat flared through my body, and I tugged him closer, winding my hands into his hair. It was silky and soft, despite our time on the road. Thoughts of pregnancy tried to intrude, but I shut them down quickly. No need to worry about that yet.

We prepped ourselves quickly. As I braided Luken's hair for him, other thoughts crowded my mind. We were about to go to the temples, the gods' stronghold. They wanted us both dead. So it wouldn't be as easy as jumping in, grabbing Thessa and Darcie, and getting out. I wasn't going to abandon them, but now that we were so close, I began to wonder what price we would have to pay.

I could be killed. I was fine with that if it meant Thessa and Darcie were free. But it would hurt Luken. And what if he was killed? The thought made my blood run cold. I wasn't sure how I'd live without him.

Don't start thinking about that. We're not going to lose. The gods feared Luken finding his mate for a reason. And he has me now. We're going to end this.

"Are you ready?" Luken said as he belted his sword on.

I nodded. Our gazes lingered on one another for a long moment before we stepped back to the main chamber. Luken's expression grew into that familiar, hard, calculating look as he stepped to the edge.

"We have to enter it together. Give me your hand," he said, reaching for me.

Before I could respond, I was yanked forward. It was like an ocean current, erupting from the portal. It slammed into me, wrapped around me, and dragged me forward. Luken shouted and jumped for me, but I was swept into the portal. A myriad of colors and sounds flashed around me, as though I was tumbling through a thousand memories.

Then, abruptly, it was over. I was flat on my back on a cold, hard surface as I stared upward, gasping for breath. A vaulted ceiling made of marble stretched over me. Brightly painted images showed scenes of gods, monsters, and... girls. Thousands of girls being led through a dark path, emerging to a bright light where a bright light

shone. The images looked vaguely familiar. Where had I seen them before?

“It is a rough way to travel when you’re not expecting it,” a cool, familiar male voice said somewhere behind me.

I rolled over and instantly, nearly vomited. My vision spun around me, and I groaned, feeling weak. When strong arms wrapped around me, I couldn’t fight them. I growled a warning, but it turned into a sick whimper. The man hauled me to a chair. Before I could get my senses under control, he’d chained my legs and arms in place.

“Draven,” I gasped.

He knelt beside the chair, his gaze intense on my face. “I really would prefer you call me Greyson. The bitch who named me has no right to decide my identity.”

I yanked my hands, the nausea finally passing. We were in a large marble room, with expensive, elaborate tapestries showing the various gods hanging on the walls. The temples. I’d made it—but where was Luken? My throat went dry. Draven knew we were coming. He’d snatched me through the portal. How did he know? Did Donelle betray us, warn him we were coming?

“Don’t fight,” Draven said, reaching to put a hand on my arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I spat.

He withdrew, frustration dancing in his eyes. “I’m not the one you should be angry at.”

“You killed my family! You dragged Thessa back here when all she wanted was to live her life. You’re the reason for every terrible thing that happened to me,” I spat back, glaring at him. “You’re the reason Kael and Ysara are dead. So, who should I

be angry at?"

"None of it would have happened if Luken had bowed to the gods, as he ought to have." Draven stood and began circling me. Considering the last time we'd met, he hadn't hesitated to try to kill me, I couldn't figure out his game plan here.

Or maybe I could. The bond. He grabbed me and not Luken for a reason. What was he planning?

"They thought he was going to take you back to the palace. They thought he'd lock you up to protect himself," Draven said as he circled me.

"Who are they? The gods?" I demanded.

He ignored me. "I knew differently, though. Locking you up would mean that he cared about what happened to you. Once mated, you can die, and he'd still have the powers you gave him. He doesn't need you anymore. The only weakness he gets from you now is that he can feel your pain."

I was still straining against my restraints and forced myself to relax. I curved my spine backward, giving myself a defeated slump. I needed to save my strength. Draven stopped in front of me and stared down at me with a hungry expression that made me shudder. In the Blood Trials, he'd tried to seduce me several times. He had made no threats the last time we met, but the look in his eyes... I shuddered again.

"I kept a close watch on the temples and all the entrances to it," Draven continued. "I knew you'd convince him to try to save Thessa and Darcie. And he'd agree, knowing it was the perfect timing to attack the gods. The veils between the gods and us are thin in these spots. If he seals them..." At this, Draven shuddered, stepping back from me. "But you're only a pawn in his game. You don't understand, Elara. Which means you are innocent. The gods have agreed to spare you. I want you to know, I fought for

you. I told them of the sacrifices you've already made. The pain he's put you through. You can see that, right? It's his fault. None of this would have happened if he wasn't so arrogant."

Was he being serious? I tried to shove aside my emotions to study him, but that hunger in his eyes only grew worse. He reached for me again, and I tried to yank away. He gripped my face tightly in his hands.

"Tell me you understand. I'm not going to hurt you because I want to, Elara. I don't. But it's necessary."

"What are you going to do?" I tried to snarl out the words, but my lungs wouldn't fully expand. "Where's Thessa? Where's Darcie?"

Draven's hands tightened on my face. "They are with the other tributes, waiting for their glory."

They were still alive. Good.

"As for you, there's only one way this ends." He dropped his hands, and a hard look came across his face. "I'm going to torture you. I will make my brother watch it, feel it, until he relinquishes his claim on the throne. He's trained himself not to feel the torture, but you? You'll feel every moment, and through you, he'll feel it too."

I clenched my fists, the air thinning around me. Part of me wanted to ask how exactly he intended to torture me, but my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. Was it true? Was Luken immune to torture, unless I was the one being tortured? I shut the bond even tighter. I wasn't going to let him feel my pain!

"He will relinquish his throne," Draven said, nodding to himself. "He doesn't know what pain is. It won't take long. And then you will be purified. Your sacrifices will be

honored.”

He looked at me hungrily again, his eyes lingering on the visible tattoos on my stomach. Disgust crossed his face, but he smoothed it out quickly. “Those marks will be removed from your body, and your virginity will be restored. And when I’m king, you will be my queen. We will be mated before the gods and serve them together.”

I stared at him in horror.

“You were blessed by the gods, Elara. Our union will be pure. They’ve kept me waiting all these years so that it can be so. That’s why I had to bring Thessa back,” he added, almost pleading as he came toward me again. “Because she and your sister are the sacrifices necessary for you to be made pure again. So you can be mine instead of his.”

“I don’t want to be yours!”

Draven shook his head. “It’s only because he’s poisoned your mind and body. You’ll see. In time, you’ll understand. But for now...” He stepped away from me again, a mask of indifference falling over his face. “For now, it’s time to begin.”

Doors opened all around the temple. In came a dozen elven mercenaries, a handful of vampires, some orcs and others. The largest set of double doors burst open, and Luken, bound with ropes of magic, was dragged in by two hulking elves. The crowd laughed and jeered as Luken was shoved to his knees before Draven. His amber eyes flickered to me and I felt him pushing at the bond.

But I knew what was going to happen and held it shut tight.

Please understand. I can’t let you feel my pain.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

I slumped forward, gasping for breath as the pain ended. How long had I been screaming? Every inch of my body felt like it was frostbitten. My thoughts were scattered, darkness swimming in and out over my vision. Shouting surrounded me, but I didn't have the strength to lift my head. The chains that held me to the chair were the only thing that kept me from dropping all the way to the floor.

"I will kill you for this!" Luken's voice.

Luken was here.

Weakly, I lifted my head. Where was he? The pain had been so all-consuming I'd forgotten he was there. My blurred vision focused on the shape I knew was him. He was... fighting? A body hit the floor. Another man was shouting, too. I struggled to understand what he was saying.

"Don't you idiots know how to bind magic?" Draven's voice.

A flash of light blinded me. White spots drove away the darkness. I pulled myself up more, blinking rapidly. This time, when the spots cleared, my vision was clear. Luken was being driven back to the floor, several elf mercenaries pinning him in place. Draven stood over him, speaking spells and weaving magic around him. Bodies were strewn over the floor. I tried to count them, but there were too many pieces.

"You know what you have to do to stop this," Draven snarled, stepping on Luken's chest. "If you want the pain to stop, give up your throne. That's all you need to do. Is your pride really worth it?"

Luken snarled up at him, trussed up tightly with the magic. “I won’t forgive you for this, Draven. I’ve tried. I wanted to give you a chance. No more. I am going to kill you.”

“I have the gods on my side. How do you think you can defeat me?” Draven asked. I expected mocking, but he sounded angry and frustrated. “I thought that even if you won’t do it for her sake, you wouldn’t want to hold the pain. You, who have never lived through hardship!”

I closed my eyes, trying to steady my breath. This was only a respite from the torture. It wasn’t what I expected. Rather than branding irons and car batteries, Draven had been using magic. There was nothing I could do to protect myself from it. I’d tried not to scream. I really had. I didn’t want Luken to know how much it hurt.

It was useless. I couldn’t control my body when Draven was using his magic on me, and I screamed. I wasn’t even sure that I had kept the bond closed. It was as though he froze every nerve ending in my body, then lit them on fire one by one.

“Are we ready to start again?” Draven’s voice was cold as his footsteps approached me.

I whimpered, shying back as best I could. My mind whirled, but what could I promise him to make him stop? He wanted everything Luken had and I was just a tool to get it. Everything I could offer him was something he already believed he’d get eventually.

Draven brushed his fingers on my arm, and pain exploded through me.

“Stop!” Luken howled. “Stop!”

Draven withdrew and turned. He breathed heavily, excited.

Luken had been brought back to his knees. Now he slumped, his massive shoulders sagging. “I’ll give you my throne. Just let Elara, Thessa, and Darcie go.”

Let us go? My heart hammered. All three of us?

Draven growled softly. “That’s not the deal I offered. Give me your throne, and I will stop the pain. I’m not giving them up when I can take the crown. Oh, it might be a bloody civil war if you don’t abdicate, but I can still have it!”

“You can have more than the throne, then,” Luken answered. His voice was low and pained. “I’ll take on oaths. I will swear to serve you. I’ll be your slave, bound my magic to serve you. You can have forever to torment me. Just let them go.”

“No,” I whimpered. “Luken, don’t!”

Draven whirled on me with a snarl. He lifted his hand, but when I flinched back from him, he froze. He stared at me with wild eyes. Was he considering the offer? Or was he thinking that if Thessa and Darcie went free, I wouldn’t be ‘purified’ for him? I understood now why the gods had demanded his celibacy. It was to control him. He’d spent centuries like this, and now they dangled the possibility for his loneliness to be ended.

I didn’t feel sorry for him. Not when I knew he didn’t care about me. I was just a body to him. But I understood what the gods did, and the full extent of their manipulations made me sick.

“Let them go, brother,” Luken whispered. “They’re innocent lives. There’s no reason to treat them this way. I’m the one who hurt you. I’m the one who deserves punishment. Strip away my magic, humiliate me, do whatever you like. But please, please don’t hurt them for my crimes.”

He loved me. Even more than I realized. He was begging, giving up his pride. He was willing to sacrifice everything for me. Not just his crown, but his dignity, his freedom.

Draven answered angrily. When he lifted his hand this time, he let it swing forward, punching Luken hard in the mouth. The gathered crowd laughed and mocked as Draven beat on Luken. A cry tore from my lips, but Draven ignored me.

“Stop it! Stop, please,” I begged. “If you hurt him, I’ll hate you forever.”

Draven drove his fist into Luken’s stomach and whirled on me. “You beg for him?”

“I will burn for him,” I answered, snarling.

“Elara—” Luken started, but Draven punched him again.

We were going to die. Draven wasn’t going to stop until he got what he wanted, and he wasn’t going to release me. Not when I’d been promised as his property. Luken wasn’t leaving this hall alive and I would not face what Draven had planned for me. My heart ached for Darcie and Thessa. I could only pray that they would die quickly.

I couldn’t let Luken die without knowing the truth. I wrenched open the bond, letting the last traces of my self-preservation fall aside. Luken gasped as I let my feelings flood between us. I let him feel everything, every thought, every emotion. His head lifted and wonder crossed his face as he stared at me.

I love you .

Our eyes met. Oh, I wished I had let him in well before this. My flood of emotions was met with his own. I felt everything, the obsession he’d had with me since we first met, how it melted to something softer, more protective, the more he got to know me.

How the need to protect me had grown while he struggled with the fear that he'd ruined my life completely. The determination he'd had to save Darcie even before I ran away from the palace.

Tears welled in my eyes. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if I'd been just a little less stubborn. Even if he'd told me all of this before, I wouldn't have believed him.

Forgive me, I begged through the bond. Please forgive me.

A tear rolled down his cheek, dripping onto his chest. His shirt was torn, and it splattered on his skin just as my tears dropped. Our tears touched our tattoos at the same moment. Draven was shouting again, but his voice seemed to be coming from a million miles away as heat flared through me. It felt like the sun coming out after a winter of snow. Warmth radiated through me, chasing away the lingering pain from Draven's torture.

Magic swept through me. I knew what it was instantly, knew how to use it. Luken and I gasped as one. The magic reverberated between us, reaching a crescendo like the climax of a song. I reached out with this magic, sliding it through the air as easily as if I was reaching with my hands, and brushed aside the bonds around Luken. He leaped to his feet and hurled one of the elves into Draven, then relieved the second of his sword and ran him through.

The chains snapped away from me, and I sprang through the air at the nearest enemy. It was a vampire, and they dodged to catch me, but I flicked a hand out. Magic flashed, blasting the vampire's head clean off. They burst into flames, and the hall erupted into chaos. I snatched up a sword and moved methodically, three hundred and fifty years of experience supplementing my assassin's training. Though we were on opposite sides of the room, Luken and I moved in tandem, quickly cutting down the bastards that had been mocking us moments ago.

They weren't laughing anymore.

Draven was the last one alive. He shot a blast of magic toward Luken, but Luken turned the spell around. It wrapped around Draven's legs and arms, driving him to his knees. He howled as he fought. I walked to Luken's side, both of us covered in blood. Draven's eyes bulged, his fangs long as he struggled against the magic holding him.

"No! I was chosen! You can't defy the gods!" he screamed, spit flying from his mouth.

Luken's hand trembled on his sword. Through the bond, I felt all the guilt he felt. I sensed memories of a small boy following around his older brother, desperate for a scrap of affection. I sensed the resentment and anger that was not Draven's fault, but that he was forced to bear.

I reached through the bond. I'll do it. You don't have to.

Yes, I do.

Draven screamed curses at him as Luken strode forward. He lifted the sword and brought it down. Silence fell as Draven's headless body slumped to the floor.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

No time to grieve. We have to find the gods' portal and seal it . Luken's thoughts were clear as he stepped away from Draven's pooling blood.

The doors burst open. I whirled, lifting my sword. The tapestries around us flickered in and out of focus as a few dozen young girls, the oldest no more than eighteen, the youngest looking like she was twelve, came running in. They shouted and screamed, brandishing kitchen knives and rolling pins. Several of their screams turned to fear when they saw the bodies. They were all dressed in white robes.

Thessa stood at the front of them.

"Elara!" she cried, dropping her knife. She raced forward, a dark-haired girl right behind her. The girl didn't release her own knife, glaring suspiciously at Luken.

Thessa drew me into a hug. "We were locked in the kitchens. They said we were going to be all given to the gods. But then the magic locking us in melted away, and—it must be because of you." Thessa released me and drew back. She turned to the other girl. "Darcie, she came for us. Like I said, she would."

Darcie. Surprise rippled through me as I stared at the girl. I'd assumed she was younger when I first saw her, but now I realized she had to be eighteen, too. She looked so different from the fourteen-year-old sister who had been taken away from me. I lowered my sword, realizing I was still holding it. I'd thought about this so many times, but I'd never planned for what I would say.

Nothing seemed good enough. Except... "I'm so sorry."

“Oh.” Darcie cleared her throat, twitching.

“We need—” Luken started, stepping forward.

Darcie sprang at him, lifting her knife. He easily batted it away, eyes widening. She stomped on his foot, and Luken grunted, grabbing both her wrists.

“What are you doing?” I cried, rushing forward. I pulled Darcie out of Luken’s hold, keeping myself between them.

“What is that fucker doing here?” Darcie howled. “Thessa told me—”

“He’s helping,” I quickly said. I tugged my sister away from my husband, shaking my head. “We have a lot to talk about. Luken isn’t responsible for our family, Darcie. But we have to get you out of here quickly.”

Luken reached through the bond, stopping me before he spoke. “If we’re going to seal the portals and banish the gods from this world, now is our time. We won’t get another chance.”

Thessa’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“You can’t. They’re too strong,” one of the other girls whimpered.

“We’re stronger,” I said, tossing my braid over my shoulder. “Thessa, Darcie, get the girls out of here. Luken and I—”

“I know where the portal is,” Darcie interrupted.

Luken nodded as he traded his sword for a fresh one. “Take us there. Quickly. The illusions in the temple are failing. They know we’re here, and if we don’t seal the



portal, we'll all go to hell."

Our bond throbbed. If it weren't for that connection, I wouldn't be able to tell how urgent the situation really was. Luken's emotions were tied up around me, and I was afraid of what the gods would do to me to punish him.

"I'll come with you," Thessa said quickly.

Darcie turned to her. "No. You're the only one who knows where the tunnels that leave the temples are. You have to get the other girls out."

Thessa opened her mouth to argue, but Darcie wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to silence her with a kiss. I smiled. Maybe these last four years weren't too bad for Darcie after all.

"I love you," Darcie told her, then broke away. Thessa nodded and gestured for the girls to follow her as Darcie turned to me and sent another glare at Luken. "This way."

She tucked her knife into her belt and picked up a sword. It was clearly awkward, and she didn't know how to hold it. I started to say something, but Luken nudged me through the bond. If it was what Darcie needed to feel comfortable, then she should have it. If there was anyone who was going to oppose us left in the temples, they'd have come at us already.

I nodded once. The three of us took off. Luken shared his plan through the bond, but I could hardly pay attention. This was my little sister. I'd fought tooth and nail to get to her, to save her from this place. And now, when I arrived, I saw she was practically in charge of the escape attempt. I truly didn't know my sister at all... but I was so happy that I would get the chance to get to know her.

If this worked.

The magnificence of the temples flickered and went dead, leaving us in an ugly, run-down wooden building. Darcie shuddered but didn't stop. She led us through dusty hallways and finally to a large room where a portal lay on the floor. The space was authentic marble, with scenes of blood painted on every surface. The portal, set into the floor, was four times as large as Draven's in the cave.

The round, flat space flickered with shades of green, yellow, and blue. Images bubbled in it, like storm clouds reflecting off the ocean.

Luken took up a spot next to it and reached for my hand. He didn't want me here; would rather I leave and stay safe, but he knew he couldn't do it without me. I grabbed his hand and held on tightly, staring at the portal's surface. How many girls had been shoved through this thing, to who knew what waited for them on the other side?

I turned to Darcie. "You need to get out of here while you can. I don't know how violent this will go."

"I'm not leaving you."

I smiled, tears pricking my eyes. "Go to Thessa."

Darcie hesitated, then stepped toward the doorway again. "Don't get killed when we've just found each other again."

"Same for you," I laughed, even though I wanted nothing more than to whisk her away and keep her safe.

She managed a smile before she turned on her heel and raced away. I prayed she and

the other girls would make it out. Thessa had told me about priestesses—were they still here? Would they try to stop them?

Luken stared into the portal, his expression hard and determined. He'd shoved away any semblance of doubt in himself. I let my love for him sweep through the bond as I stepped up beside him.

My husband.

My mate.

My Luken.

Magic swelled between us, strong and bright and beautiful. Our hands twined together, and Luken started to chant.

I didn't know the words. Not even the bond let me understand what they meant, but I understood the intent. A crisscrossing net of blue magic started to form over the portal, starting from the edges and weaving its way into the middle. A firm casing built itself on the net, stretching out fingers like ice casing a lake, but it burned hot, a red magic that hardened into stone as it spread around the portal.

A bolt of lightning jumped from the center of the portal. Electricity crackled through the air, making my hair stand on end. It cracked a chunk of marble out of the ceiling. I yanked Luken aside in time for the stone to avoid us. Luken stumbled, his concentration broken. The net disappeared over the portal, and more lightning crackled around the edges of the seal he had already put down.

Luken snarled as he held both hands out over the portal. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling the strain in his body as he fought the gods' magic, tearing apart the seal. Sweat dripped from his face, and his fangs lengthened, his magic greedily sapped by

their power. I ground my teeth together, holding him tighter. I pushed more of my strength through to him. Our magic convulsed together, bursting forward and sealing chunks of the portal, only for the gods' magic to tear it apart.

I looked past his shoulder into the roiling portal. A howling wind had joined the lightning. In the mass, I thought I saw a face. Two green eyes made of storm and fury latched onto me. Ice flooded my veins, and Luken faltered. He saw it, too. Massive fingers reached through the portal, grasping the edge of it. My heart hammered.

Images were forced into my mind. Promises of exactly what would happen to me and Luken when they came through. What they would do to Thessa, Darcie, even Bain for helping us. Images of what they had planned for our children...

Our children. A ball of light sat inside me, the same light I'd been filled with after Luken and I made love on the beach.

We weren't alone; he and I. Love swept through me, and it was more powerful than fear. I was pregnant. I could see them already, the babies growing in front of me. And I would not let the gods get their hands on any of us. As my love swelled, Luken's did as well. The magic grew stronger, bursting through us both, unable to be contained. A terrifying roar filled the room, but we held onto each other and our future.

Inch by inch, we forced the portal shut. The hand slipped, falling back. The storm clouds disappeared, and stone rippled over the portal and cracked down the middle, forever destroying the entrance to our world.

Shaking, Luken and I slowly sank to our knees. Luken turned, pulling me up tight against him. He shook with exhaustion, his breathing in great gasps. Wonder pulsed through the bond as we held each other. It had worked. We'd sealed them away, and now the gods couldn't touch us again. No wonder they feared the prophecy so much!

Luken pressed his lips to my forehead. “Are you okay?” he asked, even though he’d be able to feel through the bond I was.

“Yeah. Are you?”

He smiled, but through the relief, I still felt an echo of sorrow.

I cupped his face with my hands. “He didn’t give you a choice.”

“I only pray that he’s at peace, wherever our souls go when we die,” Luken murmured. He pulled me closer and nuzzled his nose into my throat. “Twins.”

“Twins. Girls, if I’m right,” I murmured.

The worries that I wasn’t ready, that I was going to royally screw up, were still there. But they were distant. I wasn’t alone. Luken and I were together and we’d figure this out. We didn’t have to do it on our own, either.

Footsteps sounded. We turned to find Darcie and Thessa, both holding weapons and each other’s hands, entering the room. Both were pale but determined. Their gazes flitted around the room wildly.

Luken and I stood. I kissed him and reluctantly pulled away to approach my sister—or both of my sisters—and held my arms to them.

“It’s over. The portal is sealed. We can finally start to fix the damage the gods have done.”

Darcie trembled, then dropped her weapon. She burst into tears as she rushed to me, throwing her arms around my neck. Thessa clung to me as well. For as brave as they had been for the other girls, they were still terrified. I held them, trying to reassure

them. Luken came closer and put his hand on my shoulder, though he carefully avoided touching either of the girls. It would take time for them to come to trust him.

I might be broken, but I would heal. I met Luken's eyes, seeing all his love in those amber eyes. We both would. And we were going to make this a better world for everyone.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

The dress Marissa picked out for the press conference fit me like a glove. It was sleek, modern, and covered up the worst of my scars while still looking elegant and sexy. I enjoyed the way the emerald-green played against my olive-brown skin. It highlighted the warm reddish undertones of my black hair, too. She had offered to do my makeup in a way to minimize my facial scars, but I'd elected to leave them natural.

I still didn't like the look of them, but they were part of who I was. If I was going to accept myself for who I was, it meant accepting even the parts I didn't like.

It had been three weeks since Luken and I sealed the portal and destroyed the temples. Making our way back to Taimarah had been easier than I'd anticipated. The tribute girls were eager to do as we said, grateful to us for rescuing them. Still, it would have been a nightmare keeping them all safe and cared for if Donelle hadn't sent an escort of elf warriors to help. They got us as far as the train station, and we rode first class all the way home. Hundreds of people were at every stop along the way, and Luken made the same speech every time—the gods had fallen, and it was time for a new order.

Nobody but he and I knew he was the world's most powerful man now. He didn't plan to flaunt his power in the hope it would stop people from challenging him out of spite. There had been a couple of assassination attempts, of course, but they were dealt with quickly and quietly. We had even met with the council of Shifter Elders, and returned the girls among the tributes who were shifters.

Thessa, being a shifter and vampire, was not offered a spot among them. It wouldn't be safe. Even though she was a panther, the distrust of vampires ran deep.

I turned away from the mirror, breathing out slowly as nerves started to jangle in my stomach. It was all well and good to remember everything that had happened and the progress we had already made. But this was going to be my first official press conference as Queen of Taimarah, and I wasn't sure how it was going to go.

Luken sensed my nerves through the bond and came over to me. He was wearing a deep, navy blue suit with flowers embroidered on the lapel. Darcie and Thessa had worked together on it as thanks for his part in rescuing them. With his golden, sun-kissed skin and his long, dark hair in its customary braids, he looked like a vision from heaven.

"Everything is going to be alright," he promised me. "I'll field all the questions at the end."

"And we're not announcing the twins yet, right?" I asked anxiously.

Tests had confirmed I was carrying. Miraculously, Draven's torture hadn't harmed them in any way. It was still very early in the pregnancy, though, and I wanted time to wrap my head around my impending motherhood before the whole kingdom knew.

Luken tucked his fingers under my chin and ran his thumb over my lip. It made me shiver with pleasure, my eyes sliding half-shut.

"We won't say anything about the twins yet." He kissed me, and warmth spread through his touch.

I slid my hand into his jacket, wanting to be closer to him. If I thought my libido was high before, it was now uncontrollable. Pregnancy hormones could do that, but I had my own theory. I'd spent so much time fighting my desire for Luken, that I wanted to make up for lost time. It helped that vampires had amazing stamina. It was tempting to finish off the transformation just so that I would stop getting tired during our



marathons.

With so much changing, I couldn't quite commit to it.

Luken broke our kiss, his reluctance echoing through the bond. "This is the start of something new and wonderful. We still have a lot of work to do. The more zealous followers of the gods will still work against us."

"It's a good thing the gods are sealed away, then," I answered. I smiled at him. "We are going to make this place better. You and me."

"And the babies," Luken added, dropping a hand to my stomach.

I laughed and nodded. "And the babies."

We kissed again, and then it was time. I twined my hand with his, and we left our small, ready room. The press was already assembled, cameras aimed at us. I forced a smile on my face as I lifted my hand in a wave. Luken squeezed my hand and offered reassurance through the bond as he led me toward the podium.

He stepped up to the microphones and began with the official confirmation of everything that had happened. The gods were banished from our world, and now a new world order would begin.

"The first of these changes is this: from this day forward, the Blood Trials are abolished. No more will such violence and bloodshed be condoned." Luken stood tall and straight. I felt the relief wash through him at these words. The Trials had been a higher price for him to carry than I'd realized. "Representatives of the crown will contact the families of past contestants to negotiate compensation for their losses. Nothing can replace the death of a loved one, but it is my hope that the crown may ease the suffering caused by the Trials."

“Is it true that the oracle has been arrested?” one bold journalist demanded.

Luken paused and considered his words. “At this point, the oracle has locked themselves away in their estate and has refused to speak with the crown on this matter. Unless the oracle responds with a threat to the crown, they will be left alone. They are a victim of the gods as much as any of us.”

There was a murmured response to this. A few of the journalists looked pleased, others unhappy. Traitors throughout the kingdom were being arrested. There had been several riots already; the gods might be defeated, but it wasn’t going to be a simple matter of moving on for some. Their disappearance had left a religious power vacuum. It was going to take work to fill it.

“In the coming months, Taimarah will also be hosting a peace summit. We have sent the official invitations to our neighboring kingdoms and territories with the hope that we can undo the strife caused by the gods pulling our strings,” he continued, leaning against the podium. “But together, we can make this world better. We can have peace and unity.”

Luken turned and gestured to me. I stepped up beside him and announced my new projects; while Luken was the driving force of getting the unrest settled, I was providing a different sort of hope. I’d be overseeing projects to introduce free education at all levels in the kingdom and a renewal of the arts. I’d be working on improving public infrastructure and supporting the most vulnerable members of society.

Briefly, I wondered what my old assassin-mates thought of all this. My mentor hadn’t thought I was suited for life as an assassin. Maybe she was right. Maybe I was born to be queen.

After the conference was done and Luken and I were alone, he pulled me into his

arms. “You were amazing. Want to go to our room and get out of these clothes?”

I laughed as heat washed through me. “Oh, I do! But I promised Thessa and Darcie I’d stop by after the conference. I’ll meet you there.”

“Don’t take too long,” Luken said, brushing a kiss to my lips. He sent a promise of pleasure through the bond, making my knees go weak.

It was almost enough to tempt me away from my promise, but I had promised. I slipped out of Luken’s arms and laughed as I skipped away to find them. They were in the library—as I suspected—with books laying open on the sofa around them as they shared soft kisses, oblivious to the world around them. They looked so wrapped up in each other, I first made to sneak away. Thessa saw me.

“Elara,” she yelped, pulling away from Darcie as though she was expecting a scolding.

Darcie pulled her tighter. “Embarrassed?”

Thessa blushed and grinned. “Force of habit.”

They’d explained to me that any sort of intimacy was strictly forbidden in the temples. Even simple kisses would have had them both beaten. It was the reason why they had worked so hard to get Thessa out in the first place. Their plan was for her to come back and get Darcie out, too. Thessa being captured and forced into the Blood Trials had put an end to that plan.

“How are you two settling in?” I asked.

Thessa snuggled closer to Darcie. “It’s wonderful. Marissa took us shopping yesterday, and we got Darcie a whole new wardrobe.”

It was Darcie's turn to blush. "You spent too much."

I laughed. "I'm the wife of a rich king. That budget was nothing, believe me."

Darcie grinned as she twisted a strand of Thessa's hair around her finger. "Thanks, anyway."

I nodded. "Well, it looks like you two want your privacy..." I winked. "I'll see you later."

"See you," Thessa murmured, but Darcie was already pressing kisses to her jaw.

I quickly made my escape, laughing to myself. I understood them all too well as I headed to the bedrooms.

Luken was waiting for me.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

The apartment within the palace that Luken and I shared consisted of five rooms. His bedroom, where we both slept; my bedroom that had been converted into our personal library; a sitting room for each of us to meet with friends and dignitaries, and the bathing room. The sunk-in bath was big enough to be considered a swimming pool, with shelves of fluffy towels always waiting for us. There was also a two-person shower and two toilets in their own little stalls with magically-enabled sound and scent dampeners. The sink, with all our other needs, sat along the far wall.

Luken was in the bath and I quickly stripped down and joined him.

“We haven’t had sex in a tub yet,” I mentioned as I slipped into the water.

“Doesn’t our time at the hot springs count?” Luken asked, admiration and desire rippling through the bond.

I floated through the warm water to him. We had stopped by the hot springs—the place of our first sexual encounter—for two days on the way home. It had been even more pleasant this time than the first time. We’d both gotten a few new bruises, sparring, and fucking in turn.

“That’s a pool, not a tub,” I told him. I settled onto his lap, angling myself so I was sitting right on his cock. It was already hardening.

Luken kissed my shoulder. “Then we should rectify that, shouldn’t we. I want to give you everything, Elara. I want to make up for all the pain you’ve been through.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not. But when I think about who I was when we first met... Of course, I wanted you to choose me willingly, but I still had no doubt that you would.” Shame bubbled through the bond. “I knew you were my mate, but I didn’t see you as a person. Not until I thought you were dead. Then I wondered about all the things I didn’t know about you. Your likes, your hobbies, your favorite book... then you were back, you were alive, and I saw your determination and strength.”

“I really made you work for my affection, didn’t I?” I laughed.

Luken kissed the top of my breast. “And it was exactly what I needed, my ego being tamed. I wish I could have spared you the pain you went through. But I think if you had come with me from the start, it would have taken me longer to really see you. I think... I think I would have put you through more pain.”

“Different pain, maybe,” I said slowly, understanding what he meant.

He’d been raised to believe he was the most important person in any room he stood in. He was raised to believe he deserved everything he wanted just because he wanted it. If it weren’t for his mother’s influence, he would have turned out exactly like his father.

“You wouldn’t have treated me the way your father treated your mother,” I said decisively. “Even if I’d gone with you from the start. But you would have disappointed me.”

“Really?”

“Of course, you would have. You’re a person. You’re not perfect. I had far too many fairy-tale dreams in my head. I would have expected you to know everything about me instantly, and to always constantly put me first...” I shook my head, but wasn’t angry at my younger self. Not anymore. “So it would have been disappointing. I

would have hurt you, too. That's what happens when you come into a situation with unrealistic expectations."

Luken hummed. "I suppose. I'm glad that we both learned and grew. Even if it took more trauma to do it."

I tugged the tie off the end of his braid and started to loosen his hair, combing my fingers through it as I did so. "I don't think that's it. Even if Draven never killed my family and we did disappoint and hurt each other, we would have arrived at the same point. It wasn't the pain, Luken. It wasn't the fear of losing each other."

His dark brows furrowed. "No?"

"No. I think we've reached this place we're at despite the trauma, not because of it," I said slowly, parsing out my thoughts to put them in order. "It was about learning how to be vulnerable. Opening up to each other, risking more pain. We had to learn to meet each other where we were at."

Luken ran a hand down my spine beneath the water. "You might be right about that."

I smirked. "I am right."

He chuckled and kissed my shoulder. "You do know that I always intended to save Darcie, right? And after Thessa was recaptured, I wouldn't have let them sacrifice her. It was always the plan to bring them back. I just wanted you to come back to the palace to be safe."

"I know that now," I said, then sighed. "But you were right when you said I wouldn't have believed you if you told me. I would have only been angrier, positive you were trying to manipulate me."

“I still should have been more open with you about my plans.”

“Yes, you should have. But as long as we continue to be open and honest now, we’ll only get closer,” I assured him, pressing my hand to his cheek.

He smiled. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I shifted off him and patted the edge of the tub. “Sit up here for me, will you?”

He did so, grinning as he read my intentions through the bond. I settled myself on my knees along the low bench, putting me right at the correct height to take him into my mouth. Luken shivered as I swirled my tongue around his tip. The bond opened further, letting me feel exactly what he felt. Heat built in more core as I felt his arousal increase. I placed my hands lightly on his hips, keeping him still as I sucked his cock.

“Ahh, Elara.” Luken let his eyes shut as he leaned his head back. “I love the way you work me with your mouth.”

I grinned around him. I knew he did. His pleasure echoed through the bond, and if I just opened it up a little more... ahhh! I stifled a gasp as I took him deeper. This was the best little trick we’d learned since opening and playing with the bond. I was in the tub, kneeling between his legs with his cock in my mouth. But I knew so intimately what he was feeling that I was also sitting on the edge of the tub, a warm body between my legs as a hot mouth greedily sucked on my cock.

My body hardened, my nipples pebbling as I moved my head up and down slowly, playing with different ways to move my tongue. Luken grunted, rocking slightly as he fought to keep himself in place. His hands tangled with my hair and tugged with just enough pressure to cause a sting of pain in my scalp. It went straight to my core,



making me tighten. Luken, feeling me through the bond, let out a soft growl. His cock twitched in my mouth.

I love the way you respond to me, I sent him, since my mouth was occupied with other things. I continued to work him, enjoying his moans of pleasure until all his muscles went rigid. He was moments from climax when he pushed through the bond, telling me to stop. His hands tugged my hair, pulling me away at the same time.

“No fair,” I complained. “I want to feel you finish.”

Luken laughed breathlessly and slid into the water, his body rubbing against mine all the way down. “And you will. But I want to be inside of you, Elara. My delicious, sensual mate. I want to feel you clench around me as you reach climax.”

His words made me shiver in anticipation.

“Oh, alright,” I said, feigning disappointment though he could feel my excitement through the bond. “If you really want to give me an orgasm, I guess I’ll allow it.”

He laughed again, kissing me. Our tongues tangled, heat sparking through both of us. His hands cupped my ass, and he lifted me over him. With one firm motion, he thrust up into me. His fullness inside of me made me moan. I grabbed his arms, my fingers digging into his skin. He fit me perfectly, nudging all the right places.

I kissed his throat and jaw as he held my hips, moving up and down in long, languid strokes. Our bodies pressed together, my breasts up against his chest as I tangled my fingers in his hair. I loved being this close to him. I loved the feeling of our union, of knowing that we belonged to each other.

“Fucking in the bathtub, check,” I moaned into his ear as he kept up his controlled, even thrusts. The water lapped at our bodies in time with his motions.

“Is the pace good for you?” he nipped my shoulder, his fangs distended. He wanted to drink badly, but was determined to keep in control.

I nodded. “I love that we can make love like this. I love our more frenzied passion, and of course, I love when we spar before sex.” I leaned back so I could look into his eyes, moving with him now. The pace remained languid, unhurried. “But I also love that we can be tender, that something so slow and steady can feel just as good as having violent orgasms one after another.”

“Violence does turn you on,” Luken grunted, his hands tightening on me. He was beginning to throb inside of me. He was so very close that it took my breath away.

“Like it doesn’t turn you on?”

He laughed and kissed me. I let my hands trace down his chest, exploring him as I adjusted the way I moved, finding an angle that rubbed my clit as well. Tension built, my thighs clenching around his. This was one of the most exciting discoveries we’d made since returning to the palace. We were comfortable with each other; we had more than sex to bring us together, and without the constant distrust and tension, we were free to explore tenderness.

“And to think that I was afraid you would get bored of me not knowing about all the different, wild ways to have sex,” I moaned as he kissed my breasts, our bodies arching and undulating. “I could be satisfied if this was the only way we ever made love again.”

Luken nipped at my skin. “So you don’t want to try new things anymore?”

A teasing ripple came through the bond, as well as a promise. I clenched around his cock, making him gasp and moan. With one hand, I cupped his cheek with my hand and redoubled my efforts. My thighs were already shaking, and heat washed through

me within moments. The tension released, and I slumped into his chest. Luken came shortly after, holding me tight as he rocked into me again and again.

He came with a groan, pulling me closer as he buried himself as deep as he could into me. The water rocked gently around us, the hit of cool air and warm liquid enhancing the pleasure of the moment.

I leaned back, grinning at my husband. “So you have something new for us to try?”

He stood, wrapping my legs around him so he was still inside of me. I laughed as he maneuvered out of the tub and to the bedroom. There, he laid us on the bed, holding me in place with his weight, and reached into his bedside drawer. From inside, he drew out a thick glass cock. I recognized the ridges and veins instantly.

“And who did you pose for to make that?” I asked, surprised that he’d kept it a secret from me.

“A lovely artist I knew about two hundred years ago,” he answered. He handed me the cock. “I thought you might like to start experimenting with toys.”

I ran my hand over the smooth glass, considering it. “And is this to use on me or you?”

“What do you want?” Luken asked, his voice husky with promise.

I kissed the tip of the glass cock, then him. “Both.”

Luken grinned. He rolled us to our sides and took the cock back. He slid it down my back as he withdrew from me, then toyed with my entrance with the cool glass. I lifted my leg higher, grinning as his eyes glowed brighter. The bond swelled deeper between us.

This was going to be a night to remember.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:21 am*

Tally and Ember Holakas entered the world without much fuss and right on time. I healed quickly and adjusted to motherhood better than I thought I would. The sleepless nights were difficult, but luckily, as the Honeyblood queen, I had lots of help. Luken was always eager to be a father, and for three months, we took time off our royal duties, trusting Marissa to run the show.

Tonight, our three-month-old twins will have their official debut as our heirs. I carried little black-haired Tally, while Luken held our tow-headed Ember. Her coming out blonde was a surprise to all of us. Looking at Luken's family history, though, we found she looked stunningly similar to his maternal grandmother.

"Announcing King Luken Holakas, Queen Elara Tideborne, and the princesses, Tally and Ember Holakas," Marissa announced as we descended the stairs.

The ballroom had been strung with pastels in shades of blue, purple, and pink. It was so different from the normal jewel and sober tones I couldn't help but giggle to myself. I smiled at our guests as they lined up to pay their respects to our girls.

"Congratulations, your... majesties?" Bain said, sounding a little uncertain when he reached us. The shifters still didn't trust vampires, but Bain had volunteered to serve as an ambassador. It was quite the change for someone who lived in a tiny village, but he threw himself into the role with as much grace and dignity as anyone.

"Your majesties are right," Luken murmured to him with a nod. "The princesses are 'highness.' How are your mother and sister?"

Bain beamed. "They're doing well. My mother is dating someone new. We like him.

My sister got accepted into university.”

“That’s excellent. Tell them congratulations from us,” I said.

He nodded and shuffled along as Marissa cleared her throat.

Behind him was Donelle. Her lips were pinched together, clearly not happy at being put in line behind a shifter. She forced a smile on her face as she nodded toward the two of us. I made myself smile as well. I still didn’t like her and didn’t trust her, but it would not be a good look for Taimarah if I was to bash her head in.

“Congratulations on your heirs,” Donelle said. She started to step away but stopped and gave Luken a once-over. His discomfort from her appraisal came through our bond. Hmm. If I handed Tally to Marissa, I might be able to get in a little bit of head-bashing before it became an incident. Donelle’s gaze snapped to me quickly. “I hope you appreciate what you have, Queen Elara.”

She moved on, and I moved a little closer to Luken. He was already brushing aside his discomfort to greet the next dignitary, an orc prince. I gazed at him in admiration, then did the same.

The line was long, but the babies stayed happy and content in our arms. Once the greetings were over, we handed the twins to Thessa and Darcie so we could open up the dancefloor with a waltz. As the music started to play, I gazed into Luken’s amber eyes, grateful and amazed we’d gotten here. Even with everyone in the room staring at us, I felt comfortable and at peace.

“The peace summit seems to be a success,” I murmured to him.

Luken nodded. “New trade routes are opening. More exchanges of information and ideas. It’s better than I planned.”

He twirled me and caught his arms around me so my back was against his chest. We swayed to the music as he kissed my neck. I cupped his cheek with one hand, letting my eyes drift shut. Yes. This was good. And I knew the future would only get brighter from here.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END