



King (Noble Reckoning #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Rue

I put up a good fight. Fate dealt me a raw deal, but I escaped it for a while, enjoying a brief taste of freedom and love. Now, I'm back where I started, but no one can take those memories from me. Especially since I've returned with a tangible piece of them—Vaegon, my pup.

I may have been dragged back to the path originally laid out for me, but no one will ever take Vaegon away. Even fate couldn't be that cruel, could it?

Durin

The elves are convinced that Vaegon is the key to the realms future. Rue and I are stuck in the dark, not knowing where he is or how long he'll be there, or if he'll even be the same when he returns.

All I want is to be with Rue. She needs comfort. She needs me. But if I want to end her suffering, I'll have to devote most of my time to a battle I'm not sure I even want to fight anymore.

Im left with no choice. I'll fulfill my duty, but not out of revenge against the queen, not for the realm's freedom, and not even because it's the right thing to do. I'm fighting to reclaim my son and build a world where no one would dare threaten my family again.

King is the conclusion to Book 1 of the Noble Reckoning series, Consort, and cannot be read as a standalone.

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Rue

I put up a good fight. Fate dealt me a raw deal—the weakest designation, a Prime happy to pass me around like cheap wine, and a lifetime of misery.

But I escaped it for a while. I enjoyed a brief taste of freedom and love with a breathtaking fae. Those memories are mine. No one can take them from me, especially when I'm returning with a tangible reminder.

Vaegon, my pup. A precious piece of Durin, the mate I was never truly meant to have.

Mannus, the bitter bastard Mother and I slipped past during our escape, may be here to drag me back to my fate, but no one will ever take Vaegon from me. I wouldn't be blessed with this perfect pup only to have him snatched right back. Even fate couldn't be that cruel.

I try to draw comfort from that as we make our way to camp, but I find myself unsure. Fate has been anything but kind to me so far.

We walk in silence, other than the frosty ground crunching beneath our feet and a growl from Mannus any time we slow our pace. The journey to the hut seemed so long. Now that I'm being forced back to our camp, the time slips through my grasp as if I'm sleeping.

The forest feels safe. Durin could appear any moment out here in the open. But once we pass into our pack's territory, the atmosphere seems to shift. What I once called

home has become so threatening.

One of the pack's Alpha wolves notices us while on his rounds and approaches. He paces back and forth a few times, checking us over. Mannus just nods to him and continues toward our camp. The wolf races ahead, probably to tell Bock we've returned.

As soon as we see the first tent, he's there, blocking our path. His power pulses around us like a barrier, as if we'd be foolish enough to run.

But his eyes surprise me. They're full of worry instead of the anger I'd expected.

"Are you hurt, mate?" he asks, reaching for me.

I shake my head no and bare my throat, remaining where I stand. The term "mate" makes me sick. And there's no way I'm running into his outstretched arms like this is some kind of sweet reunion. I don't want to provoke him in case he takes it out on my mother, but I won't let him think I'm happy to see him.

The pack has begun to gather around us, silently emerging from the shadows and stepping out from behind tents. It's unsettling, like being in the eye of a brewing storm. But I'm surprised to find that I don't care who's here for this. I left them all behind when I fled. Whether they agreed with him or not, they accepted Bock's plans for me. They're nothing to me now.

Bock's expression turns from concern to shock, then to fury, as his eyes settle on my stomach. All traces of worry and tenderness vanish, replaced by a barely-contained rage swirling in his eyes. He keeps them locked on mine as a primal roar erupts from his lungs, turning to steam in the chilly air.

"What have you done?" he demands.

His Alpha bark presses down on my chest, ensuring I speak the truth. He probably assumed we'd been caught and killed. Now, he finds us both unharmed, bringing with us another life we hadn't left with.

"I was afraid," I blurt.

My body urges me to continue under the weight of his bark. To unleash my disgust for him and his twisted sense of what's acceptable. I'd love to be honest with him, but I don't want my mother to be punished.

Mercifully, she steps forward to prevent the unforgivable disrespect that was ready to fly out of my mouth.

"After we finished at the market, an innot spooked Rue, and she went into heat. She needed somewhere to hide for the duration."

While all of that is true, it leaves much unsaid. Bock shifts his attention to her, noting that she's speaking freely. He quickly corrects that.

"And why did you not send for me?" he barks.

His veins bulge beneath his skin in his fury. The tips of his long fangs brush against the thick hair of his beard. He's imposing like this. Aggressive. But I think most of his anger is stemming from embarrassment. He lost track of his future mate, missed out on her first heat, and now, she returns carrying another male's pup.

Good. Fuck him.

I want to stab him in the balls for speaking to my mother the way he did, but I'm relieved to be released from his bark's influence. Mother is more calculating than me. She's picked up some things from the fae at the market over the years. She'll be able

to handle Bock and his bark much better than I could.

“I was afraid to leave her,” she says carefully, implying she didn’t want me to be vulnerable while she ran for help. “She found a deep cave where she could ride out her heat.”

Both statements are true, though they aren’t directly connected. Bock has no idea that she wasn’t with me in the cave.

“Why didn’t you return immediately after her heat?” he demands.

Neither of us speak because he didn’t bark this time, plus, it’s unclear who he was speaking to. He looks at me, but instead of asking again, he says, “Come closer.”

I drag my feet forward and bare my throat to him. I remind myself that this is not a true submission. I’m doing this for my mother.

He bends down and sniffs my neck. My skin crawls everywhere his breath touches. I want to claw at my flesh until the feeling is gone. But I have to keep my composure for the inevitable question that’s sure to come next.

“Who is the father?” he asks. His tone is calm, but each word is dripping with his Alpha bark.

“A fae,” I reply, fighting against the force of his power. “He found me during my heat and lay with me.”

I feel like a traitor, knowing they’ll all assume it was a selfish, heartless fae, just like any other. I once thought that of Durin, too, but I was wrong. They’re wrong as well, but they’d never believe me if I told them otherwise.

I fight desperately not to give more information than I have to. I don't want them to know anything that might lead them to him.

Gasps and growls ripple across the camp, just as I'd expected. Some of their faces twist in disgust. Some show pity, like I'm a victim. The Prime and his Alphas, however, including my father, put on a show with their pretentious rage.

"I will gut him for taking advantage of a helpless Omega," Bock declares to the pack. "My Omega!"

The Alphas gather around him, growling, fangs and fists out, prepared for a fight.

What a joke. They were all willing and eager to take advantage of the very same helpless Omega.

But luckily, Bock is no longer angry with me. He thought I'd run off and found another Alpha. Now that he knows it was a fae, his ego isn't as hurt. My mother will hopefully be spared any punishment for her involvement.

"You were ashamed to be with his child," my father speaks up, stepping out from the back of the group. "That's why you remained hidden."

He's not actually talking to me, more like giving the Prime an excuse for my behavior. And he's not sticking up for me like it might sound. He's just worried about his own ego.

I'll take the out, though. I didn't realize I was pregnant until months later. I was completely oblivious. But they don't know that. Anyone else would have considered the possibility after a heat. Mother would have known right away if I'd told her the truth. My father's excuse for me is believable.

“Don’t worry, mate,” Bock says, using that horrid word again. “There’s no shame in something you had no control over. After the pup is born, you will be fit for your role as Luna. We can find a pack to take it, or you may raise it here.”

I’m immediately thankful that Bock is reasonable about most things. He won’t feel the same protective instinct over my pup as he would if it were his own. But I know he won’t be unkind to it.

He also knows what happens to Omegas who lose their pups. They can fall into a deep depression, to the point of physical illness and debilitating pain. Some never recover, eventually succumbing to their despair and refusing to ever eat again. At least he doesn’t wish that on me.

“You’ll be taken to my tent and remain there until the pup is born. When your body recovers, I will claim you as my mate. Your mother may tend to you and help you deliver. Otherwise, she is to remain in her tent in seclusion under your father’s watch.”

Dammit. He’s still angry with her. She should have brought me back, even if I was ashamed. She also should never have taken me to the market without an Alpha in the first place. Hopefully, his anger will subside quickly, and she can return to her normal duties. I feel horrible that she’s in this position because of me, even though it could have been much worse.

“Who is this fae that will soon face a gruesome death for his actions?” Bock asks, his gaze sweeping proudly over his Alphas.

The thought of them hunting Durin down sends a shudder through me. I can’t help but shrink back as I stare helplessly at Bock.

“I don’t know,” I lie, since there was no bark. “I was in heat. I barely remember

anything from it.”

Bock turns to my mother, believing she was there for my heat, and remembers to bark this time. “What does he look like?”

The words tumble out of her mouth. “Tall, blue, noble.”

“Did he give you a name?” Bock demands.

Mother looks at me apologetically, devastated, as his name is ripped from her lips. “Durin.”

A shadow falls over Bock’s face, his demeanor shifting from one of authority to one of disbelief. “Durin?” he asks. “The guardian fae?”

Guardian fae?

Mother and I have been isolated for months. I don’t know what he’s talking about. It does seem to point to Durin, though. He told me about helping other species as he plots the queen’s downfall. I can see why word may have spread of him as a protector. Even if he’s not this guardian Bock is speaking of, I’ll use it. I can’t let them go after him.

“He killed Mitah, and he hates the queen,” I say, failing to hide the tears as they spill down my cheeks. “Ask around,” I insist when Bock remains silent. “He’s helped many shifters. And he was only trying to help me. I was in so much pain. Please, don’t hurt him. He’s going to change the realm for us all.”

I realize too late that my attempt to protect Durin has exposed my deceitful answers. It also gives away my feelings for him. Bock may be distracted from the reason Mother and I went to the market alone, but I’m sure he’s now convinced that I fell for

the fae who took advantage of me.

I wince, waiting for him to lash out. But he looks at me with pity instead. The poor, ignorant Omega, falling for her abuser. I bet he uses it to make himself the hero.

A sudden shriek from the crowd pulls everyone's attention away from me. When I find the source, I'm shocked to see Jevive wrench free from her mother's grasp and storm toward us.

"What about me? " she whines at Bock. "I presented as Omega. I'm in my three-moon period. You told me I would become Luna. Now that Rue returns, I'm just cast aside?"

Bock seizes her by the back of the neck and growls softly in her face. "Watch your tone with your Prime. You were not given permission to speak."

She whimpers and averts her eyes from him.

"I thought Rue had been killed. Have you no sympathy for what she endured? She has the right to reclaim her title. And I deserve the Luna who was meant to be mine. Now, off with you."

If only we could have hidden it longer. Why did Cirro have to find me that night? In just a few months, Jevive would have presented and become the new Luna, just as Mother had hoped. I could have remained here safely and "presented" later.

But Durin and our pup... They would never have become a part of my life. One of them wouldn't exist at all. Maybe it was all worth it to keep a piece of Durin with me. He isn't perfect, but he's mine. In a way. Maybe he is actually strong enough to defeat this many Alphas. Perhaps he'll risk it and rescue us from this life.

But if he doesn't, this is my only chance at being spared the life I ran from.

"She's right, Prime," I say quickly. "I was gone. And I'm no longer untouched. It's only fair that she's allowed to fill the role that she was promised."

I pray silently that he is grateful to take the out. That he prefers a pure mate, one who hasn't shamed him as I have. But he's already made up his mind. He shoves Jevive toward her mother and gives her his back as he glares at me.

"You'd give up your right so easily, Omega?" he asks, his eyes glowing with anger again. "After I so graciously allowed you to keep it?"

"It sounds like someone enjoyed her heat a little too much," Mannus says, peering around Bock's large frame so I can see his ugly face. "You weren't ashamed to return to your Prime. You were hoping the fae would fall for you once his pup was born. How pathetic."

I instinctively cradle my belly, feeling threatened by his accusations. My tears flow even faster, only giving credit to what he's claimed, what Bock was likely already thinking.

But my fear isn't enough for Mannus. He's angry. He was cast out for months, living in the forest alone because of me. He's not finished hurting me yet.

"I've been near the castle while hunting for you, Omega," he says with a truly wicked grin. "I've overheard things. You think you can win the fae's heart? You say he hates the queen? Then why is she preparing a grand celebration for him as we speak? A festival to present him as her consort. Her lover. Her most precious and intimate companion?"

He shakes his head and chuckles, mocking me. "Do you really think he'd choose you

over the queen?”

My throat closes up, and my heart feels like it was ripped from my chest. I want to disappear. If it weren't for the innocent pup who needs me to survive, I would gladly surrender myself to the cold waters of the stream I once hid in.

Mother tries to come comfort me, but my father steps between us and holds her back.

I'm trapped. By my fate, by the Prime, and by this new pain that's suffocating me. Everything seems to be closing in on me. I feel smaller and more helpless as Mannus's words replay over and over in my head.

In my desperation, I lose my grip on the loathing and disgust I've been holding back for so long.

“Maybe Durin would choose the queen,” I spit at Mannus before turning to the almighty Prime. “But I'd probably choose her over you myself!”

Gasps echo through the forest, and growls of his enraged Alphas rumble around me. “What did you say to me?” Bock asks, leaning down until his face is right in front of mine.

This close, his fangs are as big and sharp as tent spikes. But I'm not intimidated. I'm fueled by agony, and my rage outweighs his bark. There's no keeping my feelings buried now that my soul has been opened wide.

“You expect me to fight for you?” I scoff. “You really think that any Omega—besides Jevive's shameless ass—wants to be your mate? To spread their legs for you and every Alpha in this pack whenever it suits you? To have them ripped open if they refuse? To be resented by the Betas for stealing their mates? You honestly believe you're powerful enough, and attractive enough, to be worth that?”

You're out of your fucking mind!" I scream.

He growls and starts to say something, but I'm not finished. I yell the words to make sure my words are heard over his.

"You're arrogant, selfish, and utterly clueless about what it means to provide for a pack. You think your status makes you desirable, but you might as well be a fae for what a cruel, heartless bastard you really are!"

I'm fully aware that a shifter could be killed for showing such blatant disrespect to their Prime Alpha. But even Bock wouldn't dare harm an Omega. We're far too valuable and rare.

Unfortunately, for the same reason, he also won't cast me out. But what worse can he do than he was already planning?

He's made his decision. At least now, someone has finally voiced what a foul piece of shit he is.

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Durin

I've just finished my breakfast, and I'm itching to get out of the castle. As much as I try not to think about it, the new season is almost here. I want to be close when the queen steps out to connect with the realm. I plan to follow her and see what takes place during these visits.

I burst through my door, hoping to get away without being stopped by anyone. But waiting for me, like a wound that refuses to heal, is Folas's ugly face.

"The queen will be holding a celebration for you in three days," he says, his smirk spreading wider with each word. "You're to remain on castle grounds until the event. It hasn't escaped notice how little time you spend in the castle. You're not to leave until the celebration is over and you've been presented as Consort."

I'm tempted to just go ahead and kill him and tell the queen he was too annoying to bear. It wouldn't be a lie.

"A celebration in my honor?" I ask with a wicked grin of my own. "Does that mean I get to strangle the messenger?"

His smugness falls away. His body tenses as he searches my face to see whether I'm serious. I reach for his throat, and he bolts down the corridor toward the common areas. His ratty green hair bounces behind him, and his robes become tangled between his legs. I laugh loudly at him until he disappears from view.

While I like this new method of getting Folas out of my sight, I need some fresh air to

process what he just told me. As I make my way to the courtyard, I try to calm myself and accept that I'm a prisoner here for the next few days.

Really, I've been a prisoner all along. My confines are just smaller now.

Folas never said it, but it was implied that I'd be watched. I won't be able to spy on the queen during her trip out into the forest.

I also won't be able to check on Rue. I can't even find Farris and ask him to watch over her for me. She's so close to delivering our pup. I'm stuck here with the scum of the realm while my son could arrive at any moment.

A cold wind whips at my face, a chilling reminder of the nightmare that looms ahead. The Still Season is here. The queen will summon me to her bed again. I have three long days to worry about Rue and dread the new scars I'm about to add to my collection.

As I brace myself against another icy gust, I can't shake the feeling that this time, the wounds will cut even deeper.

"Why didn't she hold this celebration sooner?" I ask aloud, not really expecting Sarra or Leah to answer.

I'm lying back in the tub while they bathe me for my special day.

"She always holds them during the Still Season," Sarra says softly, pouring her calming magic into my skin.

"Why's that?" I scoff. "Because it matches her cold, dead heart?"

“Maybe,” Leah says, squirting some oil into her hand. “You know how dead the ground looks around the castle? It’s colder here. And darker in a different way. All color and warmth just get sucked away.”

“Sucked away, or sent away?” I ask.

“I’m not sure,” Sarra says, rubbing her fingertips into my scalp. “Anything bound to the castle slowly loses its hue. The walls, the drapes, tables... even the servants who never leave. Anything you see with color hasn’t been here long.”

“Your hair...” I say, thinking of all the silver-haired servants I assumed were glamourised to match the castle.

Sarra nods. “She doesn’t allow us to glamour ourselves. So, our hair remains this way once the color is gone.”

“What about Folas?” I ask. “His hair isn’t white, but he’s no noble. Who the fuck is he?” I snap, slamming my hand into the water and splashing it across the floor.

Leah gasps and shields her face against the sudden spray. Sarra blinks at me as a drop of water slides down her neck.

“Sorry,” I tell them, immediately regretting my outburst. I wave my hand over the wet spots, using my heat to dry them. “I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

“It’s okay,” Sarra says. “No one really knows much about Folas. Only that he’s always been here, and no one is allowed to touch him.”

“I probably would have sliced him up myself otherwise,” Leah says, nonchalantly.

I gape at her as she tugs at my arm, signaling me to stand. Sarra chuckles as they

rinse me off.

“Maybe one day, you’ll get the chance,” I say, giving her a wink.

Both fae look knowingly at each other, then focus on drying me off. They dress me in gaudy white robes adorned with intricate gold embroidery and tiny gems. The gems grab the light and throw it back, making me glimmer as I walk. I prefer to go unnoticed, but tonight, even my gold-trimmed boots shine. I step out of my room, feeling like a damn accessory. An adornment for the queen’s wrist as she flaunts her wealth and beauty before her commoners.

Two guards immediately lead me to the main entry of the castle. Folas is lucky it isn’t him escorting me. I doubt I could hold my temper if I were to see him right now.

As we approach the grand doors, I find the queen waiting for me. My stomach immediately sours. She’s a far more repulsive sight than Folas would have been.

She typically dresses in pale colors, but today, she’s draped in a gown of pure white, the layers of fabric flowing around her like a veil of snow. The only hint of color is a light blue, frost-like crest stitched delicately down the front of her skirt.

Her ashen crown rises with sharp, icicle-like peaks studded with gems and gold. Her pale skin and hair blend seamlessly into her garments. She looks like a snowfae a group of younglings might have crafted.

I muster a smile for her but envision melting her into a puddle with her own magic.

Without a word, she grabs my hand and pulls me out the door into the chaos outside. It’s nighttime, but the lawn is bright, glowing with strings of blue calantar blooms and a large fire in the center of the courtyard. Fae twirl and dance around the flames, their glammers falling from their faces as they relax and indulge.

The musicians, already a few drinks in, fall in and out of tune as they sway and stumble. No one seems to notice their mistakes. They're too busy enjoying their glowing elixirs or deep green wine. The sweet, sticky scent fills the air and nauseates me even further.

The fun clearly began well before we arrived. Some fae have fallen to their lust, happily indulging themselves right on the lawn. Other fae are playing tricks with their magic, laughing at the harmless mischief between them.

The bloodlust is quiet here. Even the nobles appear unthreatening as they take part in the fun.

But the music cuts off when the musicians catch sight of the queen. Guests stumble into bows before her as she passes. She inhales the crisp night air with a smile, as if the atmosphere itself can rejuvenate her.

I doubt anyone is looking at me, so I don't bother forcing a smile. I just follow her to the two thrones perched on a raised platform near the front of the castle.

Hers is a replica of the one in the throne room, white and intricately carved. The one for me is as vibrant as my room's decor, stained with rich reds and blues and adorned with enough gems to excite a whole den of gryphons.

As she lowers herself onto her throne, the many layers of her gown billow around her. It's ridiculous. She looks like she tumbled into a snowdrift and became stuck in it. I hide my scoff with an exaggerated bow, then lower myself onto the smaller throne at her side.

"My dear, perfect fae," she begins, her gruff voice grating in my ears. "Creatures who embody the very essence of Faerie. You deserve all its spoils and the respect of other species who dare encroach on its lands."

The way she feeds their pride and hatred of the other species sickens me. What could it possibly do to benefit her? While she drones on endlessly, I wonder how she became queen. When she became queen. Answers no one seems to have, though I suspect we'd all love to know.

These answers would be the most helpful. But I doubt they're possible to find.

"You've seen him among you, steadfastly guarding our realm as an honorable soldier of my court," she continues, pulling my focus back as she speaks of me. "He has surpassed my expectations with his dedication and remarkable abilities."

She looks down at me with feigned affection and respect before turning back to the crowd. I grit my teeth and stare out toward the forest. Soon, I'll be out there where I belong. If I can just get through this torturous evening.

"Tonight, I stand before you to introduce not merely a noble, but the embodiment of royalty itself. I present to you my most formidable soldier and beloved consort—Durin. May his presence inspire you all to unleash the full power within you."

The fae stand and cheer, sloshing glasses and vials of their drinks. It's disgraceful how they hang on the queen's every word. I stare into the crowd as they return to their merriment. I'm too repelled by her empty words to feign any humility or grace.

I can feel her looking at me, but my eyes are stuck on the jubilant fae. They're spoiled and secure. Anything they desire becomes theirs. All while the shifter I love is stuck hiding from them in fear.

"What is troubling you?" the queen asks. "It almost seems you're not honored to be by my side."

I'm grateful again that her questions often allow for multiple interpretations. "I want a drink," I say, turning to face her. "Would you like one?"

She blinks in surprise before a hoarse laugh catches in her throat. "I'm done here. Join me in my chambers once you've had your fill."

She goes to stand, but reverses, relaxing back down onto her throne. "How's my magic?" she asks, lightly. "Have you had to use it?"

I was so close to being free of her. Now, she wants to chat about something I know more about than I should. I need to get away from her. Keeping my composure is a battle. All I can think about is roaring in her face and cutting off her head.

Do it... my bloodlust whispers to me. No one would expect it here in front of everyone.

I want to listen. It's tempting advice. Except for the fact that, even if I succeeded, I'd be killed by the nobles strolling proudly around me. The thought of never seeing Rue again and never meeting my son quickly brings back my rational side.

"It feels strong," I tell her, faking a smug smile. "I haven't had to use it, but I want to."

"In time, Durin," she purrs, seeming pleased with my answer.

It takes every bit of my strength to swallow a snarl when she reaches out and touches my face. Her slimy magic seeps into my skin, racing toward that hidden place where my own resides. I feel the icy tendrils scrape at my magic, then pull a fragment with it as it withdraws.

At first, I worry she's reclaimed her magic, but I realize she's only taken a small

amount—the magic I’ve nurtured since she first shared hers with me.

Having someone steal any of my magic away from me is horrifying. But I can sense a barrier within me. The rest of my magic remains locked away, untouchable. She tried to take more, but she only succeeded in siphoning what I’ve managed to grow.

By the look in her eye, she thinks she just discovered a bottomless well of power. If I don’t get rid of her soon, that’s exactly what I’ll become. Unfortunately, I’m not prepared yet. Right now, my focus needs to be surviving the part of the night that will take place in her bed.

She rises gracefully and glides back toward the castle, smiling at the fae who bow as she passes. I’m not sure whether to be thankful she’s gone or angry that I have to see her again so soon.

But if I have to endure another night in her bed, I might as well be drunk for it. I get up and stomp toward a table where the fae have been filling their drinks.

“Fuck the empath,” I grumble. “I’ll just drink to survive this time.”

I freeze when I hear someone chuckle behind me. “I’m not really up for a fuck right now,” he says, clearly amused. “But I’d be glad to help you through your duty tonight.”

I turn and see Daylor, the empath, smiling at me between curtains of his long purple hair.

“I apologize,” I mutter, not sure what else to say.

“No, it’s me who should apologize,” he says, stepping beside me and turning to watch the crowd. “I was unable to assist you last time.”

So, I was right about him. He was helping me after all.

“It’s okay. I got through it,” I mutter, feeling some of the tension fall away.

“The queen had commanded me to work with the lost mixed fae shifters that day,” he says.

A mixture of hesitance and hope washes over me. But I don’t feel them as if they were my own. He must be projecting his own emotions onto me. Showing me that I can trust him.

“Doing what with them?” I ask, allowing my interest to show.

He takes a breath and clasps his hands in front of him. “The queen sometimes has me try to convince the crazed ones that they’re whole again. It never works. But I always give it a good try. I would love to end their distress.”

I wonder if he’s talked with Kahras about me. Perhaps he’s come to trust me after learning my emotions, which speak loudly to who I am.

“She wants you to do what Kahras’s elixirs cannot,” I guess.

“Right,” he says. “But despite my best efforts, it doesn’t work. She walks away frustrated, often taking it out on me. Last time was particularly harsh. I was with the healer when she summoned you.”

I think about his distinctly crooked nose and wonder if it’s related to the queen’s abuse.

“Fuck... I’m sorry,” I tell him, feeling my bloodlust stirring to life again at her cruelty.

“Don’t fret about me. Just... be successful in whatever you do. I’ll be there to help you tonight.”

Before I can thank him, a familiar head of orange hair catches my eye. The sight of Farris moving through the crowd overwhelms me with relief. He can check in on Rue and explain to her why I haven’t come.

I watch him scan the area, looking for me. When our eyes finally meet, I expect a grin. Instead, a look of panic unfolds across his face.

He’s not here to visit or enjoy the celebration. He’s not the solution to my concerns about Rue. He’s here to deliver a whole new problem for me to deal with.

From the looks of it, it’s a nasty one.

He shoves drunken fae out of the way as he approaches, finally stopping in front of me. He glances at Daylor before saying anything. The empath graciously moves along to give us some privacy. As soon as he’s out of earshot, Farris speaks two words that gut me more than what’s waiting for me in the castle.

“Rue’s missing,” he says, tapping the glass in his hand anxiously.

I’ve shared everything about Rue with him. He knows where the hideaway is. He knows about the pup. He knows exactly how much they mean to me.

“What do you mean, missing?” I ask, feeling the familiar cloak of dread wrap itself around me.

“I hadn’t seen you in a while, so I decided to check on you. I figured your Omega’s little hideaway was a good place to start. But when I got there, it was silent. Too silent.”

“They were probably sleeping,” I say, trying to convince myself. “Or maybe they heard your footsteps and were afraid.”

“I thought that at first, too. But I got a bad feeling. I was already illusioned as a sprite, so I snuck into the hideaway to look around. They were gone, Durin. And it looked like they left in a hurry.”

My heart sinks into the cold, dead ground at my feet.

She ran from me? Now? After all this time, she chooses to leave?

I should have been more affectionate. It makes no difference if I wasn't strong enough to tell her my secret yet. There was no reason I couldn't at least tell her how I feel about her.

But another reason occurs to me. Maybe she hadn't actually forgiven me for denying her in the cave. She'd been planning to leave this whole time. To hurt me like I hurt her.

I lower my head, carved out and empty inside. I don't know where to go from here. Should I even try to find her if she wants to be rid of me? Can I possibly manage to finish my mission knowing she's gone?

“I think she was taken,” Farris says, pulling me out of my spiral of despair.

“What?” I ask, looking up at him while I try to put together what he said.

Is he just trying to make me feel better? Or does he really think she's in danger? Either way, I'm stuck here, helpless to do a damn thing about it.

“There were pawprints,” he says, handing me his drink. “Durin, I think whoever she

was running from might have found her.”

My heart pulls itself back together and begins thudding viciously in my chest. I chug the drink down, letting the liquid calm my thrashing bloodlust before I lose control and make a scene.

My instincts are screaming at me to get out into the forest and unleash my fire on anyone or anything that gets in my way of finding her.

But the queen is expecting me tonight. If I don’t show up, she’ll have me hunted down and possibly even killed. Then, the pup will have no father and be raised in whatever hellish shifter camp Rue has been dragged back to.

“I’ll try to track her down,” Farris says, gripping my shoulder firmly. “When can you get out of here?”

I glare at my ridiculous robes and growl in frustration. “Probably not until the morning.”

“Okay. Meet me just inside the trees,” he says. “I’ll do everything I can to find her until then.”

I grip him in a hug, releasing him quickly to avoid drawing attention. “Thank you.”

He gives me a bow, one I’ll have to punch him for later, before darting away in a flash of orange. I toss my empty glass and stomp toward the castle, barely containing my rage.

But beneath the anger, I’m unraveling as I imagine what might be happening to Rue. Even worse, what more might happen before I can reach her. My duty is to protect her and our pup. But I’m on my way to stroke the queen and her ego instead. I’m

desperate to get this over with.

Daylor falls into step a short distance behind me, and I can already feel his influence. It grows stronger as I get closer and closer to the queen's chambers.

By the time her door is shut behind me, I'm on fire with false desire. I disrobe and give the performance of my life, then escape to my room to pace nervously until first light.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Rue

“Take her to my tent,” Bock orders Mannus, but he’s staring at me with a thunderous look in his eye. “Don’t touch her yet. You’ll have plenty of opportunities later.”

Bock seemed like a good leader except for that one glaring flaw. But now, the darkness that fueled his cruel way of thinking is laid bare for the entire pack to see. Everything I’ve just spewed at him is true. Those in the pack who’ve had their heads buried can’t ignore it any longer.

They can continue to look away, to stay quiet, but the words have been spoken. Bock can’t hide behind the silence anymore. This stain on his name can never be washed out or covered up.

Mannus grabs me by the arm, fully aware of what kind of touch Bock was referring to. His fingers dig deep into my skin, but I don’t acknowledge him. He may be physically stronger than me, but nothing compares to my heartache or the hatred I have for the Alphas in this pack.

He drags me across the camp to Bock’s tent and shoves me inside. He’s still bare after his shift. It’s impossible to miss his dirty cock rising as he rakes his eyes over my swollen breasts.

“I’m going to do so many things when that pup is out of you,” he says, taking slow, predatory steps toward me.

I back away until my legs hit the edge of Bock’s bed. It takes a moment to remind

myself that I'm safe. Mannus will obey his Prime and not take me. His defiance would cost him his life. He'd never give up endless opportunities to torment me, no matter how impatient he is.

His attempts at intimidating me now seem so pathetic. He thinks he's done some honorable deed by bringing me back. He's too stupid to remember that he was the reason I got away in the first place. Bock isn't finished with him. He's just using Mannus to intimidate me.

He'll get nothing from me, though. Only a mask of indifference while I wait for him to become bored with me. I hold my ground as he scents my neck, refusing to flinch, even when his tongue slides along my shoulder.

He scoffs. "You won't be so quiet when my knot is ripping you wide open. It'll hurt, but what will really piss you off is how much you love it."

The day he tries, I'll slice his cock off, knot and all. I fear no one. Let them tie me up like a prisoner for attacking him. They can continue using my bound body as they please. But at least Mannus will be left harmless and humiliated. Alphas can heal from a lot, but they can't regenerate appendages. I'll be ready for him, and I look forward to seeing him cry.

When he finally gets that I'm not going to react, he lets out a frustrated grunt and storms out of the tent. Now that I'm alone, what he claimed about Durin is able to sink in. My legs give way beneath me, and I crumble onto the rug by the bed.

Mannus has been searching for me for months. He's been around the fae, hearing things I haven't. I don't think he's lying. It adds up—specifically, Durin's prolonged absences and his reluctance to mate with me again. The queen has always come first.

I can't help but wonder how long they've been... how long he's been with her. Is this

something new? Have they been intimate for some time, and she only now decided to make his position official?

I imagine Durin and the queen making memories like the ones stolen from me. Visions of them smiling and caressing each other come at me from all directions.

But my Omega rises up and deflects them, one by one, until I can close that dark part of my mind and focus on what's real.

He said he hated her. He cannot lie.

A faint warmth passes through my chest. She's right. He does hate the queen. He's been plotting her death. Everything was real—his stories about helping the other high fae, the way he poured himself into his kisses, the pride he took in naming our pup. None of it was a trick.

Yes. Stop being self-centered.

If he hates the queen, he can't want to share her bed... I doubt she asks for anything. She wouldn't invite him to be intimate with her. She'd command it and expect his obedience. It takes me a moment for the realization to hit me, but when it does, it hits hard.

He's being forced, just like I will be.

I managed to delay mine, but who knows how long he's been suffering. He only rejected me because he'd been with the queen and felt guilty for it. He was ashamed to tell me. And he was afraid that I would reject him.

My heart breaks again but for a whole new reason. My Omega knew, but I couldn't see it. Knowing of his misery hurts far more than thinking he loved her instead of me.

And what's worse, he'll come to visit me and find that I'm gone. He'll think Mother and I took our things and fled from him.

He'll continue to be burdened by his mission and violated by the queen. Only now, he'll believe that I stole his pup and abandoned him to endure his misery alone.

He's too honorable to pursue someone who wants to be rid of him. There's no hope for him rescuing me. I'm back to where I began, helplessly bound to my bullshit fate.

It's late when Bock finally enters the tent. I'm still on the ground, aching for Durin. I don't care that he sees it. I don't resist when he lifts me from the floor and tucks me beneath his blankets. I don't even pull away when he wraps his body around mine.

Fighting would be useless. There's just no point. Durin has been facing far worse. I can survive a night in the arms of someone I hate. At least I know Bock won't try to mount me... yet. Once the pup is born and my body is healed, he won't hesitate.

I'm surprised, though, that he doesn't threaten me or launch into some lecture about what I did. He says nothing, only cuddling up to me like we're in love. It's like he's forgotten what I said about him in front of everyone. But I know that can't be the case. He doesn't smell like wine, so I don't think he drank the anger away. He must be trying to fuck with my head.

I manage to sleep, telling myself it will be an escape. But as I lie awake in the morning where his former Luna used to lie, a sickening feeling keeps me from drifting off again. Any drive I had to find a way out of this is gone. Bock is content to take an Omega who doesn't want him. He'd choose pride over a mate who's eager to serve him. It's despicable. He really is no better than the wicked fae he condemns.

"What's wrong with her?" Bock's rumbling voice crawls into my ears as I lie lifelessly on his bed.

He muttered sweet things about my scent when he awoke and some other things I turned my ears off for. I guess he hopes my mother will understand what his thick brain isn't getting.

I thought he was trying to scare me with his peaceful behavior last night, but I'm beginning to suspect something is seriously wrong with his mind. He's honestly confused about why I ignored his touch in the night and why I've not risen for the day. Why I'd rather sleep my life away than face it by his side.

"She's just worn out," my mother replies gently. "Some fresh air will help."

Mother is trying to appease him so he won't become angry with me. But I want him to know how miserable it is to be near him. He can't think that because he's forcing me to become his mate, I'll just magically be thrilled about it.

"Fix it," Bock orders her before striding out of the tent.

It takes a lot of effort, but my mother manages to pull me to my feet and drag me out of the tent. As my eyes adjust to the bright light, I'm surprised to see Bock waiting outside.

I bet he's making sure Mother follows through with his orders. I don't even spare him a glance as we pass. He grunts in annoyance and stomps off. I'm mercifully left in peace. Mother sets me down on a log outside the tent and covers me with a blanket. After settling in beside me, she begins to rub my shoulders.

"I'm fine," I say, shaking her off.

"You're not fine, Rue. You have to snap out of this. Durin will come."

I huff and caress my belly, hoping my mood and unstable emotions aren't passing

through to Vaegon in any way.

“Oh, my sweet daughter,” my mother says, staying by my side despite my standoffish attitude. She wraps her arms around me and begins to rock. “Durin will always come for you. Don’t you see? He’s your scent match.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “Have you lost your mind? Fae don’t have fated mates. They don’t even take mates at all. They just fuck until they tire of each other and move on to the next.”

“It’s in the way you cling to that cloth like it’s your lifeline,” she whispers. “And the look he’s given you each time he has to leave, like he’s parting with his very soul. I’ve seen many pairings in my life, but none have ever radiated the energy the two of you share when you’re together. Call it a mother’s intuition, but I feel an overwhelming sense of relief and security when you’re with him. Like my role of protecting you is almost complete. You’ll see,” she says warmly.

I can feel her smiling against my cheek. If only I could be half as delirious as she is right now.

“Whatever,” I mutter, deflating in her arms.

“Just promise me,” she whispers, “When he comes, go with him. Embrace the life fate has always intended for you. Leave me here to win the pack’s favor for him.”

I hate the idea of leaving my mother here if I were to escape. I doubt I’ll have to worry about that, though. Durin isn’t coming for me. Yeah, his scent is intoxicating. It stirs up cravings in me like I’ve never had. I’m helplessly addicted to it and fiercely protective of it. The washing cloth, still tucked securely against my breast, is proof of that. I’d kill anyone who dared try and take it from me.

But that's not enough to make him mine. He's had my heart since I woke up in his arms, even though I had every reason to hate him. Even while I fought my longing to forgive him, my heart belonged to him.

Yet he resisted me with ease. It doesn't matter that it was for an honorable reason.

He's not my scent match. Perhaps I was always destined to be his, but I don't think he was ever meant to be mine.

Hours later, no one has come to retrieve me. I made my way to the ground and have been leaning back against the cold, stiff log. I've stared at nothing for so long that I'm not sure my eyes know how to focus anymore.

I wonder if Bock is trying to make me nervous by leaving me here. Or maybe he forgot about me. He's clearly delusional. I have no fucking idea what he might be trying to prove by ignoring me.

It doesn't matter. I don't have the energy to do anything. This suits me just fine.

Eventually, some movement in the trees catches my eye. I drag my gaze to the side, annoyed at the effort that it takes. Two sprites flit gracefully around the trunk of a small tree. Their delicate wings shimmer in the sunlight, making it seem like the warmer seasons.

The male backs away and ventures higher into the air. He spins in a slow circle, then spreads his wings wide with each flap. The smaller female smiles up at his display of size and strength. She does a little spin of her own before reaching out to him.

He darts back down to join her, but she backs away. Her tiny hands trace her breasts

and hips as she shows him what she has to offer.

He flits over and swiftly pulls her into his arms. Their wings work together to hold them in the air, somehow never tangling. They touch their noses together and whisper their sweet little tinkling sounds. She tickles his ears with her fingertips, making him grin. Then, she moves her hands to his chest, gliding them back and forth like the waves ebb and flow in the sea.

I used to watch this mating dance when I was young. I thought the sprites were just playing. It was cute to me. As I matured, I began to understand what their dance really was. Even so, I've found myself still drawn to the beauty of it.

But I can't bear to watch them right now. They're happy, and I'm miserable. Each movement reminds me of what I've lost. Their sweet, innocent joy is making me bitter.

I wait until they move farther away to avoid startling them, then push myself up and head back into the tent.

There will be more of them. They mate during the Still Season. Sprites all around will be dancing and pairing with their mates in hopes of creating new life. To bless the realm with more mischievous sprites to spread their chaos. They're still as amazing to me as they've always been. It's just too sweet to bear right now.

Maybe even from now on. I can't imagine this hurt ever going away.

I look around for somewhere to lie down, not even considering the bed. I settle on taking the floor at the back of the tent and drag my body in that direction.

On the way, I slam into something sharp, sending me crashing to my knees.

I rip my dress up to check my stomach, which feels like it's been split down the center. I brace myself for the sight of blood gushing out of a gaping wound. But there's not even a scratch or bruise from the impact.

Confused, I look around to see what I might have walked into. I search everywhere but find nothing in the path I took.

The stabbing pain returns, sharper and more persistent than before. I cry out and collapse onto my side, protecting my belly as I writhe in agony.

I'm reminded of how my heat began, stumbling through the cave before being lost to the fever. Could I be in heat when I'm carrying a pup? Why would my body try to conceive again when it's already nurturing a new life?

No... The pain has made me delirious. This isn't a heat. This is it . My pup is coming.

A surge of joy cuts through the pain, and I smile as I struggle to my feet. It hurts, but I know what to do. I've overheard countless births in my life. One word has always stood out to me. Walk.

I pace the length of the spacious tent, grateful Bock's is bigger than the rest. As I walk, I hold my stomach tightly, finding relief in the pressure. Vaegon pushes back against my hands, and I can feel him innately moving himself into the right position.

I swell with pride in his strength. I don't need to call for help. My son is capable of entering the realm on his own.

After more laps and shaky breaths, piercing light suddenly floods the tent. I crouch instinctively and hiss at the silhouette standing in the gap.

"Oh, Rue, look at you. You're such a good mother already."

The voice is filled with the same pride in me that I feel for my own son. My fangs retract as a sob escapes my lips. “Madda,” I cry softly. “He’s coming.”

“Yes, he sure is,” she says, hurrying to my side. “Now is the time to cheer up. You have a little life to focus on.”

She’s right. Vaegon might be the only piece of Durin I’ll ever see again. I owe him the whole realm I’m bringing him into. And that includes the environment he grows up in. He’s worth more than watching his mother be passed around.

I’m ready to fight back. I’ll get us out of here. Even if it means waiting until he’s strong enough to help me.

This is not my fate. Vaegon is.

Mother paces with me for quite some time, holding me through each wave of pain. I stifle my cries to prevent drawing anyone’s attention. This moment is meant for my family alone. The ones that are able to be here, at least.

When the pain becomes unbearable, Mother gently guides me to lie down on the bed. Though this bed disgusts me, I find comfort in it as Mother helps bring the beautiful, blue-haired pup into the realm.

She swiftly cleans his face and eyes, then wraps him in her apron before handing him to me. Her face glows with pride as she watches me cradle Vaegon to my chest.

He already has a full head of blue hair, and his cute little ears are pointy and long. Not as long as Durin’s, but much longer than mine. His cheeks are adorably full, as all pups are. Though the warm bronze of his skin and the ethereal beauty of a fae are unmistakably from his father.

Instead of crying, he lets out a growl and latches onto my breast to nurse. I laugh at his already fiery spirit. He'll be as fierce as he is handsome.

My Omega is so proud. Happier than I've ever felt her. Instead of Vaegon's kicks and elbows, I now feel her jumping up and down inside me.

"He's perfect," I say to my Omega while smiling up at my mother.

The love I already have for Vaegon is so strong it almost hurts to breathe. Nothing can take this feeling from me. Not even when Bock strides in and interrupts our moment.

He looks down at Vaegon without emotion. "How long until she's healed?" he asks my mother.

This miracle of life means nothing to him. My joy as a mother doesn't affect him in the slightest. All he cares about is when he can get what he wants out of me.

I laugh to myself at the mess I've made of his bed and stare down into my pup's blue eyes like he's the only one here. I end up completely forgetting about Bock until he takes a step closer to me.

My fangs reemerge, and the growl that erupts from my throat is from a whole other realm. I clutch Vaegon tightly, concealing him as best I can while baring my teeth at the Prime.

He freezes, then slowly retreats. I hiss and continue to stare him down, daring him to change his mind.

His expression hardens, and he turns to my mother again. "Find me when she's healed," he barks.

The selfish bastard is itching to mount me and claim me the second my body can handle it. Well, he's going to have a tough time accomplishing that. I'm not letting go of this pup. Not for a second, not for anyone.

He's mine. I know there's something big in store for him. It's my job to protect him until he's strong enough to carry it out. And there's no one in this realm—Alpha, queen, or otherwise—who can stop me from fulfilling that duty.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

Farris rushes toward me as soon as I break through the tree line. "I think I know where they are!"

"Show me," I say, already moving forward even though I don't know which direction to go.

My body trembles with the pent-up rage and worry I was forced to swallow down all night. I didn't sleep for a single second. I just paced the length of my room while praying no one could hear my restless footsteps.

As soon as the pink sun showed itself, I threw open my door and stormed out of the castle. No one gave me a second glance.

As we move deeper into the forest, the last thread holding me together begins to fray. Daylor must have stayed close after the queen was done with me. I'll find a way to repay him for that. But, right now, I have to find Rue.

"It's a couple of hours from here," Farris says, squeezing between some bushes. "I tracked the wolf prints. I couldn't get my eyes on Rue, though. I hit a wall of Alphas every time I tried. They either heard or smelled me no matter what illusion I used."

He notes my glowing hands and looks at me apologetically. "Sorry, Durin. I don't have the power you do. I'm no match for even one Alpha. I couldn't get any closer."

"Don't apologize," I say firmly. "You tracked them down. That has saved me a ton of

time. Just get me close. I'll take care of the Alphas."

"I'll illusion us when we get there. Even if they sense you, you'll have an advantage."

I nod, and we continue in silence, keeping a steady pace. My chest burns, and my stomach twists, urging me to run instead of walk. But I need to save my energy. From what Farris said about the Alpha wolves, it seems Rue has been taken to a shifter camp. There's no way of telling how many Alphas will stand in my way.

Farris finally comes to a stop where the trees begin to thin. "Any closer, and they'll spot us."

The trees are sparser here. The ground is unnaturally smooth, worn down by the repetitive laps of wolves patrolling their territory. Fresh prints are etched into the damper parts of the dirt, soon to be smoothed over by time. This is definitely the edge of a shifter camp.

"Sprites are everywhere right now, getting frisky," Farris whispers. "Let's be sprites again. Don't worry; I won't forget your cute little skirt."

I grunt at his attempt to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, my magic is not amused. I look down at my sprite form as soon as it appears. It's all very convincing, except for my glowing blue hands. Somehow, my magic has broken through the illusion.

"Shit," Farris mutters, rubbing a tiny hand over his little sprite face.

"Okay, something that glows then," I say, scrambling to recall any lesser fae that might get away with glowing hands.

We spend seconds that feel like hours trying to think of something. But all my patience was drained over the long night. I can't wait any longer.

“Just remove it,” I growl. “Take it off.”

Farris quickly lifts the illusion. I’ll just have to be me and get Rue the fuck out of here. There’s no telling what that sick Prime of hers has done. I can’t leave her with him a second more.

“Stay here, or go home,” I tell Farris. “I don’t want you in the middle of this. It could get ugly.”

I don’t wait for a response, charging deeper into the camp. He’s smart. I know he’ll keep himself safe.

About a minute later, the air feels warmer than it should be. And it’s too quiet. Instinct tells me there’s an Alpha close. He’s sure to be in wolf form, so I keep my gaze low, scanning near the ground for any sign of him. In seconds, he appears in my periphery, but I keep my face pointed straight. Just knowing where he is will be enough.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” I say as I push deeper into the shifter territory. “So, don’t make me. I’m just looking for someone.”

Despite my rage for Rue’s Prime, I’m not planning on harming him or his Alphas. But if they force me, I’ll do whatever’s necessary to get her out of here. I just hope I’m not too late to stop whatever horror she ran from.

I keep going, not even breaking my stride when the Alpha lunges at me. I simply raise my right arm, warning him off with a burst of blue flames. Undeterred, he foolishly continues his attack. He latches onto my wrist as if his drool could snuff it out.

It blazes on, severely burning his snout. A yelp escapes his jaws as he jumps away

from me. He begins rubbing his nose in the dirt, trying to dull the pain.

I leave him behind, but I pick up the pace. Alphas heal fast. Ridiculously fast. I may only have seconds before he's on me again. I've got to reach the heart of the camp where the rest of the shifters should be.

The wolf sends out a warning howl ahead of me. Looks like I'll be facing far more than just one wolf by the time he heals.

I can hear him panting behind me as I charge forward, waiting for his packmates to arrive. It doesn't take long before two wolves appear on either side of me. One a sleek black, the other a blend of brown and white. Both with sharp fangs and thick fur around their necks to protect their throats.

The only clear path is ahead of me, but I can't outrun Alpha wolves. My only choice is to use my magic.

Defeating three wolves would be easy. I still don't want to harm them, though, so I decide to use my magic defensively. I cast a crackling web of blue energy around me, forming a protective barrier between them and myself. The magic pulses intensely, no threat of running out.

I'm no fucking vessel. This magic is mine.

The wolves skid to a halt. Their paws dig into the dirt as they realize the danger they're facing. They growl and snap in frustration, helplessly watching the intruder close in on their camp. I almost feel bad for them. They're just trying to protect their pack.

But they didn't protect Rue when she needed it. They don't deserve my pity.

The black wolf moves to strike. “Stay back!” I yell, slowing my pace to better anticipate their moves. “I just need Rue.”

The wolf races out in front of me and shifts instead of attacking. “You can’t take Rue,” he says cautiously, eyeing my magic. “She belongs to the Prime.”

That confirms it. Rue really is here.

My heart pounds erratically, knowing I’m so close to finding her. Ignoring the Alpha, I charge forward, desperate to get to her.

The heat from my magic brushes against him as I pass. Leaves and dirt fly up around him as he frantically scrambles backward.

He must shift back after that because, a moment later, three wolves run ahead to warn their leader. I follow in the direction they fled, knowing they’ll lead me where I want to go. More wolves emerge as I get closer, encircling me. But they’re too wary of my magic to attack.

I can almost feel Rue’s presence as I break through the trees into a cleared area filled with tents. I stop, scanning the silent camp to choose which one to search first.

Before I can take a step, a large, angry Alpha appears before me. He stands as tall as me but with a broader frame and fangs the size of my fingers. His power ripples around him in an obvious warning. He might be intimidating if not for my amplified magic.

And my uncontrollable hatred for him.

He’s the Prime. The one who terrified Rue. The one who hunted her down like prey and dragged her back to his camp.

Rue is a treasure. I can't fault him for wanting her. But he has no right to force his own will upon her. I'm itching to use this lethal magic to punish him for that. But I'd prefer to let Rue give me the order.

I give him a quick once-over with my eyes for his efforts. "You're certainly impressive," I tell him. "But I'm here for Rue. I won't be leaving without her, no matter how powerful you may be."

The other Alphas stare uneasily at the net of blue energy surrounding me. This arrogant bastard, however, refuses to stand down. If he were any other leader, I might respect him for it. But he needs to understand that today will not be his day for glory.

"It's not my intention to hurt you. But have no doubt, I won't think twice if you refuse to let Rue leave with me."

"What makes you think she wants to leave with you?" he asks, crossing his thick arms over his muscular chest. "Even if it were up to her."

"Ask her," I say, hoping he'll bring her out where I can see her. "Let her speak for herself."

The smug look that spreads across his face is unsettling.

"Fine," he agrees. "But don't be so confident, Consort. I doubt she'd choose to go anywhere with you. Not after learning what an especially revolting fae you turned out to be."

Rue knows?

The blow hits so hard that my magic nearly falters. The heat wants to withdraw back inside and put my heart out of its misery.

If she does know, then he's right—she won't come with me. What am I supposed to do then? Leave her here with this Alpha she despises? Force her to come with me, someone she probably hates just as much?

My magic flares so high at the thought, the Prime has to step back and shield himself from it. But when he recovers, his righteous look returns and makes my decision clear—Rue is coming with me.

She can hate me, but at least she'll be able to hate us both while enjoying her freedom.

“It doesn't matter whether she wants to come with me,” I snap. “I know for a fact she doesn't want to be here with you . Why do you think you had to drag her back? Why do you think she disappeared in the first place?”

A ring of growls rumbles around us. The Alphas step in closer to support their disgraceful leader. Rue was right. This pack is infected. I'd love to clean it out. But my only goal here is to find Rue and get her the fuck away from them.

“Oh, really?” the Prime sneers. “Then why has she spent the past two nights in my bed?” He lifts his chin to the sky and curls his lip at me. “She's mine, fae. You have no claim to her.”

The strike lands right where he wanted it.

Rue could have changed her mind about him after learning who I really am. He's powerful, fully capable of protecting her and the pup. He's not tied to the queen's bed, but free to dote on her like a good mate should.

Has he become more appealing to her after seeing what a filthy piece of shit I am?

My magic flickers in and out as the drive behind it slips away. What am I worth without Rue? The mission that once defined me feels so trivial now. If I'm not even honorable enough to defeat this loathsome Alpha for Rue's affection, how can I possibly hope to save an entire realm? And why would I even want to?

"I belong to no one!"

The strength in Rue's beautiful voice slices through the air, flooding me with relief. She's okay. And she's not enamored with this foul beast in front of me.

Everyone turns to look at her, but none are as deeply affected as me. I'm frozen, spellbound by her beauty and the pointy-eared pup nestled in her arms. I watch his little chest rise and fall with each breath. His tiny fingers tangling in her hair.

My fate and future stand in their glory, just out of my reach.

"He's here," I whisper.

Rue doesn't look at me. I wish she'd at least spare me a glance. I'd kill for a hint as to how she feels toward me. But she just clutches our little Vaegon tightly as she glares at the arrogant Prime.

He ignores her, keeping his sights on me. A shadow lurks in his eyes that wasn't there before. An eerie calm settles over his features, reminiscent of the depraved queen herself.

His tone seems to have shifted significantly after witnessing my reaction to my son.

"You may take the pup," he says cordially. "He's the real reason you're here, isn't he? Do as you wish with him, but regardless of what Rue claims, she does belong to me."

Instead of cowering, she takes a courageous step toward him. “No one will take this pup from me. I’ll decide where he belongs.”

I long to reach for her, but my magic still flows from my fingertips. I’d never direct it at her or my son. But there’s no way I’m allowing this Alpha, or anyone else, to get anywhere near them.

Luckily, the queen’s magic has woven so deeply into my own that it readily bends to my will. I can still protect myself as I protect Rue, even from a distance.

I open the front of the barrier I created and extend it outward. Flames spring to life, forming two straight lines in a clear path straight to Rue. Shifters leap aside as the fire races across the ground they’d be standing on.

Rue ignores the flames as they curve protectively around her. Once my barrier is complete, she immediately strides toward me like she expected this all along. I shrink the path as she draws nearer, leaving only a ring of fire around us once she’s by my side.

I peek down at her neck, and one of the knots in my stomach unfolds. She hasn’t been claimed.

The Prime has lost, but he refuses to surrender. Words are the only weapon he has left, but he wields them with deadly precision.

“When the queen finds out you’ve sired a son with someone else, she’ll kill you. Then she’ll kill them both. You pretend to be so noble, protecting the poor shifters, but you’re just another pawn for the queen.”

He’s right. Deceiving Rue makes me no better than them. But what of his own actions? I trust Rue’s judgment. I don’t need the details. This Alpha is just as

wretched as me.

“We’ll go with you,” Rue says loudly, pulling my gaze back down to her face.
“Thank you for your mercy toward my pack.”

She glances to the side, and I follow her gaze and find her mother being restrained by a large, frustrated Alpha. I open my mouth to demand he let her go, but she gives me a smile and shakes her head. I look over to Rue, hoping she’ll give me the go ahead. But she doesn’t. She narrows her eyes slightly and walks around me.

“Let’s go,” she says.

Neither of them seems to want me to intervene. Regardless of my age or title, I’m in no place to make decisions for Rue and her mother. I reluctantly turn and follow her, leaving her mother behind.

I raise the height of the flames around us so no one could possibly try to attack us from behind. We’re secure.

But as we move away from the camp, I can’t help but worry that I just destroyed any chance I may have had of getting these shifters on my side.

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Rue

Neither of us speak until we've made it well past the pack's borders. I've been trying to digest just how powerful Durin's magic is. I feel foolish for believing he'd have any trouble rescuing me.

He's been hypervigilant, continuously scanning the forest to be sure we weren't followed. I think we're safe at this point, so I try to break the tension. We'll need to talk eventually.

"We're safe, little one," I coo at Vaegon. He's been watching the flames dance around us since we left. "Your father used his pretty fire to rescue us."

Durin stops, and the blue flames surrounding us flicker out. He turns and tentatively lowers his eyes to the tiny version of himself cradled in my arms. I hear his breath catch as he finally feels safe enough to focus on his son. His eyes soften, and he reaches out, gently tracing his finger along the delicate bridge of Vaegon's nose.

Vaegon responds with a short growl, followed by what almost looks like a little smile.

"He's incredible," Durin whispers.

I start to offer him to hold Vaegon, but something pulls his attention to the shadows around us.

"My friend, Farris, is gone," he says gravely. "I was hoping he might illusion us once

I got you out of there.” His eyes slide back down to the pup. “I should glamour him. We can’t let him be seen.”

Because he’s a mixed fae shifter. If we cross paths with any fae, soldier or not, they’ll try to take him from me. Durin could easily protect us. But defending a shifter and her mixed fae pup would undoubtedly raise suspicions against him. As much as I hate it, he still has an important job to do.

“Fae can glamour others?” I ask him, stalling. I don’t know how to allow Vaegon’s perfect little face to be changed.

“Not usually,” he says with a playful grin. Like the ones he used to give me before all this happened. “I’m just better than everyone else.”

I give him a small smile, but it quickly fades as Vaegon’s safety weighs on me. I have to allow him to change our son. We can’t leave him at risk.

“You’re right,” I say, slumping my shoulders. “He’s too easy to spot. If you can do it, then do it.”

He nods, looking at me cautiously. “I’ll just change his hair color and ears. Maybe soften his features a bit. But that’s all.”

With a gentle hand, he brushes his fingers along Vaegon’s head and the length of his ears, subtly changing them to look more like that of a shifter. As he contours the sharp lines of Vaegon’s face, a slightly altered version of our beautiful son emerges.

His hair is now black, with a hint of blue still showing. His face is smoother, and his ears look more like mine. I already miss his adorable fae features, but they’ll be back. He’s still cute this way. More importantly, he’s safer. That’s what really matters.

“We should go,” Durin says quietly.

I lift my eyes to the forest surrounding us. “Where?” I ask.

He knows the realm far better than I do. And I’m willing to follow wherever he decides to lead me. I trust him, even if he withheld the truth from me. I understand why he did it. It wasn’t because he wanted to hurt me. I think it was because he was afraid of losing me.

“I’m not sure,” he admits with a hint of embarrassment in his bright eyes. “You and your mother did an amazing job with your last place. I doubt I’ll be able to find anything as perfect. But I’ll find the safest place that I can.”

As soon as he’s finished speaking, the fallen leaves at our feet begin to rustle. We watch in awe as a dryad’s root emerges from the ground beneath them and points straight ahead. Needing no other convincing, I set off in that direction, closely followed by Durin.

The dryad’s have helped me many times before without reason. I trust them. If they’re leading the way, I know they’re leading us to safety.

The dryads shake the limbs of their great trees to create a path to guide us. I whisper my gratitude to them as we walk, stuck in uncomfortable silence again. I’m not sure how to break the tension this time since Vaegon has drifted off in my arms.

Durin clears his throat. I look up and find his eyes fixed on the ground as he speaks. “Did the Prime hurt you?”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “You came for me in time.”

He lets out a long breath, and some of the tension falls from his shoulders. “Good.”

His next question takes a few moments to get out. I remember how horrible it felt when he rejected me. It seemed like I'd done something wrong and changed the way he felt about me. He's probably worried about how I see him now. I'll give him the time he needs to find his words, but I'll be ready to speak up for him if his courage falters.

"How much do you hate me?" he finally asks, still avoiding my eyes.

I shift Vaegon to my other arm but continue walking to make Durin more comfortable. "I don't hate you at all," I say honestly. "I was hurt when I found out. I would have preferred to hear it from you instead of a piece of shit Alpha in front of the whole pack he dragged me back to."

"I'm so sorry," he whispers, closing his eyes. "I kept trying to tell you, but I lost my courage every time. I thought you'd send me away. The thought of never seeing you again was even more debilitating after I learned about Vaegon."

I look down at the pup's peaceful face. "I understand that. And I finally understand why you rejected me."

He steps in front of me, bringing my steps to a halt. His hands brush along my arms softly, sending chills across my skin. But he pulls them away too soon, as if he's not sure he should be touching me.

"I was rejecting myself, Rue. Never you," he says firmly. "I wanted you so badly. I always have. But you deserve better than me. Someone clean. Someone pure."

He turns away and begins walking again, unable to face what he considers the truth. My heart cracks to know he's been feeling this way about himself. He doesn't know just how well I can relate. I never told him why I hated the Prime so much. Out of my own shame, I kept what was intended for me a secret. He has no idea that I was

running from a very similar nightmare to the one he's been living.

"Durin," I say, reaching for his arm to stop him. "I didn't tell you everything, either."

He stops and looks back at me quietly, searching my face for answers.

"The Prime..." I pause, needing a breath before I can continue. "The Prime shares his Omega mate with his Alphas. All of his Alphas. His last mate was so destroyed that she snuck away, looking for someone or something to kill her. She succeeded. So, the Prime decided to take the next Omega who presented as his new mate."

The look of horror on his face makes me want to comfort him. But the tension in his posture holds me back.

"It was you..." he says. "You presented first. That's why you ran."

I reach out and take his hand, locking my fingers with his. "Yes, that's why I ran. But running wasn't an option for you, was it? Not if you wanted to help everyone who needs you."

I can't imagine what he's had to endure at the hands of that evil bitch. The patience he's had all this time, waiting until the right moment to strike, is incredible. He must want to rip her to shreds every second of every day.

"I should have killed that wolf when he first stepped in my way," he growls, gripping my hand tighter.

I'm shocked to find his anger directed at Bock, not the queen. He's thinking of me, even though he's been wronged far worse.

"You saved me from him," I say, pulling his hand against my chest. "You couldn't

escape your scars, but you prevented mine.”

His free hand is clenched in a fist, telling me he’s not convinced. “Thank you for saying that,” he says. “But I’m stained. I can never wash away what she’s forced me to do. It will cling to me for the rest of my life. You shouldn’t have to settle for me.”

I realize the trees have stopped rustling. It’s like the dryads are patiently waiting for us to finish. I’m grateful for the moment because Durin cannot be allowed to hold onto those thoughts. They’re so wrong.

As much as I hate Bock, one thing he said was true. There’s no shame in something you had no control over. I need to convince Durin of that before he spends another second feeling this way.

“Our bodies can be dirty, but nothing can soil the soul. The only filth that can stain us is from within, born from a wicked heart. Things that happen to you cannot tarnish you.”

His brow creases as he considers my words. There’s so much shame and anger on his face. But there’s also a spark of hope.

“If I’d stayed and accepted my fate,” I rush to continue, “I wouldn’t feel like I was unclean. They could take my freedom and what they wanted from my body, but they could never strip me of my purity. That comes from my soul.”

He reaches out and gently strokes Vaegon’s hair, seeming to find comfort in the motion. I think my words are reaching him, but I don’t want to give him the chance to argue.

“Your heart is far purer than mine. I was okay with the next Omega suffering in my place. I ran from my fate because I was proud. You faced yours to help others.”

He moves his hand to my jaw and tilts my face up to meet his gaze. “It was not your fate if it didn’t unfold. Fate always gets what it wants. You were never meant to be the Prime’s mate. You were meant to make this beautiful pup with me. And to escape... with me.”

He’s right. We’ve faced some difficult things already, but none of it has been in vain. Something precious has already come from our suffering. Perhaps we have more blessings in store for us.

I decide to create a small one right away. Taking advantage of his closeness, I lean in and press my lips softly against his.

A wave of excitement crashes over me, igniting a warmth I thought I’d lost. One that I don’t need to be afraid to show. As I move back, I let my smile bloom for him to see.

His own smile follows as he turns his eyes to the little bundle in my arms. He gently takes Vaegon from me and snuggles him up to his chest with one arm. Then, he slips his hand behind my head and presses our mouths together again.

He bites my lips and licks my teeth, letting his tongue roam free. I shiver as the desire I’ve suppressed for so long rushes through my veins once again.

At first, I buried it because I thought he had used me. Then, I stifled it further, convinced he had rejected me. When I was taken, I tried to let it die, thinking I’d never see him again.

But now, I think it’s finally safe to fall for him.

Durin pulls back to take a breath, but I lean in and pull in a lungful of the comforting scent of crescent nuts and fresh-cut wood. All the hurt and fear begin to fade. I

wonder if Mother was onto something about scent matches.

I pull the washing cloth from my binding and run it along his neck, where his scent is strong. Then, I tuck it away, feeling a sense of security having part of him to keep with me.

Durin kisses the top of my head and takes my hand. “Let’s get somewhere safe. If this little guy stays asleep, I can give you a lot more of my scent to carry around with you.”

I cover my face as if the dryads can see me blush. If they do, they don’t comment on it. They just start the rustling back up, urging us to move forward.

We walk for quite a while, our soft conversation blending in with the sounds of the trees. Durin fills me in on everything he’s learned. What stands out most to me is the alchemist. He’s already found a way to help the mixed fae. Could he one day find a cure for our son’s bloodlust?

Hope fills my heart as we walk, guiding me toward the future and away from the wounds of my past.

Durin stops suddenly, tugging me to a halt. “I know where we are,” he whispers. “But how? This isn’t the way I came before.”

Before I can ask where, a tranquil voice falls from the sky and settles over me like a fluffy cloud.

“Of course it isn’t.”

I gasp when a pale, fae-like figure appears seconds after the voice fades. He’s tall and lean and strikingly beautiful like Durin. He also has similarly pointed ears. Yet,

there's something distinctly different about him. I just can't put my finger on what.

White, silken hair falls down his back, while dark, piercing eyes contrast sharply with his pale complexion. He wears a long tunic that looks almost like a robe. It's made from the softest-looking green fabric I've ever seen. But it's somehow humble, like it's spun from simple yarn that anyone could afford.

I'm not sure how long I stare at his ears before the realization sets in—he's an elf.

An elf!

My heart stutters as I behold what has always seemed like a myth. I've never seen an elf before. I've only heard stories shared as entertainment at pack gatherings. But they're no myth. Elves are obviously quite real.

I realize I'm grinning foolishly, so I quickly lower my eyes and bare my neck in reverence. He's no shifter, but hopefully, he'll understand it's significance. Especially if he's angry over our presence here.

"What do you mean, Of course it isn't?" Durin asks, unfazed by the mystical creature. "This place is nowhere close to where I found you before."

"An elf is only found if he wishes to be," he says. "The dryads led you to me, just as they did last time."

"Last time?" Durin asks, frowning in thought. "They were certainly being more subtle then."

He must be the one Durin told me about. I steal a glance at the elf who I suspect our son is named after and jump when I find him looking directly at me.

“Who is she?” he asks.

“This is Rue,” Durin says, still proudly holding my hand. “And this...” he adds, giving the elf a mischievous grin. “This is Vaegon.”

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Durin

The stoic elf looks down at the handsome youngling in my arms. Elves are exceedingly difficult to read. But since he didn't have a smart-ass comment about me using his name, I think he might be honored. Or, at the very least, amused.

"Remove his glamour," he orders.

It's not the response I'd expected. It's pointless to question an elf, though. I remove the glamour and watch him study my son's peaceful face.

"He's yours," Vaegon says, lifting his eyes to Rue and me. "Joy and light to you both."

I grin and look over at Rue, who's been staring up at him in shock.

"Thank you," she whispers, reaching for our son without looking away. I hand him over and kiss the top of his head before returning the glamour.

"Why are you here?" Vaegon asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I'm not entirely sure," I admit, sliding my arm around Rue's shoulders. "Rue was taken by an oppressive Alpha she'd previously fled from. I rescued her, and then the dryads led us here."

"Were you able to exact your revenge?" he asks.

I've been so consumed with my plan against the queen that it takes me a moment to realize he's referring to Mitah.

"Indeed," I say, standing a bit taller. "Thank you for your help. I'm on a new mission now to take down the queen."

"I see," he says, eyeing the crest on my cloak. "From within, I take it."

I nod. "The kelpies seem on board to help. They've granted me passage through their territories. I hope to persuade them to fight once I have a more concrete plan."

I quickly fill him in on the shifters working to thin out the nobility, those inside the castle whom I count as allies, and the queen's odd obsession with the mixed fae and change of seasons. I'm not sure whether he's impressed or skeptical. I decide to share my most significant asset, something I've kept close to my chest until now. Hopefully, it will pique his interest if nothing else has.

"The queen shared some of her power with me."

That pulls a reaction out of him, a slight widening of the eyes that only lasts a second. "Why would she do that?" he asks.

"She discovered that I can nurture magic, something even I didn't realize," I say, glancing at an equally surprised Rue. "I think she's trying to grow her own magic in me, much like she's been storing her magic in the mixed fae."

"Her magic is failing," Vaegon says, looking over my shoulder.

"Or running out," I suggest. I turn my head to see what he might be looking at, but there's nothing there.

“That’s wonderful,” Rue gasps, pulling my attention back around. “That will help you defeat her.” Her eyes shine so bright that even an elf should be touched by her hope.

But this one isn’t. “If you intend to ask us to fight alongside you, we will not,” he states, causing Rue’s face to fall.

I turn and shoot him an irritated look. “I have no intention of asking you to go against what you believe. I didn’t even mean to show up here today.”

“Why would the dryads lead us here?” Rue asks quietly. She sways back and forth, looking down at our pup instead of the elf who just crushed her spirit.

Her question is valid. The dryads had to know the elves wouldn’t fight. How is this conversation helping anything?

I decide to ask Vaegon to direct us somewhere safe instead of wasting more of our time. Before I can do that, there’s a noticeable shift in the air.

It’s thinner. I feel less weighed down. It’s also warmer, easing the tightness in my lungs from the cold, dry air.

I clamp my eyes shut when a sudden piercing light replaces the forest around us. When I open them again, we’re standing on the bank of a broad, crystalline pond in the center of a wide clearing. The water is so clear I can see every creature and plant thriving beneath the surface. Elves wade in the water as if it’s the middle of the Radiant Season again.

I hold Rue close and spin around to scan the rest of our surroundings. I think we’re still in Faerie, but it looks so foreign. Lush grass replaces the crunchy, dead leaves and gnarled roots that were beneath our feet. Unfamiliar plants peek out from a forest

of tall, uniform trees surrounding the clearing on all sides. Elves stroll gracefully across the grass in their simple robes or tunics.

They all look like Vaegon with pale skin and hair and dark, piercing eyes. Some chat quietly in small groups, while others sit alone and enjoy the warm sunshine.

“Wow,” Rue breathes. She gently bounces the pup in her arms as she takes everything in. “It’s beautiful here.”

“Come. We must see the Hendama,” Vaegon says as he turns and heads toward the forest.

I have no idea what that means, but we don’t have much of a choice. I hold Rue close to my side as we cross the clearing and follow him into the trees.

There are no huts or tents that I can see, making me wonder where the elves sleep. Do they sleep? Elves didn’t always hide. The smaller villages like mine tend to hold onto old ways, passing stories down to each new generation. I know that Elves once sold their spells and fine linens at the markets. My mother has a very old pair of gloves made by elves that were handed down to her.

Rue and I are getting a glimpse into their hidden world. I have no idea what to expect, but I know that I’m incredibly lucky to be here.

After a few minutes, a lone elf comes into view, sitting on a thick patch of red moss. She stares intently at us as we approach, almost as if she’s been expecting us.

“Hendama,” Vaegon says, closing his eyes and bowing slightly. “The visitors... as you requested.”

His behavior tells me she’s some kind of leader. Or, at least, superior to him. And I

suspect she was communicating with him somehow before he allowed us to enter their territory.

As soon as Vaegon steps aside, the Hendama extends her hand to Rue. “Come, sit,” she says.

Rue carefully lowers herself to the ground across from her. I step forward to join her, but the elf holds up a hand to stop me.

“Not you,” she says firmly. “The little one has a great purpose ahead of him. You, however, have much to do right now. Go.”

My stomach lurches as if I’ve fallen from a great height. Shapes and colors blur around me like I’m caught in a whirlpool. I feel like I’m drowning. But after a few seconds, it all stops, and I find myself back in my room at the castle.

The weight of the cold castle air amplifies my panic, forcing me to my knees. I’ve been separated from Rue and Vaegon again, in the place I hate most in the entire realm. There’s no life here. Finding a breath within these walls is a mission in itself, every single time.

My instinct is to flee the castle, rush back into the forest to find them. It would do me no good, though. The entrance to elven territory isn’t a physical place. No one can find it. I’d end up wandering in circles, setting fire to everything that I came into contact with.

I need to calm myself down. Blocking out the panic, I stomp over to the table near my bed. After pouring myself a glass of water, I take a moment to run through what I know.

Elves are not violent. They won’t hurt Rue or Vaegon. Especially since the dryads

were the ones to lead them there. The Hendama said Vaegon has a great purpose in store for him. She must be some kind of seer. It's the only magic I know of that involves knowledge of the future. If that's indeed what she is, she probably knows what she's doing.

That doesn't make me any happier about being separated from Rue again, though. My chest aches as each labored breath is stolen away by my panic and longing. What exactly am I supposed to be doing here? Suffering alone in my room doesn't seem very productive.

My stomach pinches and lets out a long growl. I realize I haven't eaten since before the celebration last night. Eating is always a good distraction. I suppose I can do that while working out why the seer sent me here. I leave my room in search of food. It's still early in the day for most of the nobles to be awake, so I eat in the dining hall instead of sending for the servants.

I have my fill while wondering what I'm supposed to do first. Meeting some of the shifter leaders face to face seems like a good place to start. They're known for being fiercely aggressive as well as relentless hunters. I think they're also the most likely species to be willing to help me fight. Hopefully, I've done enough to prove my intentions to them so far.

When I've finished my meal, I head toward the main entrance of the castle. Before I can reach the castle doors, though, the last voice I want to hear calls out to me.

I groan internally and try to keep my scowl to myself. I'd hoped not to see much of the wretched monster again for a while. Maybe once I get whatever this is over with, that can happen.

After a deep breath, I hurry over to meet her. I take a knee and look down at the cold stone floor.

“My queen,” I say, shielding my mind from the fresh memories of her bed.

“Stand,” she seethes, her voice dripping with barely contained rage.

My heart stops. All the heat in my body rushes to my skin.

I’ve angered her somehow. What changed? Just last night, she was sighing contentedly, quite pleased with me. I glance up at her expression for any hint of what’s going on.

She’s glaring at me with death in her eyes and lips twisted in disgust. “Did you happen to fuck a shifter after becoming my consort?” she snaps.

My blood turns cold. My heart begins to pound dangerously fast. The instincts to flee or to attack her wage a war on my own body.

I force the storm of my magic back down. This isn’t the time to stand against her. But I can’t lie to her, either. Her question is straightforward this time.

“Yes,” I admit, bracing myself for her anger.

Her silence is far more threatening than if she were to strike out at me. It stretches on while I envision the punishments she might have in mind for me.

How the fuck did she find out about Rue? Why would the seer send me back for this?

I hear footsteps approaching from another corridor, so I decide to explain myself before her anger has time to boil over. I don’t need any nobles witnessing this.

“It was right after you named me as consort,” I tell her, much steadier than I feel. “I was on my way to find the telekinetic for you when I stumbled upon an Omega in

heat.”

“You knew my rule, yet you chose to fuck her anyway?” she hisses. “And a filthy shifter, no less?” Her bony fingers clench and unclench into fists by her sides.

“Her pleas were impossible to ignore,” I say, lowering my head to feign remorse.

Playing the reckless, lustful noble is my only chance out of this.

“I was new to my role, my queen. I didn’t anticipate having to...” I pause, trying to find the least offensive words for it.

“Having to resist such an enticing opportunity,” she finishes with an annoyed sigh.

Her calmer reaction fills me with hope for getting out of this alive. I nod my head sheepishly like a scolded youngling.

“You were weak,” she snaps, her old voice cracking in her anger. “Far from the powerful fae I was first drawn to.”

“Yes. I was weak, my queen. But I haven’t taken another since. Only you.”

I could never have imagined being grateful for ruining my time with Rue in the cave. The queen knows I can’t lie. Maybe the fact that I’ve been faithful since then will help me win back some of her favor.

After considering my words, her glare loses its edge. I don’t fully trust it, though. Her pride is too strong to let my slight against her slide. I might be safe from immediate death, but I know it’s only because of how valuable my magic is to her.

“Good. See it remains that way,” she says, feigning indifference.

With a dismissive flick of her wrist, she commands me to rise. I stand and clasp my hands in front of me, keeping my eyes on the floor.

“I’ve been trying for a spawn for many years now,” she says offhandedly.

This is no trivial revelation. It’s a crucial thread in the tapestry I’ve been struggling to create. My mind immediately begins weaving it in to see how it looks in the bigger picture.

During my lifetime, she’s celebrated the naming of many consorts, each one quickly replaced after only a short time. Then there’s the fact that she mates only at the turn of the seasons. And that’s only after communing with Faerie and visiting the mixed fae to replenish her power.

Maybe she thinks that more power means increased fertility. That would explain why she suddenly chose a powerful noble over a simple pretty face. It’s not just my magic-nurturing ability that caught her attention. She must believe a more powerful fae could provide her the heir her weaker consorts couldn’t.

But two major questions remain: Why does she want an heir so badly, and why is she admitting this to me?

“I want your spawn,” she says flatly, watching closely for my reaction. “The one you created with the shifter.”

I maintain a neutral expression, but inside, my magic churns, threatening to burst and consume me in my own flames.

Why did I assume she only knew about the heat?

My bloodlust and magic fight to break free. My arms ache as I try to keep the fire

from bursting out of my fingertips. The bloodlust begs me to rip out the queen's organs and mount them to the walls of my bedroom. I hold them both back with every ounce of strength I have. Not even a spark can be allowed to escape. She can't know how deeply I care for the pup she's trying to take from me.

Either she's testing my loyalty, or she wants Vaegon for my magic. With only one fae parent, he can only inherit the kind that I have. It would benefit her greatly to have two fae who can grow more magic for her.

I have a feeling it may be for both reasons.

I'm dying to know how she found out about Rue. But I don't dare ask. My only option is to feign indifference and seem willing to comply.

"Understood, my queen," I say, hoping she doesn't push for a more revealing response. I will never hand Vaegon over to her, so I can't honestly agree to her commands.

"Bring it to me, and kill the Omega. She has fulfilled her duty to the realm. She's no longer needed. Do these things, and perhaps I will forgive you for your weakness."

"Thank you for your mercy, my queen," I say, bowing low to hide the terror and revulsion on my face.

Kill Rue? Give Vaegon to this monster?

That's why the seer sent me here. I needed to know that the queen had found out. To speed things up while she thinks she still has a grip on me. This was the catalyst I needed to move forward with my plan. The seer knew that the time had come.

I won't return to the castle after today. I'll warn the empath and handler what's

happened. Then, I'll begin gathering everyone I can convince to join me in battle.

But first, I need to see Rue. If the dryads will help me find her, that is. I'll spend as long as it takes to prove how deeply I love her and how desperately I want to be with her. Only then will I be prepared to move forward.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Rue

Durin vanishes from my sight with a wave of the seer's hand.

My fangs slip past my gums, and a growl begins to form. I hug Vaegon tightly against my chest as if he might be next. Elves have shifted from being fascinating creatures to being a major threat.

My Omega wants to slash the elf's throat then find a way out of here. But I have no idea what the elves are capable of. Stories claim some have power that rivals the nobility. I have to wrestle my rational mind away from my Omega's hold to keep from getting myself killed.

Elves are powerful, but they're also known for their peaceful ways, much like the dryads. The dryads have always been helpful and kind. They brought us here. That's enough to retract my fangs and settle my instincts to fight.

Vaegon and I should be safe with them. My pack certainly won't be able to find us here. All I need to do is show the elves respect while I wait for Durin to return. Hopefully, he'll be back before he faces any serious danger. I can't bear the thought of that being my last memory of him—being ripped out of my hands without warning or a chance at goodbye.

Vaegon wakes and squirms against my tight grip. I let out a sigh and release some of the tension from my shoulders.

"I wish your father wouldn't have put your glamour back on," I murmur,

momentarily distracted by his adorable little face.

“He will need it, Omega,” the seer warns me.

I stiffen as she reaches out to rub the top of his head. I’m not comfortable with anyone but Durin touching him. Still, I decide not to stop her. I know better than to offend someone who’s protecting us.

“How do you know these things?” I ask, watching her run her fingers through his thick hair. “I get that you’re a seer, but why would you know about my son’s future? What is he to the elves?”

She pulls her hand away and gives me a serious look. “He is very important to all of Faerie.”

“Any chance you’d be willing to elaborate on that?” I ask through a yawn.

She stands and gestures for me to follow her. “You need rest. I’ll help you settle in.”

I follow her through the forest I’ve always known, yet it seems so different. It’s more vibrant. The dryads’ trees stand taller and stronger. The plants lining the path have larger blossoms and thicker leaves, still in full bloom as if it’s always the Radiant Season here.

Hedge mice wander by our feet as if there isn’t a predator to fear. I’m used to seeing them dart away at the slightest sound or movement. Here, they seem completely at ease, secure.

But the sprites are the same as always. They zip around, showering us with tinkling songs and gentle breezes from their wings. I smile, able to enjoy them again now that I’m not in such a dark place.

We arrive at a charming hut tucked away among the trees. It's the first dwelling I've seen since we've been here. I wonder if the elves live up in the trees. I glance up above my head but see nothing out of the ordinary.

The hut is larger than the one Mother and I were hiding in, but it gives me the same sense of security. The wood is smooth and unblemished as if the hut had been freshly built. There are two windows, one on each side of the small door. The roof is thatched with thick, yellow reeds, probably from the pond I saw in the clearing.

A sense of comfort falls over me as I follow the seer inside. It's clean and inviting. There's a small kitchen area on one side and a seating area with a table and two chairs on the other. There's nothing else in the room other than two doors set into the back wall.

The seer opens one of them and steps inside. I stick my head in and see a small bassinet and a wooden rocking chair, perfectly suited for a newborn pup. This hut feels like a dream. It's tempting to believe that this kind of security and comfort could be our future.

"The other room has a large bed for you and your mate when he visits," the seer tells me.

"Oh, he's not my mate," I say, my cheeks flushing with how badly I wish it were true. "But I'm glad to hear that he'll be back."

The seer pauses and blinks at me. "He will return. Today, in fact. Don't allow fear to bring you unnecessary distress. Trust fate."

I bite back a scoff. Trusting fate is something I'll likely never be able to do. It's too unpredictable and has turned its back on me too many times. I'm thankful for Vaegon, but fate has repeatedly dumped fear and uncertainty onto my head. Even

worse, it forced the fae I love to go through trials and horrors no one should have to face.

“Feed your pup, and let him sleep. I’ll have a meal waiting for you when you’re done. Then, you can also rest. When you wake up, your mate will have returned.”

Her repeated use of the word “mate” makes me wonder if she’s hinting at something. I’m not sure what all she’s able to see or allowed to reveal, but I’m filled with hope that Durin and I might share a bond like that someday. He’ll have to survive his attack on the queen for that to happen, and the seer hasn’t shared anything about that if she knows.

I nod and take a seat in the rocking chair. “Thank you. Let me know what I can contribute while we’re here. I’d like to do my part.”

“Just rest,” she says, turning away. “Our accommodations are hardly worthy of what you and those you love will be contributing.”

She glides out the door and shuts it softly behind her, leaving me to consider her words. I can’t help but feel uneasy about the meaning behind them.

I hate being in the dark.

Knowing what’s coming means I can prepare for it. But this elf is set on leaving everything to fate. Pressing for answers won’t help. For now, I’ll have to make do with the morsels she gives me. Vaegon is safe here, and that’s what matters most.

I hear the seer moving around in the kitchen while I feed my hungry little pup. I can’t help but be excited about trying elven food. It will probably taste delicious no matter what it is. I haven’t had much to eat today. Or the past few days, really.

After Vaegon has had his fill, I change his wrappings and settle him in the fluffy bassinet. He drifts off immediately with a full belly and a safe, quiet place to rest.

I consider moving the bassinet to the other sleeping room so he'll be with me but decide against it. It might come off as impolite or untrusting. It's not worth risking the security we've found here.

When I slip out of the room, I'm met with the delicious aromas of the meal the seer left for me. In the center, a piece of smoked fish seasoned with various herbs sits on an intricately carved wooden plate. Two smaller plates rest to the side, one with vibrant peppers stuffed with grains and nuts and the other with some kind of sweet, fruity bread. A steaming cup of tea entices me to sit and indulge myself.

I can't help but feel like I've earned this.

I savor every bite, keeping the moans to a minimum to avoid waking Vaegon. The meal is delicious but incredibly filling. I find myself stumbling into the other room in need of sleep.

I leave the door open to hear if Vaegon cries for me, then pull back the blanket and climb in. I've barely settled before falling into a deep, peaceful sleep.

My eyes snap open at the sound of footsteps in the other room. I jump out of bed and rush toward Vaegon's room. The elves scare me, but that won't stop me from painting the floor with their blood. I charge out of the bedroom but stop short when I see Durin watching Vaegon sleep from the doorway.

"You're back!" I gasp, running into his arms, relieved that the seer was right.

Durin holds me tight and presses a gentle kiss on my forehead. A pang of disappointment hits me that my lips don't get the affection.

It quickly fades when I see the worry spread over his striking features.

I watch him walk over and carefully lift Vaegon out of the bassinet. He sits down on the rocking chair with our son nestled in one arm and reaches out for me to join him. I settle onto his lap and rest my head on his chest, staring down at our perfect little pup.

I get it. This worry for Vaegon's safety is heavy. And until this realm is cleaned up, or he's able to defend himself, it will continue to feel that way.

Vaegon wakes and blinks a few times before furrowing his brow and growling at me. But the tension melts away quickly, replaced by a toothless grin that lights up his face. I can't help but giggle as he squints up at his father before sticking out his tongue and beaming once more.

He's so young. I can't tell if these are genuine smiles or simply a pup exploring what his facial muscles can do. Either way, they're precious enough to balance out some of the fear.

"The queen knows about you and Vaegon," Durin says softly, wiping my smile away. "I don't know how, but—"

"Mannus," I hiss quietly, trying not to scare the little one. "That sackless bastard... It had to be him."

"It doesn't matter who did it," he says, resting his chin on top of my head. "What matters is keeping you and Vaegon safe. And you're safe here."

He wraps his free arm tightly around my waist and whispers against my hair. "Promise me you won't try to leave. For any reason."

"Of course," I say, extending my finger for Vaegon to hold. "We won't go anywhere, not without you."

His chest rises with a deep breath, then falls as he lets it out slowly. "Good," he says. "Because the queen wants you gone, and she wants to take Vaegon for herself."

"No!" I growl, turning to see his face. "That is not happening."

"No, it's not," he agrees, threading his fingers through my hair and pulling me back to his chest. "As long as you stay here where it's safe."

"Why does she want our son?" I ask, trying to push back the terror rising in my chest.

"She admitted she's been trying for an heir for ages now," he says, shaking his head. "But I think it's more than that."

"Like what?" I ask, taking Vaegon from Durin's arm and holding him close.

"She probably suspects he'll have the same magic as I do." He bends down and kisses my cheek, which calms me a bit. "She wants it for herself. She can't use Vaegon's magic until it awakens. But he's also vulnerable until then. She could mold him over the years to be like her, convincing him that offering up his power to her is his idea."

"Or, she could simply imprison him until he's old enough for her to exploit his abilities," I say, my voice trembling as I fight back tears. The thought of him chained up in a filthy dungeon is unbearable. I sway gently as if Vaegon is the one in distress, finding comfort for myself in the motion.

“Exactly,” he says, moving his hand to cradle Vaegon’s small head.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, feeling a strong energy fill the room.

“He needs protection,” Durin says firmly. “I’m sharing some of my magic with him. You’re both safe here with the elves, but I’m sure you’ll have to leave eventually.”

The idea of stepping outside of this sanctuary makes me shudder.

“He has only one fae parent, so he’ll inherit my magic,” Durin says. “But I can’t be sure he’ll receive both forms. This way, there’s no question. And, he’ll have the queen’s magic along with them.”

A faint glow from his fingertips tints Vaegon’s cheeks blue. “I’m just giving him what he can hold. It will grow as he matures. By the time he comes into his magic, he’ll be incredibly powerful. No one will be able to make him do anything against his will.”

We know too well what it’s like to have your will ripped away. I’m thankful that Durin can help protect Vaegon against it.

When Durin finishes, Vaegon lets out a wide yawn. His tiny eyes flutter shut, and he quickly falls back asleep. Taking on some of Durin’s powerful magic would surely be tiring for a pup. He’ll probably need to eat again soon, but I’ll let him rest. He’ll tell me when he’s ready. I carry him over to the bassinet and tuck him in, kissing his soft forehead before quietly leaving the room and returning to my bed.

Durin follows me out and closes Vaegon’s door. Once he’s in the bedroom, I lie back, hoping he’ll join me. My heart soars when he climbs on the bed and wraps a long arm around my body, pulling me close.

“How long can you stay?” I ask, glancing nervously at him.

Fate hasn't been kind to me. I'm worried it will rip this moment away before I can even enjoy any of it.

“As long as it takes to make you feel special,” Durin whispers against my mouth.

I melt in his arms. The tension fades away completely. He brushes each lip against my top one, then my bottom one. I wait for the kiss, but his tongue slips in, teasing the inside of my mouth before our lips finally meet.

My stomach and core flutter uncontrollably. I can't help but grip his hair and tangle my fingers in it. I feel the need to weave myself into him until I get the connection I'm really looking for.

His hand glides over my hip and waist but hesitates before reaching my breast. He moves the hand to the bed beside me and looks down at me with concern.

He's doing it again.

My heart begins to crumble. I choke back a sob because if I let one out, they'll never stop.

“I'm sorry I made you feel rejected,” he murmurs, running his nose along my cheek. “And I know you must have felt used after your heat. I want to be with you now, Rue, but only if you desire it.”

He's asking for my permission, not pushing me away.

I doubt he'll ever understand just how much that means to an Omega. He just secured my heart forever. I don't even care that I can't remember my heat. This is the perfect

way to begin a new first time.

“Take me,” I say, guiding his hand where he wants it.

“Are you sure?” he asks, giving my breast a gentle squeeze.

I nod, and he slips his hand into the top of my dress, capturing my lips again. His fingers graze my nipple, sending jolts of pleasure through me as he squeezes and rubs.

I moan softly at the contact with the sensitive flesh. He swallows the sound and slides his hand down my stomach, stopping short of the place that aches most for his touch.

“Are you still sore from the birth?” he asks, his voice a raspy blend of arousal and concern.

“I’m an Omega,” I scoff, proud of my designation for the first time. “I healed before you even showed up to rescue me.

He huffs a laugh and nuzzles my neck. “What an incredible creature you are.”

He lifts the hem of my dress, pulling it up slowly until I can feel the cool air against my wet core. Slick has seeped through my white undergarment and onto my thighs, but he doesn’t shy away from it.

He slips his fingers beneath the fabric, gliding them carefully along my folds through the wetness until they’re covered. Then, he sneaks one between, grazing my clit with a soft, yet effective, touch.

I gasp at the pleasure, instinctively bucking my hips against his fingers. Heat floods my cheeks at my own eagerness. Mercifully, he doesn’t tease me. He kisses my

collarbone and playfully nips at my jaw as he continues his gentle strokes.

I let myself rock into his touch, moaning lightly with every bolt of pleasure from his warm fingers. I've imagined him touching me like this countless times, but the reality far surpasses anything I could ever come up with in my head.

But I want more.

With a light tug, I move his hand away and untie my dress. I slowly pull the layers of fabric away from my body. The more of my skin that's revealed to him, the more his eyes widen with excitement.

Emboldened by his approval, I slide my panties down and toss them to the side. He sucks in a deep breath and takes in what I've presented to him.

"Thank you for giving me another chance," he whispers, tracing aimless paths along my hip with his fingers. "This life wouldn't be worth fighting for if you hadn't. I need you, Rue."

"You have me," I say, pulling his face down to kiss me. "Now, take me."

"I will," he says, kissing me softly. "As often as you'll allow me. I love you."

My heart races, wanting to leap from my chest and into his.

He can't lie. He really does love me.

I should say it back. I want him to know that he's loved just as deeply. But he climbs on top of me and takes my focus away.

He grabs my wrists and pins them together above my head, holding them tightly with

one hand. Then he settles between my legs and crashes his lips against mine.

He takes control of my mouth for a while before slowing the intensity. His lips wander down my neck and across my chest. He spends time on each breast, massaging them and tugging each nipple with his teeth.

His free hand stays busy, caressing whatever it can as his mouth lavishes me with attention.

Alphas are domineering and aggressive. Big and bossy, eager to show off. Durin is far more powerful than any Alpha, yet he offers me tenderness instead. A thoughtful, unhurried journey to make me feel treasured. It's so unlike the proud, selfish mounting of an Alpha, solely focused on his own desires.

Durin is building a connection with me, not seeking to conquer me.

He kisses me quickly, then vanishes. I feel his neck brush against my core just before he latches onto my hip bone. He bites down and sucks hard. Hard enough to mark me.

My legs fall open. I'm left fully exposed to him when he rises to his knees. I don't feel shy, though. I just feel wanted. Still, I can't help but jump when he ventures between them.

He kisses the points where my inner thighs meet my core. I feel his cold breath blowing against my slicked folds as he presses his lips right above my swollen clit. His tongue joins in the teasing, giving tiny licks just outside the target.

I want to roll my hips to claim the pressure I'm dying for. But I force myself to wait and see what he'll do instead.

It only takes a few seconds to realize I'm more impatient than I thought. The waiting becomes too much. I'm just about to growl at him when he flattens his tongue and drags it along each of my outer folds. I moan and push my core up against his mouth, grinding my angry clit against his tongue.

He flicks it up and down right where I need it. I gasp and twitch with each bolt of pleasure as he repeats the motion over and over.

But he pulls away.

I glare at him, but he just smirks. Then, he holds my gaze as he dips the tip of his tongue right into my entrance.

His cocky demeanor falls away as soon as he gets a real taste of me. "It's so sweet," he groans against my core.

He said he didn't kiss me during my heat. Maybe he didn't indulge in this way either. It's comforting to know he's having some firsts with me, too.

I sink into the soft mattress, ready for anything.

He continues with his tongue. It dips and glides, building pressure inside me. When he moans against my clit, a burst of pleasure ripples through my entire body. But it doesn't taper off. I'm on the verge of falling over the edge.

Durin notices and bites my hip sharply. The pain pulls me back, but the marks he leaves only deepen my desire for him.

"Not yet, Rue," he says, kissing his mark. "We're taking our time."

I also want to stretch this out. I'm just desperate for release. A frustrated growl slips

out, followed by a soft whimper at being denied.

“You make such beautiful sounds,” he says, running his thumb along my parted lips.

My cheeks burn furiously. I wonder what other sounds I made for him during my heat. I shudder as I imagine what might he do to coax them out of me again.

He presses a gentle kiss to my stomach and rises to a kneeling position. His long fingers untie his tunic as he begins to shed his clothing. I relax, enjoying the way his bronze skin replaces the dull white of his uniform.

He continues until there’s nothing left but the perfect fae I woke up to in that cave.

My eyes trail down his sculpted chest and stomach before landing on his long, thick shaft. It reaches for me, just as my heart reaches out for him. The head is firm and flushed. The length looks smooth but firm. My mouth waters as I imagine the taste of it.

His stomach flexes as he moves to lie down on top of me, but I hesitate. His body is flawless, and I want him inside me so badly. But I want to pleasure him first. Like he did for me.

I sit up and tug him down beside me, then climb on top of him. His eyes widen, but he doesn’t try to take back control. I push away the lingering nerves and straddle his thighs. “I love you, too, Durin,” I whisper, pulling both of his hands to my chest. “Every part of you.”

He pulls in a deep breath and kisses one of my hands tenderly.

I smile and dive into my task, touching and kissing every bit of skin I can reach. I start at his forehead, then trail all the way down to his ankles. He growls when I

deliberately skip over the most eager part of him.

I can be just as patient as he can.

After a few more passes, I think he's suffered enough. I rest my hands above his knees and slide them along his thighs. My fingers sink between the cords of muscle as they pass. His breaths become shorter as I approach the large, firm sac resting beneath his shaft.

Instead of going there, I zero in on an intriguing area I've never seen before.

I've only seen bare males while they're standing. With his body laid out like this, I can't help but notice the enticing strip of flesh just beneath his balls, begging for my attention.

I gently push his legs apart more to get a better look. Instinct guides me down to trace my tongue along the firm, smooth skin. His cock jerks, and he bucks his hips, but his hands stay locked to his sides.

His sac draws up against him even tighter, but his intoxicating scent is what pulls me in this time.

I bury my nose in the center of his sac and breathe him in. His scent is dizzying, as if I just indulged in all the wine I had turned down from him before.

A warm, euphoric feeling blooms in my chest, and I wrap my lips around the delicate, wrinkled flesh. I suck and nip at him, kissing the base of his shaft just to feel it jump.

A low growl rumbles in my throat as the word mate repeatedly screams in my head.

My gums begin to tingle. I pull back before my fangs can drop and pierce him in such

a sensitive spot.

He moans and grips me by my thick hair, holding me in place. The muscles in his stomach ripple with tension beneath my touch. The head of his cock is dripping. The veins along his shaft swell like they might burst if I don't give him relief.

I check his bright blue eyes for any hint of hesitation, but all I see is blazing desire. I wrap my fingers around his thick shaft and settle between his legs, then take him into my mouth.

The skin is so smooth except for the veins that bulge out along it. He tastes like the forest, warm and familiar. I don't really know what to do now, but I like how this feels.

Asking him how to pleasure him would ruin everything. I doubt I could continue after something so awkward. So, I just let go.

I slide my mouth up and down, sucking, licking, and pausing to give it kisses between breaths. I do what I want and stop wondering if I'm doing things right when his groans fill the air.

He grips my hair tighter, balancing his intensity with gentle thrusts into my mouth. I slowly figure out when to breathe and when to relax as he holds himself back for me.

I want to keep going, but I also want to stop and mount him. To finally feel him inside me. Reluctantly, I pull my mouth from his cock and wipe my face.

He's smiling at me when I look up at him. He's so beautiful that I forget what I'm letting go of and bury my face in his stomach. It takes a few lungfuls of his scent to realize his shaft is caught between my breasts. Resting right there against my heart.

He closes his legs slightly, pressing them against my sides. Then, he thrusts slowly, gliding his cock up and down. I rest my head on his stomach and savor his scent while he uses my body to stroke himself.

After continuing this way for a while, he freezes and holds his breath. I pull away, suspecting he's come too close to his release like I had before.

I rise to my knees and look down at his piercing blue eyes and tousled hair. The sharp lines of his beautiful face and powerful body keep me busy as he takes a moment to recover. I could stare at him all day. My own private feast of the eyes.

But my meal is interrupted when he pulls me down flat against him to kiss me. His erection throbs right against my folds. It's impossible not to rock against. I grab the sheets beside his head and glide my clit back and forth over his hard shaft, bringing myself right back to the edge again.

He grips my ass hard and pulls his hips back. His shaft is left just out of reach. I whimper and grind against his abdomen, desperate to find pressure to replace it.

He hushes me softly and moves his hips forward until the head of his cock brushes against my opening. It stops me short, cutting off the growl that almost escapes.

"Look at me," he whispers.

I bite my lip and meet the glowing blue eyes staring up at me. I hold his gaze when he presses the wide head of his cock against my entrance. My breath catches when he slides it through my slick, but my eyes stay locked on his.

But when he pushes the tip inside, my eyes lose the battle and roll back in bliss.

"Nuh-uh," he murmurs softly. "Open them."

I force my eyes back open, watching the pleasure on his face as he goes deeper. My breaths quicken with each inch of his length that slips past my opening.

It's like being filled back up when you didn't even know you were empty. How did I miss the void before? Now that Durin has filled it, I know I'll never feel complete again when he's not inside me like this.

He pulls me down for a kiss and flips us over, leaving me on my back beneath him. He's impossibly perfect. Tall. Toned by his strength. Every inch of him as beautiful as the next. My hands can't decide where to go.

They end up lying uselessly at my sides as I stare up at him. He holds onto my hips, moving my body in slow, fluid motions. The base of his shaft teases my clit while his girth puts delicious pressure on my inner walls.

Alphas have it all wrong. Submission isn't about giving in. It's an act of trust in your mate. It's feeling safe enough to relax under their control, knowing they'll use it to your benefit.

It's bliss. Incredible. The pleasure builds so rapidly, I fall behind in what to do. Just as I think it can't possibly get any better, I feel Durin somehow expanding inside me.

I know enough about shifter mating to know what this is. I just don't know how it's possible.

"How do you have a knot?" I gasp as my body stretches wider around him. I let out an embarrassingly long moan, earning me a smirk and a gentle kiss.

"I glamour'd one," he says. "I did the same for you during your heat. I'm not sure I could have satisfied you without it. Pushy... remember?"

“Shut up,” I breathe, rocking my hips sharply back and forth around his unexpected girth.

His expression turns serious, and he thrusts hard, making me cry out in pleasure. He jerks and swirls his knot aggressively, pushing my walls to their limit.

I cling to his arms, gasping and moaning until we’re both too close to the edge to pull back.

He grunts and drives deeper. I clamp down on his knot and grind against him. Pleasure hits me from all directions. It tears through my body, finding every bashful inch and pulling it into the pleasure.

Durin releases my hips and lies down on top of me. He slips his arms under me and holds me tight as he gives one final thrust.

His moan is long and warm against my neck. My own breaths come out in little bursts until the final wave crashes and fades.

With all the ways he could have given me release, he picked this one— as one. This is the only memory I’ll ever need.

Durin lifts his head and looks at me with glassy eyes and a sleepy smile. He flops down on his back, taking me with him, and wraps his arms securely around me. I suck in a deep breath now that his weight isn’t pressing down on me.

We lie together as we catch our breath. I grip his knot as long as I can, unwilling to break our connection. But my walls eventually tire. He ends up slipping out of me, along with much of his essence. I resist the urge to gather it and push it back inside me like my instincts want me to. I watch his strong, bronze body rise from the bed and cross the room instead.

“I’ll find something to clean up with,” he says. “And I’ll open both doors so we can hear Vaegon if he wakes. I think we’ve earned a nap.”

“I just napped,” I laugh.

“Well, you deserve a second one,” he says as he heads into the kitchen.

I grin and slip into sleep, barely noticing as he cleans me up and climbs back onto the bed beside me. When Vaegon wakes up, I’ll bring him in here to snuggle with us both before his father has to leave.

For now, I surrender to the comfort of a dreamless sleep, forgetting the dangers that will be waiting for us when we wake.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

“Where are you going?” I mumble, reaching for Rue as she slides out of my arms. “We have more sleeping to do.”

She laughs while slipping on her dress and fastening the ties. “I want our son to snuggle with us.”

I smile and pull on my leathers, listening to her feet padding across the hut. Do I really need to pretend to be some kind of savior? To rescue the realm from its evil queen like some kind of fable? I could stay here with Rue and Vaegon, free from obligations or fear. I’m sure I have something to offer the elves that would earn my keep. Would getting rid of the queen really change anything for them? They seem to have it good here already.

A deadly growl shakes the walls and rips me out of my thoughts.

I rush into Vaegon’s room and find Rue seething down at an empty bassinet. Panic and fury take control of her face. Her fangs protrude menacingly from of her gums. It’s both striking and terrifying, but it’s painful to watch.

Where the fuck have they taken our son?

Rue’s fingers grip the bassinet so tightly that her knuckles have turned white. She screams and turns to the rocking chair. With the strength of an Alpha, she picks the entire thing up and smashes it against the wall.

Straw spills from the cushion, and wood splinters scatter across the floor. She turns to me with a killer's face but pleading eyes before racing out of the hut.

I quickly throw on my boots and chase after her.

She seems to know where she's going. I blindly follow her while I try to convince myself that everything is okay. The elves are extremely selective about who they reveal themselves to. They'd never bring anyone into their hideaway they weren't sure about. Vaegon must be okay.

But why would they sneak him out while we slept?

Whatever they're doing, they've chosen a shitty way to do it. Seeing Rue so distressed fills me with rage. My magic surges to the surface. Flames spread across my hands, and my fingertips crackle with raw energy.

I worry the elves will see it as a threat, but maybe it fucking should be.

The small clearing where we met the seer comes into view. She's there, sitting by a fire with another elven female who's holding our son. He's awake but seems unaffected. Seeing that he's unarmed is a huge relief. But when they see us, the alarm on their faces tells me they're hiding something.

I move to Rue's side, and we charge toward them together, ready to take Vaegon back and demand an explanation.

The seer holds up her hand and casts out some kind of translucent barrier. It ripples over them like water flowing down an invisible dome. Rue reaches the barrier and pounds on it, screaming at them to give Vaegon back to us.

The seer touches his forehead with her hand and calls out a spell over him. "Tulya i

calma en alass?, i orya yáve.”

She seems to have significantly stronger magic than most elves. Whatever she’s doing to Vaegon will be tough to undo. But I won’t even get to try if I can’t reach him.

I press my palms against the barrier and channel my magic into it. The elf holding Vaegon looks panicked as the barrier takes on a bright blue hue.

Rue steps back, and I push harder, pouring more of my power into the dome until it bursts into a cloud of steam. Rue stumbles forward, barely catching her footing before sprinting toward them.

But the seer is quick. She utters a single word and waves a hand over Vaegon and the other elf. They vanish, leaving Rue grasping at nothing.

The seer doesn’t flinch as Rue jumps right in her face, growling viciously around her fangs. Rue’s hands are clenched by her sides. She knows better than to mindlessly attack, but she’s still quite intimidating.

“Give us back our son!” she snarls.

“I shall. When the time is right,” the seer replies evenly.

“Fuck you and your cryptic bullshit!” Rue growls. “He’s mine! How dare you take him while we slept!”

She steps back and takes a breath. Her calmer tone isn’t any less threatening as she continues with wild eyes. “Bring him back to me, and we’ll leave.”

The elf clasps her hands together and bows her head slightly at Rue. “I apologize,

Omega. I didn't wish to upset you," she says. "But it must be this way."

I want to burn a hole in her face, but I can feel an invisible barrier holding back my magic. Vaegon's spell... The one he cast to prevent me from harming any of his kind. It almost feels like he knew this moment was coming.

"What must be this way?" I demand, giving up on my magic. "And why?"

"You are indeed powerful," the seer says, turning her attention to me. "Aside from the queen, you're unmatched by anyone in this realm, even me. But you cannot defeat the queen alone. Your son is the key to her fall."

"He's three days old!" Rue snaps. "How can he be the key to anything?"

Tears stream down her beautiful face as she glares helplessly at the seer. I pull her into my arms, hoping to comfort her and remind her she's not alone.

"You'll see," the elf tells her. "You must trust fate."

"Trust you, you mean," Rue scoffs, wrenching free from my arms. "Why?" she yells. "Why should I trust you after what you've done to us?"

The seer slowly rises to her feet, forcing Rue to lift her head higher and higher to hold her gaze. "This is bigger than you," she says firmly. "Your family was chosen, meaning your hearts are worthy. That is the only reason I'm tolerating your disrespect."

Rue clenches her jaw, holding back her anger. "Please let me have him back. I'll do whatever you say. He's so little... He needs his mother."

"Allina recently had a youngling of her own. She'll look after Vaegon while someone

else cares for her daughter. You are not the only one who will bear the burden of fate's design."

"Where?" I demand, pulling Rue back into my arms. "Look after him where?"

"Another realm. They'll remain there until Vaegon is strong enough to help you. Then, he will return to you."

My heart sinks down into a familiar pit of rage and shame. "The power I gave him... They want him to grow it," I mutter, releasing Rue and stepping away. "I did this. I'm so sorry."

Rue turns to look at me. Her eyes are softer than I'd expected.

"You were protecting him," she says, pressing her hands against my chest. "You didn't do this, Durin. Fate and the elves have allied themselves against us. They did it."

She turns to glare at the seer again. "Which makes no sense, does it?" she asks. "If fate will always play out, why do you think it needs you to intervene? Do you really think so highly of yourself?"

The seer remains calm despite Rue's harsh words. "Seers are not allied with fate. We are its servants, delivering messages to those who need them and ensuring they stay on their correct paths."

"Why does Vaegon's path have to be in a completely different realm?" Rue shouts. "What's wrong with here? No one knows how to find this place."

"His magic will grow faster there. It is the only way."

Rue's anger gives way to her heartbreak. Her shoulders slump, and she whispers at the ground, "Why couldn't I go with him? He'll be scared. He'll think I abandoned him."

"If you'd gone with him, Durin would have no reason to stay here," the seer explains. "He would abandon his mission to be with you and your son." She locks eyes with me and asks, "Am I wrong?"

I don't answer because I can't deny it. I was thinking that very thing only minutes ago.

"Vaegon may be the key," the seer continues, "but Durin's role in this realm is just as important."

She surprises me by resting her hand on Rue's shoulder. "Please, have faith. Vaegon will be safe. If this was done any other way, I couldn't say the same."

The Rue I know would have ripped that hand clean off. But this Rue is too torn apart to register the seer's touch. The life has faded from her eyes. She looks like she can barely keep herself upright.

My own heart cracked when I found out Vaegon was taken, but seeing Rue like this threatens to cleave it in two. I lift her into my arms and hold her as tightly as I can. But I don't know how to hold her together when I'm breaking apart, too.

"Have hope."

The whisper swirls across the clearing like sand in the wind. A feeling of calm settles over me, but I'm still too defensive to let it sink in.

I turn to see who the voice belongs to, and I'm frozen by what I find. A gentle dryad

has emerged from the shelter of his towering tree and is moving gracefully toward us.

Deep blue intertwining roots form his slender body and legs. His long arms stretch out like branches and taper into thin, twig-like fingers. Layers of rough bark cover his face, revealing only golden eyes and thin lips from underneath. Purple saplings sprout from the crown of his head. Their tiny leaves sway with each step he takes like wisps of thin, wavy hair.

I've only caught glimpses of dryads in the forest—glowing, golden eyes blinking in the dark or the tail end of one's body rejoining with its host. I've never seen one fully separated from its tree. I'm surprised to find he's only as tall as I am, so slight next to the massive trunk he emerged from. Yet his spirit wraps me with warmth and tranquility. He feels like the essence of goodness itself.

I set Rue on her feet, hoping his presence comforts her, too. It's so rare for dryads to show themselves. Perhaps they are closer to the elves than the rest of the high fae.

But this dryad isn't here for any elf; he's focused on Rue and me.

"You must believe what the seer tells you," he says. "Time is your greatest adversary in this battle."

"How?" Rue sniffs, staring down at her empty hands. She's too heartbroken to recognize the significance of standing before a dryad like this. "The queen has ruled out of hate for ages. Why the sudden urgency?"

The dryad bows his head to her. "The queen wasn't always evil. Long ago, she ascended to the throne by protecting the realm with her formidable strength. But as the centuries passed, she felt threatened by other fae with powerful magic."

I lower myself to the grass and pull Rue down into my lap, hoping to convey my

respect and attentiveness. The dryads are ancient. They are everywhere and see everything. They communicate across the entire realm, sharing all they know with each other. They usually keep this information to themselves. We need to hang on to every word he says.

Rue relaxes against me and numbly waits for him to continue.

“The queen tried everything to strengthen her magic. She tried stealing it from other fae, but she was unsuccessful. She experimented with potions and spells, all of which ultimately failed. Eventually, she became desperate. Lost. She began offering sacrifices to Faerie in hopes of a blessing.”

“What kind of sacrifices,” Rue asks softly, tightening her grip on my arm.

I doubt any of us want to hear the answer, but it’s important.

“At first, she took lesser fae. But that wasn’t enough. So she turned to the high fae. All species. Even her own.”

Rue covers her mouth with her hands in disgust and curls up in my arms. I can’t let myself waver now that I know just how depraved the queen really is.

“It was futile, for Faerie is goodness and light. But her insatiable greed drew the attention of something else. Something dark and far more sinister. It’s buried deep inside the realm,” he says, pointing his wooden fingers at the ground. “Far deeper than our roots can reach. It saw the queen and rewarded her wickedness with more power. Power no fae could hope to match. But... the magic was fleeting.”

“That’s why she communes in the forest...” I say, lowering Rue on the grass beside me so I can walk while I think. “She’s not communing with Faerie. She’s spilling innocent blood to buy more power from the darkness.”

The dryad's roots creek softly as he nods at me.

Fleeting magic. Sacrifices. The mixed fae. It all makes sense now.

"She dumps what magic she has left in the mixed fae before each meeting with the dark force," I think aloud as I pace. "She's trying to make more room for the magic. Or wants to appear weaker in hopes that the force will give her more. Then, as the blessing runs out, she reclaims what she stored in the mixed fae to get her through until the next one."

"We were not aware of her using the mixed fae for such purposes," the dryad says gravely. "It would explain why we haven't seen a mixed fae serve as her sacrifice in quite some time."

I sit back down beside Rue to let him take over.

"Striking deals with evil is never wise. The sacrifices were no longer enough. She was given less power each time. She made more and more sacrifices in exchange for diminishing returns. In desperation, she promised the dark force anything it wanted."

"And what did it want?" Rue asks, leaning toward the dryad in anticipation.

His eyes turn to her, filled with compassion. He folds his hands together and looks off into the trees. "It wanted part of the queen herself. Her very essence—an heir."

Rue's face is filled with horror. The pain the dryad had distracted her from comes crashing back in the worst way possible. "Did she do it?" she whispers.

"No," he answers. "Each time she has spoken with the dark force since, it demands her spawn. She insists she's trying but never provides the sacrifice it's looking for."

I run my fingers through Rue's hair, not sure how else to soothe her. "That's why she discards her consorts," I say, "They didn't give her an heir. That's why she took me. She hoped a powerful fae might be able to."

But one infuriating piece still doesn't fit. "Why the turn of the seasons?"

Before the dryad can respond, Rue gasps. "The sprites! They're most fertile at the beginning of the Still Season. And gryphons! They mate at the start of the warmer ones." She counts off other creatures on her fingers whose mating patterns revolve around the change of seasons. "Could it be connected?"

"The realms line up at the turn of each season," the dryad says. "Power is balanced. New life is kindled. That's why many species mate during these times."

"Yet, she still couldn't conceive," the seer interjects, speaking up for the first time since the dryad arrived. Rue shoots her a deadly look, but she ignores it. "When she discovered your ability to nurture magic, she must have thought she found a way to circumvent the dark force's control over her."

"With me, she could grow her own power without a sacrifice. And when she learned about Vaegon, she realized she could have two vessels to cultivate her power."

The seer moves toward the dryad with her gaze pointed to the sky. "And she wouldn't have stopped with Vaegon." Her eyes dart back and forth as if she's tracking streaks of heat lightning weaving through the clouds. I can only imagine she's having a vision of what that future would have been like.

"You'd be shackled and chained, growing her magic while producing more spawn through fae proxies." She lowers her eyes and finds me with them. "You must finish your preparations while Vaegon grows the magic you gave him. Only then can you defeat the queen."

A growl rumbles through Rue's body. "How long?" she demands.

"Not long," the seer replies. "And Allina has left her own youngling as a promise to keep him safe."

Rue climbs to her feet and scoffs at the seer. "One mother wasn't enough? You had to break two?" She shakes her head but suddenly whirls around in a panic. "The bloodlust! How can he resist it without our help? Will he come back lost?" She searches my eyes for hope, bearing another wound I couldn't shield her from. "Is the only way to save the realm growing infinite power in a crazed mixed fae?"

"He will not be lost. I assure you," the seer tells her, still standing by the dryad as if she is his equal.

But she's not. The dryad has given us invaluable information. The seer has given us nothing but more questions and heartache.

I expect Rue to lash out. I won't stop her if she does. But Rue's expression slides away until all that's left is a vacant stare. She trudges back the way we came, pausing briefly to turn and bare her throat to the dryad.

"Thank you," I say, bowing my head to him. "We'll do what needs to be done."

"We know you will," he says softly. "We've always known you."

I remember all the times they were there to help or listen. My heart still feels ripped open, but I know he's right. And as much as I hate her right now, the seer is right, too. I won't get my son back until I fulfill my purpose. And Rue will be heartbroken until that day arrives. At least she'll be safe here while I prepare. Well... safer than anywhere else, I guess.

But if I come back and find that the elves have taken her, too, Vaegon's spell won't be able to protect them. I'll pick them off one by one until someone returns them both to me.

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Rue

It's been weeks since they took Vaegon away. Since Durin held me as I fell apart. He rocked me gently for hours, pressing soft kisses to my hair and face while I cried. It didn't ease the ache in my heart, but he kept it from shattering completely.

He stayed with me for days until the seer came and warned him against waiting any longer. She reminded us that the longer he delayed, the longer our son would be gone. So, he left.

For the first few days, I jumped up every time someone came in to check on me or drop off a meal, hoping they had my son with them. But they never did, and it didn't take long for my hope to wither away.

The seer suggested I help care for Allina's baby. She claimed it would be good for me. She's delusional. The idea of swapping pups is revolting. I don't want to lay eyes on a pup that isn't mine. What did she expect my answer to be? Fate didn't give her a vision of the big fat fuck you she had coming?

Since then, I've been lying in bed, occasionally nibbling on the food the elves leave for me. My Omega has been nowhere to be seen. Durin has his duties to occupy him. Most of the time, I don't even have him. I have nothing.

I can only function when he's here. I eat when he visits. I bathe, but only because he does the work for me. That's about the extent of my contribution to the realm.

He gives me updates about what's happening with the other species, but I've stopped

caring. His words drift right over me. The only thing I'm able to focus on is his touch. We mate as much as we can. In those fleeting moments when he's part of me, I feel alive again, as if he's living for both of us. My heart feels full.

When he leaves, I return to being hollow. And soon, an entire season has passed, and I've all but given up hope.

It's been ages since Durin last came, or maybe it just seems that way. I'm trapped here with only my uncertainty.

Is Durin even alive? Is my son alive? Does my life hold any meaning anymore?

I have no reason to hope. No reason to move. So, I don't. Not even when the mighty seer herself enters my room and speaks to me.

I've done nothing for the elves. Not after what they did to me. They claim my son is the key. Well, he was given to me. I helped create him. I nurtured him and brought him safely into the realm. They did nothing but rip him away and leave me broken and empty. They'll get nothing from me. They've already taken it all.

The seer lingers in my doorway, her annoying presence hard to ignore. I go to brush her off like I usually do, but I quickly realize this visit is different. Something has changed.

"It's time," she says firmly. "Come."

My heart races, and I leap to my feet, but my body is starved and frail. I crumple back onto the bed, gasping for breath. The last time I ate was whenever Durin was here. I'm weak, and I'm filthy. I can't be reunited with my son like this.

The seer moves closer, offering her help. As grateful as I am that the day has finally

come, my anger still runs deep. I brush her off and stand up on my own, then carefully make my way to the table. The food from this morning is still there, or maybe it's from yesterday. I don't really care. I shovel it down, barely tasting it, along with the glass of water next to it.

My stomach protests at the sudden onslaught of food. I fight to keep it down. I know I'll need the energy. If Vaegon is back, there will be no time for celebration. It will be time for the queen to fall.

I'm prepared for that, but no one's taking Vaegon from me ever again. Whatever role he must play in this fight, he'll have to do it from my arms.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

The days since they took Vaegon have dragged on like an eternity. Yet, somehow, it seems like there's never enough time to finish what I need to do.

The first thing I did was ask the dryads to help me find a shifter leader who could help me convince Alphas to fight. They led me straight to a Prime named Sashon, who heads the largest pack I've encountered so far. Everything about him screams leader, like his wolf-like eyes and the way his muscular arms are always spread, welcoming and protective. No proud posturing like Rue's old bastard of a Prime.

He introduced me to his whole pack, not just the Alphas. I was invited to share a meal with them and encouraged to speak freely. He listened respectfully while I explained my undesired roles of noble and consort. He didn't interrupt while I confessed what I had to do to rescue Rue and our pup from her Prime. Instead of judging me for stealing an Omega from his kind, he thanked me for sparing Bock and his Alphas. Sashon's pack mirrored his feelings, nodding and thanking me as well.

I felt comfortable sharing what I've learned so far. I offered up every detail of what I know as a sign of trust. He was content to let them all—Betas, Omegas, and Alphas alike—hear the details and be part of the discussion.

He's a true leader. The type of ruler the queen should have been.

He promised to spread the information to the other packs and gather as much support as possible. I was assured most Primes aren't like Rue's and that there will be plenty of shifter support when the time comes.

His efforts have given me a little more time with Rue. She needs an ally. Someone she can trust. Right now, she's trapped in a fortress with a different kind of enemy.

I've just returned to the elves' hideaway. I'm tired and eager to hold her. She's always sad, but she still manages to refill me when we're together. When I reach the hut, an elf I've been avoiding is waiting for me outside. I have nothing nice to say to Vaegon. What the elves did to us may have been necessary, but I can't agree it was the right approach.

I'm not thrilled to see him now, either. I want to care for Rue and then rest. I've spent days with Sashon and the kelpie Majestic, strategizing on how to handle the common fae. Most of them I'd consider neutral, likely to hide and protect themselves when things get messy. But the ones living near the castle might side with the queen and cause trouble for us.

Their magic may not be strong, but it's enough to complicate things and pull our attention away from the bigger threats. We have been working on a plan to keep them out of our way. It took a long time to figure out, but I think we've gotten it sorted.

I'm ready to be with my Omega. I hope whatever Vaegon wants is quick.

In the typical elven way, he gets straight to the point. "Rue has gone to retrieve your son."

My heart drums wildly in my chest. The battle seems so small now that I'm about to have my son and the light in Rue's eyes back.

"When will they return?" I ask, stepping closer as if he's a friend again. He's not. He's only tolerable now that he brought me some good news. But that's as far as it goes.

“The seer said in one week. It’s time for your final preparations. The new season is approaching. You will strike in ten days when the queen is weakest. Before she can offer her sacrifices.”

Ten days... Adrenaline heats my blood and vibrates in my bones. “I still need to—”

“Yes, complete your tasks. Return in one week. You’ll have a chance to catch up with your family.”

My mind races through what’s been done and what remains. Preparations for the common fae are already underway. The kelpie leaders have agreed to allow those who wish to fight to join me. I need to update them and the shifters on the timeline.

I’ve kept my distance from Rue’s old pack and the ones nearby. If Rue is right, someone from her pack betrayed us to the queen. I don’t know if they acted alone or if the Prime and his soldiers were also involved. I can’t risk interacting with them or neighboring packs they may have rallied against me.

I need to warn Farris about what’s coming. Our cluster is far enough from the castle to be unaffected, but I’ll need his help inside the castle. His illusions have been invaluable these past couple of months. When the queen realized I’d fled, she sent all the nobles out to hunt me down. They’ve been moving in small groups, afraid to go against me solo, but because of Farris, I’ve been able to stay hidden when they get close.

Luckily, Farris is always eager to help. I have a bigger task for him this time. The alchemist and empath need to be warned. Leah and Sarra need to be taken as far away from the castle as possible before the fighting starts. It’s a lot to handle, but his double illusion power makes him the only option with Vernan lingering around the castle most days.

“I’m ready,” I tell Vaegon, even though I’ve just returned.

He clasps his hands in front of him and studies my face for a moment. I paint on an expression blank enough to fit in with his kind. I can’t afford to let him doubt my readiness. I want my son.

“The place the seer sends you today will be where you’re to return in one week. Ensure you’re there.”

“I’ll be there,” I say over my shoulder, already heading off to get things done.

“Durin,” he calls after me.

I pause and sigh, then slowly turn to see what the holdup is. “Yeah?”

“The elves cannot fight, but we can offer protection to you and your allies. We will stand with you as best we can.”

“Thank you,” I say as a smile breaks through my defenses. “Then we may actually stand a chance.”

I find Farris just outside our village, leaning casually against a tree and watching Larreli move about in her hut. I take a deep breath and present him with my request. He pauses for a moment, and I worry it might be too much to ask.

“I know it’s a lot, but—”

“No big deal,” he says, flashing me a grin. “It’ll be fun.”

I grab his shoulder and lean in to look him in the eye. “The nobles are on high alert. The queen is probably much more active at the castle now. This is serious, Farris. I don’t want you to get caught.”

He waves me off and strides toward the castle. “I’ll grab Phen on my way, see if he wants to join in on the fun.”

Phen, the stronger telekinetic. The one who wanted nothing to do with the queen. “I forgot about him,” I say, shaking my head. “Let me do it. Where can I find him?”

Farris stops and turns back to look at me. “He lives near the red falls, where we used to swim. He has bright yellow hair. It was in a knot on top of his head when I saw him.”

“Great. Thanks,” I tell him.

“Need me to illusion you?” he asks.

“No, you were illusioned as me when you visited him. He needs to recognize me. I’ll just glamour my hair.”

“Okay.” He stifles a smile and bows, reminding me of the punch I still owe him. I grab a small stick and throw it at him. He jumps to the side with a laugh and then disappears into the woods.

Sashon gave me some clothes that don’t stand out as much as my uniform, but I glamour my hair orange like Farris’s anyway, just to go blend in better.

The red falls aren’t far, and it doesn’t take me long to reach the village where I suspect Phen lives. I stick to the shadows as I wander past the huts, hoping to catch sight of him. It takes a while, but I finally see a bright yellow knot of hair on a fae

crouched behind a bush.

My heart starts to beat a little faster as I wonder what he could be hiding from. I look around, hoping to find whatever it is before it finds me. A second later, a tiny fae youngling stumbles out from behind the bush. When she sees Phen, she throws her arms up and shouts, “Raaar!”

Phen jumps like he’s terrified, then falls to the ground clutching his chest. The youngling giggles and jumps right on top of him. He bursts into laughter and wraps his arms around the little fae, then lifts her up and nuzzles her nose.

He has a family. Those who love him and who’d be devastated if he didn’t come home. He didn’t want to serve the queen, but I can’t ask him to help me defeat her. If we fail, Faerie will need more fae like him to stand a chance at creating a better realm.

I turn and head toward the dark lake to let the kelpies know to be ready. I just hope once my son is back, I’ll find the strength to make the same sacrifice I couldn’t bear to ask of Phen.

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Rue

Less than a season lost. That's not so bad. We can make up for it. Vaegon won't remember the separation. Once he's back with his true mother, that pretending bitch will disappear from his memory.

And I'll make sure she never goes anywhere near him again.

I don't want to think about her right now. I've eaten and washed up. I'm ready to see my son.

As soon as I step outside the hut, the seer mutters some elvish words. A moment later, we're in an unfamiliar part of the forest. I spin around, expecting to see Vaegon and Allina, but there's no one else here. Just the seer and me in a long, narrow clearing surrounded by thick trees. The sky is clear above us, and the grass is lush beneath our feet.

"There," the seer tells me, pointing to a small tree at the edge of the clearing. I notice a faint distortion in the air, an almost invisible shimmer.

"Go through there, and you'll find your son. But return quickly, no more than a day. That is crucial."

I'd like to know what happens if I'm not back in time and how it could possibly take more than a day. But the seer vanishes before I get a chance to ask. I look around, feeling uneasy in this open space alone. Why wouldn't she come with me? Why does everything have to be so damn mysterious with the elves?

It doesn't matter. Vaegon is waiting for me.

I hurry over to the shimmer. I pause before stepping in, imagining the moment I take Vaegon in my arms. My stomach drops at the thought of him crying for that vile elf because he doesn't remember me. I wonder if he cried for me like that when he first left.

My heart aches from missing him and from wondering what he's been through all this time. But I have to swallow my fear if I want to find him. What matters is bringing him back where he belongs and showing him how loved and safe he is with me. I hold onto that thought as I take a deep breath and step into the shimmer.

I feel a bit dizzy as I stumble out into whatever's waiting on the other side. I close my eyes until it settles, then brave a look around. I'm not sure what I expected from another realm, but I thought it'd be a lot different than this. It's a forest, just like Faerie, only the colors are all wrong. The trees have green leaves and muddy-brown trunks instead of the vibrant purples and blues I'm used to. And I feel no essence of the dryads within them. The only other plants I recognize are the calantars. They're not right either, growing haphazardly around the base of the giant tree before me, not in neat lines along the paths like they should be.

It's warm here despite being the coldest season. Just like in the elven territory. How sheltered I've been, never straying from my pack's camp. I feel like I've gotten a glimpse of how exciting Faerie will be after the queen has been removed from it.

But Vaegon isn't here. No one's around except whatever creatures are buzzing past my ears and squawking in the trees. I look around, trying to decide which way to go. Before I can choose, I scent them—shifters.

I've been hiding from my pack for so long that my first instinct is to flee. To jump back through the shimmer to safety. But my son is here, and my longing for him

outweighs my fear. I close my eyes and take a few shaky steps forward. If these shifters are anything like the ones in my realm, they've already noticed me and will soon show themselves.

They do. Almost immediately, two large Alphas emerge from the trees, fangs bared, and bodies tensed. I sense an Alpha wolf creeping up behind me, too. They'll relax when they see that I'm a harmless Omega and learn why I'm here. I'd imagine they know about my son if the seer sent me.

"Who are you?" the smaller Alpha demands, keeping his distance as he sniffs the air. Instead of answering, I admire the black drawings on his arms as I wait for him to place my designation.

"An Omega?" he asks as my scent finally reaches him. He approaches confidently now, dropping his eyes to my neck.

"I'm mated," I say quickly, cutting off any thought of claiming me.

Why the fuck didn't the seer send an escort with me?

A larger, calmer Alpha with dark brown skin and a thick, black beard steps closer to have a look for himself. "I see no mark. Is it hidden?"

"My mate is a fae," I explain. "We cannot mate-mark each other."

Maybe Durin isn't technically my mate, but the heart makes the bond, not the mark. Hopefully, my claim will be enough to deter these Alphas and move this along.

They exchange a glance before the first one turns and walks away. "Come on," he says.

I follow him through the forest until it abruptly ends, spitting us out into a vast open space stretching as far as I can see. Fruits and vegetables grow in neat rows on either side of a large hut with a sharply angled roof. At the front of the hut, a wide path of small rocks leads out to a hard, stone-like path that disappears into the distance.

When we step out of the cover of the trees, a strong heat blazes across my skin. I glance down at my arms, but they don't seem to be injured. I look at the Alphas, but they seem unaffected. When I turn my eyes up to the sky, a hot, blinding light pierces right through my skull.

"What the fuck?" I shout, covering my eyes with my hands. I blink a few times and look at the ground to make sure I still have my sight, then squint back up to get a better look.

The pain is just as bad. And now, my head is throbbing.

"Just like Paren," the bearded Alpha chuckles.

"Who's Paren?" I ask, unamused. "And what's wrong with your sun?"

"Nothing is wrong with it," the other Alpha replies. "It's just more badass than the one you have in Faerie. I assume that's where you're from."

"It is. And where are you from?" I ask, looking around.

He grunts and swings open a wooden door, leading me inside. I step into a kitchen area much larger than the one in the elven hut. There's a water basin against one wall, though it's set into the table instead of sitting on top. Cabinets line two of the walls, and there's a cooking stand but no fireplace. A small table and chairs sit in the center, and there are two doorways leading to other rooms, but no doors.

“Sit,” the painted Alpha tells me. “I’m Samuel. That’s Jessen.”

I nod and take a chair, reminding myself to be patient and polite. They don’t seem to want to hurt me, and I have no idea how to find Vaegon on my own. Maybe they’ve been expecting me. They seemed to know where I’m from.

“Drink?” Samuel asks, opening a cabinet and pulling out a glass.

I shake my head, too nervous to put anything more in my stomach. “No, thank you.”

He shrugs and takes the glass for himself, gulping down the water. The other Alpha holds up a strange box to his ear and begins speaking into it. “Prime, someone came through.”

Is he using magic to talk to someone who isn’t here? Do shifters have extra magic in this realm, or is that box enchanted?

“It’s an Omega from Faerie.” He pauses, then looks at me. “I’m not sure. Probably just fell through like Paren.”

Who is this Paren they keep talking about? The elf who came with Vaegon is named Allina, and she wouldn’t have just fallen through.

“Why have you come here?” Jessen asks me.

“I’m here for my son,” I reply, starting to worry that they may not have been expecting me after all.

“And who might your son be?” he asks.

“He came with an elf. His name is Vaegon. He’s a pup.”

My stomach drops when the two Alphas exchange a loaded look.

“Prime,” the Alpha with the box says. “She says she’s here for Vaegon. She claims to be his mother.”

“I am his mother,” I growl, threatened by his doubt. This wasn’t supposed to be difficult. I should have been able to walk through, get Vaegon, and return home. Why is this happening?

They both stare at me wide-eyed until the one with the box says, “Yes, Prime. We’ll wait.”

He slips the box into the pocket of his strange leathers and turns to me. “Vaegon is coming,” he says carefully. “It will take about an hour.”

My chest loosens, and I take a deep breath. “Thank you,” I tell him, regretting my outburst. I can feel my hands begin to tremble, knowing that Vaegon is on his way. In an hour, I’ll be back in Faerie, reuniting Durin with his son.

“I’ll go join Reese outside in case any more come through,” Jessen tells Samuel. He walks out the door, letting it swing shut behind him.

“More what?” I ask. “More shifters? Why would more come through?”

The remaining Alpha looks at me curiously but doesn’t respond. I grit my teeth and decide not to ask again.

As we wait, I catch him stealing glances at me. Do I seem odd to him? Our clothing is different, but I don’t think we, as shifters, look that dissimilar. This hut is the strange thing. There are bright lights in the roof that glow without candles or calantars. Cool air blows out of a slatted hole in the floor. I stare through the doorways, wondering

what other strange things are in the rest of the hut.

It feels like centuries before I hear a rumbling sound coming from outside. I jump to my feet, fighting the urge to run blindly through the rooms, looking for my son.

Samuel, who had been leaning against the wall, suddenly blocks the doorway. I clasp my hands together and force a smile, hoping Vaegon will recognize me as soon as he sees me.

Heavy footsteps fill the next room. Did they bring a small army for Vaegon's safety? Or are they more threatened by me than they let on? I wish Durin was here. In my rush to get Vaegon back, I didn't consider my own safety. I'm kind of regretting it now.

The seer wouldn't send me into danger, though. She believes Vaegon is meant to save the realm. He's here. I just need to stay calm until I can get us back through that gateway.

Samuel bares his throat to someone and then heads back outside. Seconds later, a massive Alpha steps in the room. His eyes are a stunning gold, and his hair light brown hair falls in clean waves to his shoulders. His face is stern behind his short beard but carries a warmth that puts me a bit more at ease. When he sees me, he doesn't even glance at my neck. I wonder if he's been Vaegon's guardian.

I bare my throat in gratitude for whatever role he's played in keeping my son safe. He dips his head in acknowledgment and moves further into the room to let someone else in. I expect it to be Allina and my son, but instead, it's a tiny Omega with golden hair and big, green eyes. She's stunning, but it's her confidence and enthusiasm that catches me off guard.

She's not afraid to see a stranger sitting here—she grins at me. And she's not at all

affected by the other Alpha in the room. She doesn't even submit to him. She looks almost excited to be here.

I glance at her neck and see multiple marks. She has mates. At least two. The idea of multiple Alpha mates makes me queasy, but she looks so happy. They must treat her very well.

She steps closer, looking at me kindly. "Her eyes," she says. "Do you see them, Lucas?"

The golden-eyed Alpha hums thoughtfully in response. The Omega darts out of the room and returns seconds later with a tall, curly-haired Beta in tow.

"Look," she whispers, tilting her head toward me. "Look at her eyes."

The Beta leans forward to peer at me as well. "I see it, but... she's so young," he says, wrinkling his brow.

"Time passes differently there, remember?" the Omega says.

A second, new Alpha steps into the room. He's broad and imposing, like any Alpha, but his aura is very different. His dark eyes stand out sharply against his short, pale hair and skin, just like everyone I've seen in the elven camp. I try to look past him for Allina, wondering if he's the elves' link to this realm. But his wide frame is blocking the doorway.

"I think she may be telling the truth," he says, studying my face.

"Why wouldn't I be telling the truth?" I challenge, locking my stare with the dark pits of his creepy eyes. "Where is my son?"

The four of them exchange looks before the Omega shuffles over to the doorway they came through. “Please,” she says softly, reaching for someone on the other side. “Please, just come see. You can bark if you need to.”

A bronze arm with long, slender fingers takes her hand and pulls her out of the room. Something about the arm plants a seed of dread in my chest. It takes root and burrows deeper the longer the silence stretches on. Tremors run through my body as the realization sinks in.

Still, my mind fights to resist the truth looming just outside that doorway.

The Omega reappears, gripping the arm of a tall, handsome Alpha. One with pointed ears and bright blue hair. His eyes are as blue as Durin’s, but their shape is unmistakably mine.

They even hold the anger and bitterness I’ve carried with me for so long.

My chest feels like it’s ripping open. My heart spills onto the floor at my feet. I double over in agony, struggling to find a breath. That fully mature mixed-fae Alpha shifter is my son. He’s Vaegon. A mother knows her young, and despite the frantic protests of my mind, my soul is certain that it’s him.

I close my eyes, recalling the Omega’s words. Time passes differently there .

Hot tears carve paths of sorrow down my cheeks. It fits. It all makes sense now. The weight of what the elves have actually taken from me crashes down on my back.

“No...” I whisper, clutching at the cavern in my chest.

My legs give way, and I fall back onto the chair behind me. I wish I could sink deeper, back to the dark nothingness I’ve been hiding in for months. But this pain is

even more unbearable than the one I was trying to escape from. Before, I had hope of getting my pup back. Now, I see that he's truly gone for good.

Soft fingers gently pry my hands away from my chest. Through my tears, I see the lovely Omega kneeling in front of me. Her own tears race down her cheeks, highlighting the pretty speckles that run across them.

"I'm Jade," she says quietly, squeezing my hands. "I'm one of Vaegon's mates."

One of them? I glance around, wondering if the others are here. I see that the Beta is clearly one of them. He's clutching Vaegon's hand tightly, looking up at him with enough love to bring me one brief moment of comfort.

I rip my eyes away from Vaegon's suspicious stare and squeeze them shut. Durin is waiting for me. I need to keep it together so I can get back to him. I can still have a life with him despite this loss, but I have to survive the pain long enough to get home.

"Are you Vaegon's birth mother?" the huge Alpha, Lucas, asks. His tone is gentle, but his Alpha bark is woven carefully into the words.

"Yes," I reply numbly. "Or at least... I was," I mutter. I try to stifle the sobs rising in my chest, but one slips out as I finish. "For three days before they ripped him from my arms."

I pull my hands from the Omega's grip and wrap my arms around my stomach. My fangs unsheathe, and a quiet whimper escapes my lips as every painful emotion I'm capable of grapple each other for control.

I don't know what to do. Should I even bother asking him to come back with me to help Faerie?

My mind buzzes. The room is spinning. I can't even think of another alternative but to stand up and walk back to the portal to sink into my depression again.

That plan quickly dies when Allina appears in the corner of the room. The Alphas growl and instinctively move to shield the rest of us from her. They seem to feel some kind of animosity toward her.

Good. I hope they maul her to death. But not before I get a chance at her.

"You!" I shout, springing from the chair. I push through the giant bodies blocking my path until I can see her face. "You did this! You stole him from me."

The Alphas don't stop me from approaching her. When I'm close enough, I grab her by the hair and yank her down to my level. Allina doesn't defend herself. She just stares at me with that infuriatingly blank mask the elves like to wear.

"I should rip a hole in your throat right now," I growl, baring my fangs to show how serious I am. "The only reason I'm not killing you yet is because I need to make sure I can get back to Durin."

She wisely doesn't pull away or utter any spells. Instead, she blinks at me and gives a single nod. I grip her tightly for a moment before releasing her with a sharp jerk.

"My youngling... Is she well?" she dares to ask me.

"Why wouldn't she be?" I snap, clenching my hands into fists to keep my claws out of her face. "It's been less than a season! She's merely months old and has been cared for by your kind. What could possibly have happened to her?"

Allina's jaw tightens. "You're angry," she says, with a trace of bitterness in her voice. "You felt sorrow for a short time while separated from your youngling. But I've

endured that emptiness for nearly three decades. You're not the only one who has sacrificed for our realm's future."

My rage is enough to stir my Omega from whatever pit she's been hiding in. She springs to life, clamoring against my chest, desperate to rip Allina apart.

"How dare you compare your suffering to mine?" I hiss. "Your pup will forget that you were gone and quickly come to know you again. Your kind lives for centuries. You'll have a long, full life with your daughter. You missed nothing!"

My Omega continues to pound against her cage, but my heart is hardening to protect itself from the truth.

"I lost all of my pup's youth," I growl. "I missed his first words and when he presented as an Alpha. I missed his first fight, his first shift, taking his mates. You spent a long time missing your pup, but you get to return to her and live out the life that was paused for you. Your suffering is over. Mine has just begun. You might as well have killed me because you stole my chance to be a mother to him at all."

I feel myself deflate. My fangs retract, and I drag myself back to the chair. A familiar numbness settles comfortably over me again. But a flash of blue light draws my gaze up from the floor. Vaegon has Allina pinned against the wall, staring her down while sparks of his father's magic crackle around them.

"Who the fuck are you?" he growls, his face inches from hers.

His strength makes me so proud, but the fact that he doesn't know who Allina is ignites my rage again.

I rise slowly from the chair, my body tense with restrained fury. I take a deliberate step closer, my voice low and even as I ask, "Why doesn't he know you, Allina?"

Her gaze flicks to me for a moment before returning to the angry Alpha in front of her. “I’m Allina,” she says, answering him instead of me. “I was tasked with bringing you here from Faerie while your magic grew.”

“That doesn’t explain why he has no idea who you are,” I say, gritting my teeth.

“No, it doesn’t,” Lucas says, standing beside me. Vaegon pulls his magic back and steps away, letting him take over.

“I was instructed to find a pack that would protect and raise him,” she says.

“Then why didn’t you?” Lucas barks. “Why did you force him to wander around at such a young age and find it for himself? That’s how our pack found him, you know. Wandering through the forest, scared and alone.”

The thought of a little Vaegon lost and crying for his fake mother infuriates me. I know where the gateway is. Allina’s not needed anymore. Fuck whatever magic she has. It won’t be enough.

I lunge at Allina, going straight for the throat.

But the Beta steps in from behind and gently holds me back. Allina takes the opportunity and rushes to explain herself.

“I was with him the entire time. Under a concealment spell. I couldn’t choose the pack for him. He needed to imprint. It was up to him to find his way.”

“Imprint?” the fair Alpha asks, uncrossing his arms and stepping forward, clearly intrigued.

But my anger comes before his curiosity. “You couldn’t be bothered to stay with

him?” I shout, struggling not to shove the Beta off and spill the elf’s blood onto the floor. “Or at least explain to him what happened once he’d settled in with the pack? You want credit for your years of longing when he spent that entire time thinking his family abandoned him?”

“The seer forbade it,” she says evenly. “She said interfering would change the outcome.”

“Fucking convenient,” I snap.

“Where have you been all this time?” The Omega, Jade, asks her. “Why did no one ever see you?”

“I’ve been hidden,” Allina says. “Living in the woods and watching over Vaegon from afar. I used my concealment magic to check on him often.”

“What does your seer want with my magic?” Vaegon demands. “And why do you find it acceptable for her to manipulate you and everyone else to get it?”

Allina looks at me instead of answering him. Vaegon and Lucas turn to me, too, making me seem like the villain here. It makes me want to kill Allina even more.

I take a breath and focus on my son instead of my hatred for Allina. “Your magic came from your father,” I say. “I don’t like it, but I think I understand now why the elves sent you here.”

I rub both hands down my face. It’s shameful how naive I was to think I’d actually get my pup back.

Jade steps closer and takes my hand, guiding me back onto the chair. “Please explain it to us.”

I sit and stare at the wall across the room. If I look at Vaegon, I might break down. If I look at Allina, I may actually go through with killing her.

“Faerie is ruled by a soulless queen and her equally heartless nobles. She craves power and despises all species that are not fae like her.”

“Just like Paren said,” Jade murmurs.

I ignore her comment and continue. “Durin, Vaegon’s father, killed a noble to avenge a Beta shifter’s death. He was captured and forced to become a noble himself.”

I glance over at Vaegon in time to see his expression darken. I hurry to defend Durin in case he misinterpreted my words. “He never hurt anyone innocent. He’s been using that position to plot against her.”

Vaegon’s eyes lose a bit of their heat, so I continue. “The queen found out that Durin has the unique ability to grow magic, something he didn’t realize about himself.”

I continue, sharing everything I know about the queen’s failing magic—the sacrifices, the mixed fae shifters, and the alchemist. I explain how she shared her power with Durin in hopes of growing it without his knowledge. The shifters listen intently, and the fair one asks a lot of questions that I do my best to answer. I don’t mention Durin’s role as consort. They don’t need that information right now, and I doubt Durin would want me to share it.

“I don’t see what any of that has to do with me,” Vaegon says, sounding bored.

I can only imagine how it feels to know nothing about your past or where you came from. He’s probably dying to know. It might be uncomfortable for him to hear how Durin and I met and how he came to be, so I’ll stick to why he ended up in this realm.

With a lot of effort, I meet his eyes and speak to him instead of the wall.

“The queen found out about you and demanded Durin bring you to her. We think she wanted to use you to grow more power for herself. We hid among the elves, and Durin shared some of his amplified magic with you for your own protection. But the elves took you away,” I say, glaring at Allina. “They brought you here to grow your magic so you’d be able to help Faerie much sooner.”

“Help Faerie how?” the Beta asks, though I suspect they’ve all figured it out already.

I give him a grim smile and turn back to Vaegon. “The seer claims you’re the key to saving the realm. She says your destiny is to stand with your father and take down the queen.”

I can’t keep his gaze. I have to look away. If my son is anything like me, he won’t give a fuck about fate’s plans, so he won’t be coming home with me.

“My destiny was to meet my mates and build a life with them here,” he says, unfazed.

His response confirms my fear, but it makes me surprisingly proud.

I glance back up just in time to see him lift the Omega into his arms and fill his nose with her scent. Then, he grips the Beta’s hair and smiles down at him. “Faerie’s fight is not my fight.”

He’s right. He’s found happiness here. He has two loving mates, and these other Alphas seem to be very protective of him. This is his family. Why should he leave them?

“No,” I say, getting to my feet. “It’s not your fight. Not if you don’t want it to be.” I turn and head for the door that leads outside.

“Wait!” Allina calls after me. “You can’t just walk away and let all of your suffering be in vain.”

I scoff over my shoulder at her. “You want me to plead your case, but you took everything from Durin and me. We only have each other now. I’m going back to be with him.”

She tries again, this time appealing to Vaegon. “You don’t want an entire realm for your mate-group? A place where your pack and every shifter hiding here can live freely? No humans to worry about? No Beta cough?”

Vaegon glares at her with the anger I just traded for apathy. I don’t know why the elves thought sending a stranger to convince him would work. I think fate just wanted to watch me suffer through this on top of everything else.

Every part of me longs for Durin. I’m not needed here, so I open the door and step out to find my way back to him.

“What’s your name?” Jade asks, stopping me.

I sigh but turn to face her, considering what joy she’s clearly brought to Vaegon’s life. “It’s Rue. Thank you for loving him.” I glance at the Alphas and give the Beta a small smile. “All of you.”

As I walk away, I’m halted again as Lucas’s rumbling voice cuts through the air.

“So, are we going to Faerie?”

I’m shocked to find everyone looking at Jade for an answer. Who is this little Omega that Alphas look to for permission? What is this world to put an Omega in charge of Alphas? Durin and I should have come here all along. I don’t know what humans are,

but they can't be worse than nobles.

The tension slips from Vaegon's face. He smiles down at her, and my breath catches in my throat. It's the same smile Durin gave me after I woke up from my heat.

Did Durin love me even then?

Nothing matters now except getting back to him. Vaegon is safe, loved, and happy. It doesn't matter that I wasn't the one to provide that. I can't change the past, and even if I could, Vaegon might not have ended up so happy.

The pain of losing him will likely never fade, but I have Durin to love unconditionally and pour my soul into. I'm not ruined because I lost my son. I'm just needed elsewhere.

The seer can put her hand in whatever she wants in Faerie. Vaegon is safe from her here. If he wants to stay, that's what he'll do. Fate will just have to find another way to save our home.

I smile at my son and his family, ready to walk away content instead of hollow. Vaegon hugs his mates closer and looks over at the Alphas.

"If we go, we all go," he says. "I won't risk losing time with any of you."

He meets my eye, and I wonder if it's his way of recognizing my suffering. He may never see me as a mother, but he at least seems to feel empathy for me.

"We'll need to speak to the others," the fair one says.

"The seer told me to be back before a day's time, so I'm leaving right now," I say, glancing back in the direction I came from. "If you decide to come, it should

probably be soon. You know where the gateway is. I'm sure the elves will have someone waiting for you."

I turn my back on them and start off toward the woods, this time, without looking back. My place is in my realm, in my time, and with my mate.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

Vaegon said to return to the spot where the seer dropped me in exactly one week. I've been trying to get there for hours.

I wasn't able to find Farris to illusion me, so I've been stuck navigating the forest in plain sight. I glamoured my hair to make me less noticeable, but it wasn't enough.

Riggus, the queen's tracker, must have been reassigned. He tracked me down, then sent for the winged bastard Nydal to do the hard part. I'm sure Nydal has been looking for a chance to get back at me after I scorched his ugly feathers in the dining hall. But he knows he's not strong enough to take me down, so he brought a small group of elementals with him. I've been trying to outrun them, but Nydal is flying overhead and keeps calling out my location.

I could probably take them all out with a few flicks of my fingers. My magic has grown considerably since the celebration. My blood flows hotter. My flames burn brighter. But I need to conserve it. Inevitably, I'll have to face the queen. I'm not sure if what I've gained can run out. And even if she's weakened, I don't know the extent of her abilities. I'll need all the power I can get.

So far, I've dodged everything the elementals have thrown at me. Luckily, I'm faster than they are. My years of training have made crossing miles of forest easy. A few of them have already given up. The rest have fallen behind.

Except for Nydal. His flying ability keeps him ahead, hovering above and trying to spot me through gaps in the trees. I've been looking for thicker ones that will block

his view. The dryad's trees are the biggest, with their deep blue trunks and thick branches. They are my best hope, and I've been darting between them as I see them.

Now, I'm close, but the meeting spot is in a long, narrow clearing. It's like someone took a big scoop out of the forest. I'll be completely exposed if I take a step past the tree line. But the light of the day is fading. My only option is to just plow through and trust...

Trust what?

Fate? The dryads and elves? My own magic? I have no idea. I just know I need to get back today, and today is almost gone.

I don't think I'll have a choice but to use some of my magic. But I'll use only enough to get away. I let it gather in my hands, but I don't waste it on building a barrier. My attack needs to be quick and precise to conserve my power. I grit my teeth and take off toward the clearing, hoping someone is there to transport me away from the nobles.

When I emerge from beneath a dryad tree, Nydal catches my movement and shouts down to the others, "Over here! Subdue him!"

Some of the nobles must have caught up as I stared out toward the clearing because snapping bollus plants instantly spring up around my feet. Their stems thrash around as they snap their drooling mouths at me. The clicking of their sharp teeth makes me shudder, but they're not worth wasting my magic on.

I stomp on the ones directly in front of me and leap over the row behind them. One clamps onto my boot as I pass. It screeches as its roots are torn from the soil, but it doesn't let go. I don't have time to reach down and pry it off. It will either chew through my boot or be snagged by something and fall off. I focus on putting as much

distance between myself and the bolluses as I can.

I barely get a few steps before thick vines shoot up from the dirt, reaching for me from all sides. These plants aren't rooted in one spot. And they're too quick to outrun. In seconds, they've latched onto my waist and ankles, almost tripping me to the ground.

I'll have to use my power. There's no way around it. I cut through them with small bursts of my magic, leaving the severed pieces to flop around in the dirt. More grab hold, and I have to slice through them as well before searching for the elemental behind the attack.

A thick vine wraps around my waist as I look, pulling my attention away. I cut through it and pry it away from my body while scanning the forest again.

I finally find the lanky fae crouched behind me with his fingers buried in the ground. His eyes shoot wide open when he sees me, but that's the only reaction he has time for. I drop the severed piece of vine and shoot my hand out in his direction. He goes down with one searing bolt of magic to the chest.

With the ground no longer a threat, I pick up my pace.

"Behind you, idiot!" Nydal calls down to someone, giving my location away yet again.

A few seconds later, the air thickens, wrapping painfully around me. I push against it with my heat, but it only tightens its grip. It quickly becomes difficult to breathe. My limbs grow heavy. My steps slow to a crawl. I grunt and drag myself forward, reluctantly unleashing bursts of my magic around me from my paralyzed fingers.

It does nothing. The pressure is almost deafening. The ringing in my ears drowns

everything else out. I'll have to rely on my sight to find my attacker. I scan the part of the forest I can see, but he must be behind me. I strain to turn my body around, but the squeeze is too tight. I'm stuck.

Just as I'm about to shout in frustration, a loud crack echoes through the trees. A body falls from the branches and crashes to the ground at my feet.

It's Rien, an air elemental. He lands hard on his head, and the pressure instantly releases me. Air rushes back into my lungs. I can breathe again, and I can move my limbs.

I didn't realize how strong Rien's magic is. I can't leave him for later. That kind of power would cause a lot of trouble for us. I crouch down and watch his chest for signs of breathing. He doesn't move. His head is unnaturally cocked to one side, and blood is pooling around his temple. He seems to be dead. I check his wrist for a pulse to be sure he's gone. Thankfully, he is, and I won't need to waste any more time or magic.

The tree he fell from creaks and shudders. Its branches shake, ridding itself of any trace of the noble it just cast down. I thank the dryad for knocking him out of its branches as I take off once again.

I can't see Nydal through the thick canopy, but he must have caught sight of me. "The coward is over here!" he yells. "Get him!"

If I weren't in a time crunch, I'd ask how a fae hiding in the air can call anyone a coward.

Shouts echo through the trees, followed by the thunder of boots pounding against the ground. Shards of ice hurtle toward my face, and the forest becomes completely swallowed up by shadows. I throw up a wall of fire just in time, melting the ice

before it reaches me. But the bright light from my magic blinds me to what's happening in the dark beyond its glow.

I cut my magic off and dive behind a thick bush, narrowly missing another shower of ice. Once my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I peer through the branches in search of the water elemental and shadow caster.

A vicious growl followed by a wet, gurgling sound draws my attention to my left. Two glowing, yellow eyes pierce through the darkness, staring right at me. Seconds later, the shadows retreat, revealing the full form of the massive, white Alpha wolf the eyes belong to.

The shadow caster lies at his feet with a mangled throat and a geyser of blood spilling out onto the ground.

The wolf leaps aside, letting a wave of ice shards whiz past. The Alpha's senses are too sharp. Not only did the water elemental miss, but he also gave up his location. I quickly spot the bright white of the queen's uniform against the deep blue tree trunks surrounding him.

I step out from behind the bush and drive a fiery bolt of my magic deep into his stomach. His body erupts into flames. He rolls on the ground in a frantic ball of blue fire, desperately trying to save himself.

A larger gray and tan wolf bursts through a thicket of fillana bushes behind him. He's gripping Shylah, a weak fire elemental, firmly in his jaws. I'm surprised to see her here. She knows her fire is a mere spark compared to my own.

Or rather, it was. The chunk missing from her side tells me her scorching days are over.

I move toward the wolves to thank them but freeze when I hear Nydal shout at someone in the clearing. The wolves take off, leaving me behind with the dead nobles. Whatever is meant to happen in that clearing has begun. I need to get there before Nydal fucks everything up.

I race toward the edge of the forest and burst into the clearing. My eyes find Rue immediately. She's standing with Allina just inside the opposite tree line.

Her arms are empty.

Rue would never let go of Vaegon once she got him back. Where the fuck is he? Has something happened, and I'm too late?

I start toward her, but a blue glow in the center of the clearing draws my attention. A tall, confident fae stands with the two wolves, staring up at Nydal with his hands lifted to the sky. His bright blue hair matches the blue bolts of magic shooting from his fingertips.

The same blue hair that grows on my own head. The very same magic that I shared with my son. This fae could well be me if it wasn't for the sharply-angled eyes he's using to peer up at Nydal. Those are unmistakably Rue's.

This fully grown, powerful fae is Vaegon. It's impossible, yet there he stands.

My heart sinks. I have to strain to keep my knees steady. I picture my son the way I saw him last—peaceful, innocent, fully dependent on his parents. I don't want to believe it, but the truth is right in front of me.

Our little growling pup is never coming back. When the elves took him away, they took him away for good.

I glance over at Rue, wondering how she's surviving this. Her body is hunched and weary, but her eyes are full of pride. I turn my gaze back to our son, who's watching Nydal flit through the air, dodging the scorching blue bolts erupting from his hands.

He's brave and confident. He's powerful. He wants Nydal dead. I feel quite proud of him, too.

Vaegon grows tired of the chase and presses his palms together. One thick rope of his magic shoots from his fingers, wrapping tightly around Nydal's body. The rope scorches his skin and feathers. He screams in agony and tries to pull his arms free. Even if he managed to succeed, there's nothing he could do to save himself.

Nydal's body whips back and forth in the air as Vaegon jerks the rope around. Blood seeps out of Nydal's flesh, sizzling against the rope as it digs in deeper. His pristine, feathered wings vanish as the pain overwhelms him.

I stride up beside my son and meet the eyes that slide over to assess me.

"Finish him off," I order, wondering if he'll challenge my direction. I'm fully prepared to end Nydal myself if he has a problem with it.

Vaegon turns his head and looks me over. One eyebrow rises, then he simply shrugs. He jerks his hand downward, slicing the rope cleanly through Nydal's torso. The pieces of his body rain down on the grass in a sickening mix of loud and soft thuds.

My son looks at me, waiting for a reaction. Instead, I rush over to Rue and scoop her up against my chest. "Are you okay?" I whisper against her cheek.

"I'm fine," she says, wrapping her arms around my neck and holding me tight.

I keep my back to everyone as we draw strength from each other. I'm still in shock,

but she must be completely destroyed. She buries her nose in the hollow of my throat and sighs. The tension in her body quickly falls away. I don't know how she managed to remain in one piece, but it settles the emotional chaos inside me. If she's okay, I'm okay, too.

Once I'm sure we're both ready, I set her gently on her feet. Then, I turn us both around to face the harsh truth of what happened while our son was away.

Vaegon meets my gaze and holds it. Before we can find words to bridge the silence between us, the two Alpha wolves shift back. One is as white as bone with piercing dark eyes. The other is a bulky Alpha with brown hair and a short beard framing his strong jaw.

I'm thrown off when they stop at Vaegon's side instead of joining me. I'd assumed the shifters were in the forest and heard my struggle, but it seems they might be here with him.

"I think that's all of them," the larger Alpha says, introducing himself as Lucas.

"Thank you," I reply, looking at the other Alpha. "Sadly, there are many more throughout the realm."

"I'm Anders," he says. "From what I understand, we're here to help with that."

Vaegon says nothing, waiting for me to speak. I'm not sure how to introduce myself to my own son, so I turn back to the Alphas instead. "Durin," I say. "We're grateful to have you."

They both nod and head toward the trees to grab their discarded clothes. I glare at Allina, but I'm quickly distracted by a strange distortion rippling in the air beside her.

“What’s that?” I ask, just as a group of shifters appear in its place and stumble forward.

A tall Beta shifter holds a tiny, golden-haired Omega close to him. Beside them stands a mixed fae shifter with purple hair and a rounded belly. A young Alpha with short, black hair keeps a protective arm around her as he scans his surroundings.

“It’s a gateway to the realm where they kept Vaegon,” Rue says.

I turn my attention back to Vaegon, proud to sense the magic swirling around him. I do believe it rivals my own, just as the seer claimed it would. His annoyed expression softens as the Beta and the green-eyed Omega approach. He wraps his long arms around them and nips at each of their necks.

Mates... he has two.

My heart warms to know he found love in that foreign place. The little Omega steps away from him and fearlessly approaches me, pulling the Beta along behind her. Her boldness reminds me so much of Rue. I can’t help but smile at her.

“I’m Jade, and this is Brody. We’re Vaegon’s mates,” she says before pointing to the other two shifters. “This is Paren. She came over from this realm not too long ago. That is one of her mates, Frederick.”

She looks back and forth between Vaegon and me and adds, “I can’t believe how much he looks like you.”

“I can’t believe he’s older than you,” the Beta, Brody, says, rubbing his jaw as he tries to wrap his head around it.

“Me either,” I reply, turning my eyes to my son. “It’s been only months. I don’t

understand.”

“Time passes differently in your realm,” Vaegon says, flicking his eyes over from his mates to address me for the first time.

It’s not the reunion I’d imagined. That hope melted away the second I saw the grown fae for who he was. Hearing him call Faerie my realm stings, but I get it. He doesn’t even remember being here.

“Rue filled us in on what’s been happening,” Jade says. “We’re here to help.”

“We’ll need specifics, though,” Lucas rumbles, lifting Jade into his massive arms. “I won’t bring my family in blind.”

Family? I glance down at Rue, who gives me a weak smile.

“They’re a mate-group,” she explains. “Vaegon has a very big family.”

I look around, wishing I knew more about shifters and their customs. It seems like all of them, even the mixed fae and her mate, are part of one large family unit. As tough as all of this is on Rue, I can see she’s comforted by this part.

I lean down and kiss her gently on the head and whisper, “Don’t get any ideas. I’m not sharing you.”

She snickers and swats at my chest, making me grin despite the tense atmosphere. I tug her closer to me and turn my attention back to Lucas.

“I’ll give you all the information you need, but we must get to safety first. Especially you,” I say to the mixed fae Omega, Paren.

I wonder why they would bring her in such a vulnerable state. But if time really does pass differently in their realm, they'd likely want to avoid what happened to Rue and me.

"Why should we trust you?" Vaegon asks as if the very thought is amusing to him.

"Vaegon," Paren says gently. "I heard many stories of him helping our kind before I left. And full fae can't lie. Just ask him. It's like an Alpha bark over everything they say. They're incapable of deceit."

I know the routine, so I jump in. "I hate the queen and her nobles. My mission is to eliminate them, along with anyone who shares their twisted mindset. I'm prepared to die if that's what it takes to make Faerie safe for everyone."

Vaegon scoffs and crosses his arms. "You're younger than any of us. Why should we follow someone less experienced into battle?"

I step around Rue and stand squarely in front of my son. "Less experienced in what, exactly," I challenge. "This realm and every living thing in it? Like the poisonous plants and the ones starved for flesh? Or do you mean the deadly creatures that strike from the shadows and how to defend oneself against them? Are you more experienced with the nobles and their magic? Or the castle's layout and all its hidden secrets? Perhaps you're referring to the indestructible queen herself?"

I scoff back and step away. "Do you really believe you're superior to the fae who gave you the very power you're so confident in?"

I raise my arms and let my magic surge forward. A wall of blue fire, charged with the queen's energy, erupts from my hands, towering over the tallest trees and stretching wide across the clearing. Vaegon tenses, his eyes darting to the family he's now separated from.

A flicker of worry crosses his face. My point has been made. I draw my magic back in before using too much of it, leaving only a scorched line in the grass between us.

“Follow me, or don’t,” I say flatly. “But don’t slow me down or get in my fucking way. If you can’t handle that, go back to your own realm and leave me to fix mine.”

Rue tugs at my tunic, but I keep my focus on my son. He lifts his chin and considers me for a moment before a smirk spreads across his lips.

“Fine,” he says. “Lead the way.”

The dryads immediately rustle their leaves, urging us into the woods. I turn to them and pull Rue along with me. We lead the group into the cover of the forest, leaving the clearing behind. Allina wisely stays silent and trails behind the group. Once we’re safely enveloped by the trees, the landscape shifts into the familiar elven territory I’ve come to know over the past few months.

Vaegon, the elf, appears and strides ahead of us. “Come,” he orders as he ventures deeper into the forest.

Gasps ring out behind me. I glance back and catch Paren whispering to Jade. “It’s another elf!”

They grin at him while the Alphas glare at the back of his head, sizing him up. I look down at Rue, recalling her own excitement when she first met him. How drastically that has changed.

I have hope she’ll forgive the elves for what they’ve done, although I’m not convinced it will happen any time soon.

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Rue

We move quietly through the elven forest until we reach their large gathering area. The seer sits gracefully on the grass, waiting for us. Her gaze is fixed proudly on Vaegon as if she brought him back to Faerie herself.

Elves stop their conversations and turn to watch our group pass by. Juveniles creep closer for a better look. None of them seem alarmed or threatened. Just curious. They trust their leader completely. I wish I could say the same about her.

“Please, sit,” she says smoothly when we reach her side. “We have much to discuss.”

Durin grips my hand when I growl, but he doesn’t try to shush me. I hope he finds a way to punish her for the pain she’s caused us. I get why Vaegon had to leave, but she made the separation far more traumatic than it needed it to be.

“This is our Hendama,” Vaegon tells the shifters. “You will show her respect, or you will no longer be welcome here.”

“And you are?” my son asks him, choosing to remain standing when Allina and the other shifters join the seer on the grass.

“I am Vaegon,” he says with a hint of a grin.

Fucking elf. If only we could go back and choose a different name.

My Vaegon raises an eyebrow. “If you’re my namesake, I sure hope you’re more

impressive than you appear.”

The elf hums and looks at me. “So much like his mother.”

It’s true. At least the side I’ve shown the elves while I’ve been here. I scowl at him even though he’s right, then redirect it toward the seer.

“I regret nothing,” she says evenly. “This is how it had to be. You’ll accept it once you stop focusing on yourself.”

“You’d better pray you never have a pup of your own,” I hiss. “I’ll snatch it away and drag it to the other realm myself. We’ll see how casually you react to someone ripping that control out of your hands!”

She brushes off the threat, infuriating me even more, and turns to the other shifters. “A battle is approaching. It will determine the future of this realm and all who dwell in it. Vaegon has a crucial role to play.”

Jade gets up and takes Vaegon by the hand, leading him to her spot on the grass. She climbs onto his lap and settles against him. Durin and I remain standing, making our anger and disapproval known. But Durin also stands in authority as the leader. There should be no mistaking who holds the power here. He’s only letting the seer speak because we need her insight.

“The rest of you may be as involved as you like,” the seer continues, “but you mustn’t interfere if you decide not to join us. Now, which of you became Vaegon’s peace?” she asks, scanning the group of shifters.

They all look at each other curiously.

When none of them speak up, she turns to Allina, “Who did he imprint on?”

Allina must be feeling remorse because she looks at me to explain, not the shifters. “Before we left, the seer cast a spell on Vaegon to shield him from the bloodlust. The spell promised he would find calm in someone of his choosing. Peace and tranquility would flow from them and give him relief during his time away.”

“Anders...” Jade says, her eyes widening with some kind of realization. She jumps to her feet and races over to the pale Alpha, throwing herself into his arms. “That’s why he’s always been able to soothe you.”

Anders holds her in his arms quietly as she covers his face in kisses.

“Yes,” Allina says. “We visited many packs. It took two years for him to imprint. But when he saw Anders, it was immediate.”

Vaegon grunts. “Anders is the only thing that kept me from burning the realm to the ground. So, thanks for the spell, I guess.”

“Yes, thank you,” Paren says, climbing onto Anders’s lap beside Jade. “I couldn’t have survived the realm without him, either.”

I’m confused. Not about the unusual mate-group with two Omegas, but because the spell was meant for Vaegon, not Paren.

“Why am I able to help her, too?” Anders asks, voicing my confusion. “Shouldn’t the spell just help Vaegon?”

“Elven magic isn’t always predictable,” the seer says, her eyes piercing into Anders as she studies his face. “Spells can carry meanings that only reveal themselves when they’re needed. And... you bear a resemblance to our kind. It’s possible you have elven blood, which could amplify the spell’s effects. It could also be what drew Vaegon to choose you.”

“Anders and I are brothers by blood,” Lucas says, shaking his head in confusion. “I only have shifter magic, and Vaegon didn’t imprint on me. How could Anders have elven blood when we share the same parents?”

“Fate knows all, down to the smallest parts of who we are. You may indeed have our blood. Vaegon chose Anders as his source of tranquility, but you had your own important role in his life.”

Lucas looks at Vaegon, who bares his throat in submission. Tears fill my eyes as I watch the most powerful Alpha, likely ever, show so much humility to this other Alpha he clearly loves.

They’re brothers—all three of them. Anders was Vaegon’s peace. Lucas really was his guardian, but not in the way I’d thought. Vaegon grew up with a family. Maybe even a set of loving parents as well.

That last thought hurts, but it also brings some healing. Vaegon wasn’t alone. He wasn’t afraid. He was cared for and comforted. The realm needed Durin more than Vaegon did. I can see that now. Hopefully, Durin will come to understand it, too.

“You all need to rest,” the seer says, breaking the silence. “Allina, go to your daughter. I’ll show our guests where they can spend the night. We’ll come together in the morning to discuss a plan.”

I watch as Allina hurries off to find her pup. If only I had the magic to trip her. I’m starting to accept the way things are, but the desire to see her face in the dirt will never fade.

Vaegon kisses his mates and clasps the arms of the other three Alphas before coming to stand next to Durin and me. A knot of anxiety tightens in my stomach. I appreciate that he’s given us a moment alone, though. Whatever he has to say is his truth. I will

accept and respect it.

He gazes up at the moon, slowly rising into the sky. “My whole life, I thought I’d been abandoned,” he begins. “I was glamourised until right after Paren showed up. But I always knew I was different. I figured that’s why I was tossed aside.”

I know he’s not done, so I stay quiet, holding onto Durin’s arm for support. It hurts to know Vaegon held onto those thoughts despite how happy he was.

It only deepens my hatred for the elves.

He moves his gaze to the clear, shimmering pond and absently runs a hand through his hair.

“I didn’t even know what the bloodlust was until Paren explained it. Anders soothed me, but only when he was close by. The bloodlust still filled me with rage a lot of the time. I thought I was just damaged. Luckily, once we had both mate-claimed Jade, he could send his calming presence through the bond, even from a distance.”

“That’s incredible,” I whisper.

Mate bonds are a powerful kind of magic. I’ll never get to experience one, but I don’t need to. I have a simpler wish. All I ask for is for Durin to return safely once the battle is over.

Vaegon finally looks at me. A faint smile flickers across his lips before he turns his eyes to the ground.

“When did you lose your glamour?” Durin asks.

“It fell during a battle two seasons ago. We were actually fighting a Beta shifter from

this realm. He had built an army of Alphas from our own realm to seize our lands and bring his pack over from Faerie. He wanted to be a hero, happily doing so at our expense.”

“Shit,” Durin says, running his fingers through his hair just as our son did moments ago. “I take it he was dealt with?”

“Yeah,” Vaegon says, briefly meeting his gaze before turning away. “But he recognized me. Said I looked just like you. He spoke of your deadly magic but never what you were trying to do to help. I had a lot of thoughts about you... most of them not good,” he admits.

Durin nods, but his grip on my hand tightens. I slip my arm around his waist and rest my head against his chest, hoping to bring him some comfort. Today should have been a celebration for our pup’s return. I don’t understand why we’ve been buried in so much sorrow instead.

“I thought you’d forced yourself on my birth mother and abandoned her,” Vaegon continues quietly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Or that maybe you killed her, and I just stumbled into the realm by accident.”

His words pierce my heart like fangroot thorns. Durin doesn’t deserve to be thought of that way. It’s a horrible slap in the face after what he’s been through.

“Paren said she’d heard stories of you helping shifters,” Vaegon continues. “I’ve been conflicted ever since.”

“He would never hurt me,” I say, hugging Durin’s hand against my chest. “He protected me. He saved me.”

Vaegon nods. “I can see that you care for each other. Scent match and all.”

“Scent match?” Durin asks, looking sheepishly between Vaegon and me. He shifts his weight to his other leg and clears his throat. “I’m sorry. I still don’t know as much about shifters as I should.”

“It’s okay,” I reassure him, gently squeezing his hand. “A scent match is a shifter’s fated mate. Mother said the same about us. I didn’t believe her at first because you’re not a shifter.”

“I’m only half shifter,” Vaegon says with a shrug. “But Jade is my scent match. She’s my brothers’ scent match, too, even though we share no blood. My family accepted that it was fate. What else could it be?”

“I see how you two react to each other. You’re fated to be together, which means I’m fated to be alive, which means at least some of this bullshit the elf was saying is probably true. So, I’m in.”

Hearing that is a relief. Durin won’t have to face the queen alone. Still, I wish neither of them had to walk into danger like that.

“Thank you,” Durin tells him. “We can strategize tomorrow. I’m going to turn in now.” He gives me a quick kiss on the cheek and walks away, leaving me alone with Vaegon.

As much as I want to admire the Alpha my son has become, I struggle to look at him. I have no idea what to say. My mind spins, searching for a topic that won’t be awkward for him or painful for me. Eventually, I give up and plop down on the grass.

He lowers himself to the ground in front of me, thankfully knowing where to start. “I can see your pain,” he says, pulling blades of grass from the ground nervously. “It’s shitty that it brings me relief. I don’t want you to hurt, but it’s nice to know my parents didn’t abandon me.”

I wring my hands, fighting back tears. What he's saying makes sense. I'm glad he can finally let go of any doubts about why he grew up without us. But my heart aches knowing he ever had to wonder.

"I'm also glad you weren't hurt in order to bring me into the world," he says before I can steady my words enough to voice them.

"After learning of my father's other role..." He clears his throat and looks away from me. "It seemed he was fond of the queen. With the way Paren described how the queen and other fae treat shifters, I had little hope you were okay."

I'm surprised to know they already knew of his role as consort, but his admission is what crushes me. I'm touched that he cared enough to worry about me but devastated that anyone could ever think that of Durin.

"He's the one who was hurt," I whisper.

The tears I'd been holding back escape, leaving warm trails down my cheeks. I let them fall for Durin. He suffered and felt ashamed because of what happened to him. He tried to stay away, thinking his trauma would somehow infect me. Instead, he ended up saving me from the same fate he'd been suffering through all along.

"I can see that now," Vaegon says, tossing the grass in his hand aside. "I'm not innocent," he continues. "I hurt my mate in ways Durin would probably hate me for. I'm sorry for thinking that way about him."

I'm not sure what he means about hurting his mate. She clearly adores him. I appreciate his apology, but I can't fault him for what he thought. He didn't have very much information to go on.

"It's okay. I understand," I reply softly. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he says, rising to his feet and offering me his hand. “I may have suffered longer to this point, but I think your wounds are deeper. They’ll take more time to heal.”

My hand trembles as I reach for his. He pulls me up with a firm grip and looks down at me with compassion. It’s not love, but it’s more warmth than I would have expected.

He lets go, looking a bit unsure. “I’m going to find my mate-group. I’m not sure what to call you. It doesn’t feel right to call you by your name, but I have a, uh...”

“A mother,” I finish for him. “It’s okay. I’m glad you do,” I say honestly, even though it chips off another small piece of my heart. “You can call me Rue. That’s fine.”

“He considers it for a moment, then nods. “Okay. Goodnight, Rue,” he says before turning to leave.

I sigh and turn away, too. Back to my mate, my greatest blessing in this life. My only hope and prayer is that after all the suffering fate has put us through, it lets us be together when the battle is done. In life or death, I don’t care, as long as we’re together.

Durin

“What do you need?” I whisper to Rue as she walks through the door.

She looks so drained. I expect her to head straight to her bed. Instead, she heads for the little bed our son slept in for only a few short hours before he was taken from us. I cleared the mess from the shattered chair a while ago, but the bassinet still sits there, waiting for his return.

“Burn it,” she says, staring at the little blanket he was bundled in.

I step up behind her and wrap my arms around her tense frame. “Will that really help?” I ask, concerned she might regret this later.

“It will,” she insists. She turns in my arms and presses her face into my chest. “I can’t bear the scent of him.”

I forget how sensitive shifter’s noses are. Rue must be catching traces of him on the blanket and mattress. They hold the scent of him as a pup. A pup who’s never coming back. I see why that reminder would slow her healing.

I nuzzle the top of her head, then guide her gently backward to the doorway. “Stay here, okay? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Tears well up in her eyes, but she clenches her jaw and nods me on. I caress her cheek and turn to do what she asked.

When I reach the bassinet, I discreetly burn a small section of the blanket off. Regret is a heavy burden to carry. If I can at least spare her from that, I have to try. I tuck the piece inside my sleeve and let my magic flow. The bassinet ignites and is quickly swallowed up by hot, blue flames.

I contain the fire to prevent scorching the walls of the hut. Everything else turns to ashes, settling softly on the floor. Rue wipes her face and takes a deep, steady breath.

“Thank you,” she says before turning her back on the room and pulling me out the door. She ignores the meal the elves left for us and heads into the bedroom.

Pleasing her body to distract her mind is something I’ve gotten good at over the past few months. I’ve cherished the intimacy, even if it seemed more therapeutic for her than romantic. But this already feels different. Her eyes shine with life when she looks up at me. She slowly undresses herself, something I’ve been having to do for her. Her eyes drop shyly with an innocence that was buried beneath her pain.

She reaches for me with both hands. I step forward to embrace her, but she grabs the fabric of my tunic. With a gentle tug, she opens it wide and slides her hands up my chest before pushing it down over my shoulders.

Her fingers trail softly down my stomach and stop at the ties of my leathers. I softly rub her arms, feeling a rush of pride when chills race along her skin. She leans in and rests her cheek against my chest, breathing in my scent as she unties the strings.

The tickle of her breath makes my cock twitch. He’s eager to be a part of this intimate moment.

A small whimper escapes her lips as she slides her hands around my back and slips them under the band of my leathers. Her palms glide across the globes of my ass as

she guides the garment down over them.

The leathers fall and pool at my feet, letting my cock spring free. When it makes contact with the soft skin of her belly, we both moan and cling to each other.

She climbs my body like a tree and wraps her legs tightly around me. My cock is pinned between my stomach and her blazing heat. I want to pin her back against the wall and pound into her soft body.

But she breathes me in and lets out a sweet sigh, slowing me down. Her fingers tangle in my hair as she nips at my shoulder and jaw.

Then, with a fierce growl, she bites down hard on my neck.

The pain jolts me, but I hold her firmly to my chest. This connection has deeper meaning than anything else we could do with our bodies. The bite during her heat was innocent and tentative, driven by a fated bond she didn't know we had. But this is a conscious choice.

Despite my past and all my mistakes, she's claiming me.

She continues growling while gripping my flesh possessively in her teeth. She's given herself over to her instincts, being her truest self with me. It reminds me of her raw beauty during her heat. Giving her what she demanded was difficult then. This time, she's fully aware of what she's doing. I won't let doubt or shame get in the way. I'll accept her offering and give myself to her completely in return.

I sit down on the edge of the bed as she clings to me, sinking her fangs even deeper into my neck. The burn is more intense than the fire living inside me. If only I could hold onto this feeling. To physically carry the heat of my mate's love every day.

Her hard nipples are pressed against my chest, and her core is still settled right on top of my shaft. I let my head fall back and groan in pleasure. She responds with a gush of that silky moisture her body makes. It coats my cock, urging me to satisfy her need.

We should strategize, or eat, or at least rest. But none of that seems important right now. It's dust on the floor we can't be bothered to sweep up. I need to be inside this perfect creature who, against all odds, wants me back.

She's given me a pure spirit and body, not ones marked by my mistakes and sacrifices. I feel like the fae I was meant to be—the innocent one, untouched by cruelty. Not the wrathful avenger or defiled protector I became. I thought I'd lost that pure part of myself, but she restored it in me.

Rue pulls away, looking at me with love and longing in her eyes. She quickly licks the mark she left on my neck, then holds my face and kisses me. It's tender at first, but she soon slips her tongue past my lips and takes control.

I moan into her mouth as she gives me the passion that's been missing from our mating.

It's impossible to focus on what she's doing to my face for long with her warm folds hugging my shaft. I slide my hands to her hips and press her hard against me. She responds immediately, biting my bottom lip and rolling her hips.

There hasn't been a good time to ask more about knots, but honestly, I don't care what Alphas do with them. I have my own, and I'll use it however I want. I go ahead and glamour one before penetrating her this time. I'm hoping the extra pressure against her clit will bring her pleasure.

She squeals as soon as she feels it. Her movements speed up, and she grinds roughly

against my knot. Then she slows down, kissing me softly for a moment before grinding against me again.

She falls into a rhythm, retreating briefly before crashing back into me like waves breaking against the rocks.

Without warning, she shifts to her knees and lowers herself onto my cock. I watch her hips roll while she grips my knot with her walls. Her long black hair flows past her beautiful face and over her shoulders, framing her breasts like silk ribbons.

She's the most breathtaking thing I've ever seen.

I grow my knot until she gasps and collapses against my chest. She clings to me, digging her nails into my shoulders.

Her fangs graze the other side of my neck. She bites down, then releases. Then, she sucks on my chest and shoulders to mark me before moving back to my neck.

I flip us over, positioning her on her back. She blinks up at me in surprise. I grasp her knees, spreading her legs wide before pushing back inside. She gasps and grips my wrists, holding on tight as I pound into her.

My thrusts hit deep, making her full breasts rise and fall with each movement. Her eyes roll back in pure ecstasy. She moans and writhes beneath me as the sensations overwhelm her.

Her walls begin to flutter, telling me she's close to the edge. I slow my pace. She pulls me down so there's no space between us. Our hips grind together, and my balls rest against her ass as we move.

There are so many points of contact. Each one sends electric jolts of pleasure through

my body. It's all-consuming, yet I still feel like I can't get enough of her.

She grabs my hair and presses her lips to mine. I kiss her aggressively and grow my knot until it's impossible to break apart. Yet I still hold her tight as if she might manage to slip away.

Soon, her body responds again. Her hips move in circles while I press deeper, searching for any hidden inch of her I missed.

My pleasure hits its peak. I can't hold back. I grow my knot just a bit more, stretching her to her limit around me.

She holds my face against hers, keeping our lips locked as I groan out my release. The jolts along my skin fade to the background as pleasure shoots through my cock in bursts.

Her moans fill the air as she finds her own pleasure. She twitches and jerks against me while clinging to our kiss. It stretches on, feeling endless. But she eventually comes down, falling limply against my chest like a warm blanket.

I gently brush the damp hair from her forehead and smile, struck by her soft beauty and incredible strength.

"I'm happy, Durin," she whispers, stilling my heart. "I can still be happy because of you."

I'd thought my next mission, after defeating the queen, would be helping Rue find joy again. Somehow, I managed to accomplish that one first. I hug her close, feeling quite victorious.

"Me too," I whisper into her hair. "I love you, my little treasure."

Call it selfish, but I'm fighting for Rue now. I want a realm where I can focus on loving and pleasing her without hiding. Where she can explore and enjoy Faerie without facing hatred or fear.

I'm not just killing the queen; I'm ripping her off the throne and putting someone there who actually deserves it. Because Rue is the only true royalty this realm has ever known.

Rue

Durin and I deserve a day in bed. The emotional beating we took yesterday certainly calls for one. But the realm needs him. I'll just have to settle for endless lazy days in bed after the battle is over.

Because he'll win, and he will survive. Then, we can have the perfect life that fate owes us.

I step out of the bedroom and find Durin at an empty table. "No breakfast?" I ask, frowning. "I guess the elves are done providing for me."

He walks over and scoops me into his arms. "You don't need them. You have me."

I smile and snuggle against his chest, enjoying the strong, steady beating of his heart. He carries me out of the hut, and I make no move to get down. The stuffy elves can think whatever they want. I love my mate, and I want everyone to know it.

He may be the realm's savior, but he was mine first.

Durin carries me down the path and out into the clearing. Vaegon and his mate-group are sitting in a circle, enjoying the bright morning sun. They're eating a typical elven breakfast of oats and fruit, with a generous side of smoked meat for the hungry Alphas.

Jade's face lights up with a warm smile when she sees us. She waves us over and scoots closer to Vaegon to give us room.

“Come, sit,” Paren calls, patting the empty space between her and Jade. She spots the bite marks on Durin’s neck and gives me a knowing smile.

I briefly smile back. Even though her rounded belly reminds me of what I lost, there’s a soft spot in my heart for her. She stood up for Durin when that Beta tried to spread hate against him in their realm. She gave Vaegon some hope that his father wasn’t as horrible as the Beta made it seem.

As we move to join her, the seer suddenly appears behind Vaegon. Durin and I instinctively take a step back. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel comfortable around that elf. She’s a destroyer, masquerading as a spiritual guide. She’s too powerful. There’s so much she can manipulate to suit her own desires.

“Please, eat,” she says, locking eyes with me. “There is much to do.”

I let out a small growl but sit down next to Paren and accept the bowl she hands me. Durin follows, and I eat quickly before the seer can say something that ruins my appetite. She has a knack for souring my stomach.

“Frederick,” she says, setting her gaze on the young Alpha. “You will stay here with your mate. I know your instincts will urge you to fight, but she needs you more.”

Before he can protest, she shifts her focus to the rest of us. “Durin, you and the other Alphas will be delivering supplies to the kelpies today and assisting the shifters with the common fae.”

Movement catches my eye across the clearing. A group of elves has emerged from the trees, their arms loaded with stacks of pale green fabric. Another group follows with woven sacks, clinking with the sound of glass. They come to a stop behind the seer, waiting for instructions.

“What about the rest of us?” I demand. I can see my irritation mirrored on Jade’s face. “And don’t tell me we’re just supposed to sit here and wait.”

“The more of you in the forest today, the higher the risk of being discovered,” she states, raising her chin at me. “We don’t have time for rescue missions. The rest of you will indeed remain here.”

Before I can argue, Vaegon, the elf, appears to the side with a group of shifters. As I look over them, I realize they’re members of my old pack. There are a dozen Alphas, along with Arya and other vulnerable members of the pack.

But most importantly, my mother is there.

“Madda!” I shout, jumping up and running into her open arms. Durin follows after me and joins our embrace.

“Oh, Rue,” she whispers against my cheek. “I tried. I really tried to convince the whole pack to stand with Durin.”

“It’s okay, Lasha,” Durin reassures her, squeezing her arm. “I wouldn’t expect them to.”

“But some of them did!” she says, pointing to the group of Alphas who are already introducing themselves to Jade’s group. “They were impressed with your power, Durin. After you and Rue left, they started seeing Bock in a different light.”

When I pull away from my mother, Arya steps in for a quick hug. “Bock began mistreating your mother and the Alphas who supported Durin,” she tells me. “I think he felt threatened by Durin’s power. That elf showed up out of nowhere,” she says, pointing at Vaegon. “He gathered up the Alphas who were willing to fight and the Betas and Omegas who wanted to leave. Now, here we are,” she finishes with a grin.

“The Betas and Omegas will remain here until the battle is over,” the seer announces, snatching everyone’s attention away. “Alphas, you’ll help with preparations today.”

With a wave of her hand, Durin and all the Alphas except Frederick vanish. I stagger back, clutching my chest as devastation and despair slam into me yet again.

She hasn’t just taken Vaegon from me this time; she’s taken my mate, too.

She approaches me and takes my hand. My fangs shoot out in response to her threatening touch. I stare menacingly into her eyes, fully prepared to rip her apart. But I’m surprised to find a flicker of compassion in the eyes staring back at me.

“They will all return safely this evening,” she says calmly.

I feel the life return to my heart, but Jade’s panicked expression ignites a fury in me. I yank my hand away from the seer’s grip and wrap it around her throat.

A few of the elves step forward to defend her, but she raises a hand to stop them.

Let them come. I’ll set them straight, too. I won’t roll over for elves or anyone else. No one has a right to treat me the way she has.

“If you ever pull that shit again, I’ll fucking kill you,” I growl. “I don’t care if Durin and Vaegon haven’t returned yet. The pieces are in place. You’re no longer needed, and I’m done with your bullshit.”

I release her throat but hold my ground. The way this realm stands aside when leaders overstep their bounds infuriates me. It’s gone on long enough.

The seer stares blankly back at me. I need to make sure she heard me, so I press on. “You say you’re a servant of fate, but the way you treat others shows you’ve

forgotten your place. You're here to keep everyone on their paths? Well, someone needs to remind you of yours. I'm more than willing to take on that role."

A tense silence hangs in the air as everyone waits for the seer's response.

Naturally, she doesn't give one. The battle is coming, and I know that should be everyone's focus. But this isn't over between us. I won't be a pawn in her games. She has her visions, but I have my will.

No one, not the seer nor fate nor anyone else, can take that away from me.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

One moment, I'm smiling at Rue and her mother. The next, I find myself by the dark lake with both Vaegons and all the Alphas from the clearing. Piles of fabric lay at my feet, and glass vials spill out of open sacks all around us.

Everything goes still and silent. The air thickens. Dark shapes dart beneath the water's surface, and haunting songs begin to drift through the air. Hoofbeats pound against the sand as kelpies rush from the trees and the shore to surround us.

My son reacts defensively, letting his blue energy crackle around him. Some of the Alphas shift and form a protective circle around us. Their bodies press tightly together as they close us in at their backs. The other Alphas crouch low, growling with bared fangs and claws, ready for a fight.

We're just as startled as the kelpies are, but we're the ones intruding on their territory. They have a right to defend themselves against us, but a fight with them is the last thing we need.

The hypnotic songs grow louder. Some of the wolves begin to drift away from the circle as they're drawn closer to the water.

"Majestic!" I shout, pressing my palms against my ears. "We apologize for the intrusion!"

I push through the circle to make myself seen. The kelpies know me. I need to diffuse this situation before a battle breaks out among us, risking soldiers we need for the real

fight ahead.

The kelpies' melodies fade, and the wolves caught in their spell look around in confusion. Vaegon pulls his magic back inside, and the other Alphas stand down.

"We didn't get a warning either," I say, glaring at the elf beside me. "No one means you any harm."

The line of kelpies parts, and the leader steps through. His black coat shines in the morning sun, highlighting the powerful muscles of his large frame.

"Majestic," I say, bowing my head.

I turn to the Alphas, and wait for them to acknowledge him as well. The wolves shift back and join the others as they all lower their eyes.

"Forgiven," the leader replies before shifting his gaze to the elf beside me. "Hmm. I haven't seen an elf in ages. Many of my kind don't believe you actually exist."

"If only we could become a mere myth to the realm," Vaegon muses as his gaze wanders over the kelpies' territory. "Perhaps one day."

"Tell your seer to stop tossing us around without warning," I snap. "We could have lost fighters today if a battle had broken out here."

He turns his dark eyes on me and clasps his hands in front of him. "You should appreciate those who can easily help you cross such long distances."

"Who?" I huff. "You and the seer? You might be the only one left when we return if Rue is half as furious as I suspect she is."

“Who is he?” the Majestic interrupts, tossing his large head at my son.

“He’s a mixed fae from another realm, destined to help us bring down the queen.”

The leader studies Vaegon carefully before looking at me. I doubt he misses the striking resemblance between us.

“And what are you?” Vaegon asks him back, crossing his arms and sizing up the imposing kelpie.

“They’re kelpies, brother,” Anders answers him. “I’ve read tales about them, but I never imagined they were real. Fascinating...”

The leader stomps and chuffs at them. “Your realm doesn’t have kelpies? It sounds like a dreadful place.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Lucas tells him with a frown. “There are no elves either. I don’t think any magical beings were meant to live where we came from. We look forward to getting to know you and your kind.”

The Majestic nods at Lucas, then turns to me. “What have you brought with you?”

The elf steps forward and picks up one of the folded green fabrics. “The sashes are spelled for protection,” he says, unfolding and holding the garment out. “They will help deflect magical attacks to your flanks and backs.”

He kneels to take one of the vials and holds it up by its leather cord. “These contain the whispers of powerful healing spells, sealed for when you need them. Just bite down or stomp on the vial to release the magic.”

“Thank you,” the leader says, bowing his head to Vaegon. “When do we begin?”

“Two hours after dawn,” I reply, raising my voice so everyone can hear. “That’s when the nobles are most vulnerable. They’re either sleeping off the day’s indulgences or stumbling back still drunk.”

“I’ll bring everyone here when it’s time,” Vaegon says. “Then, I’ll move you all to the starting point together.”

I realize I never stopped to consider his magic. He gifted me smaller spells before I faced Mitah, but he also has transference magic like the seer. It must be powerful if he plans to send everyone to the castle at the same time. He and the other elves won’t engage in battle, but they’re proving invaluable to this mission. I’ve been too focused on my anger at what they did to Rue and me. I didn’t realize what a crucial part they play in our chance of success.

As I watch him slip the corded vial over a kelpie’s head, my thoughts turn to the blinded kelpie I lead back here after his attack. “How’s Shamere?” I ask the Majestic, hoping he’s healed more since returning home.

“He’s well,” he says. “He regained enough sight to see the damage his hooves can inflict on a handless noble. But, sadly, not enough to resume his duties.”

“He deserves the rest,” I say, hoping Shamere won’t miss his work too much. “We need to get going now. We have to visit the shifters. We’ll see you again around dawn.”

“Very well,” the Majestic says. “We’ll be ready.”

Vaegon wastes no time transporting us to the shifter camp closest to the castle. It’s still a good bit away, but it’s where we need to be right now.

“Durin!” Sashon calls as soon as we appear.

I'm relieved we've avoided another tense situation. I step forward and bare my throat to him before introducing the others. The Alphas all submit as well, seeming at ease among their own kind. Sashon gives my son a curious look, much like the kelpie leader did, but keeps his thoughts to himself.

He forgets all about it when he notices the elf who brought us here. He flashes over and scents his neck unapologetically. A huge grin spreads across his face, and he turns to his pack. "Come meet our brother, the elf!" he shouts.

Vaegon's eyes widen. He takes a few steps back as shifters crowd around him, getting a good look and sniff of the mysterious creature. His expression quickly evens out, but his body is so tense that I know he's miserable.

I chuckle loudly and turn back to Sashon. He turns and waves us over to a heap of small stones lying near a patch of glowing calantar flowers.

"The charms are ready," he says proudly. "One of our mixed fae took the trumec weed from the kelpies and infused it into the stones."

Anders picks one up and turns it around in his fingers. "What are they for?"

"They're sleeping charms," Sashon explains. "Made from a powerful sedative that grows in the kelpie lakes."

"We're concerned about the common fae living near the castle," I add. "They're under the queen's influence and might decide to fight for her. They aren't particularly powerful, but they could become a significant distraction."

I scoop up a handful of the charms and admire the red lines of the trumec, running across the stones like veins of fire. "These charms will be placed outside their huts to keep them in an enchanted sleep. They'll remain in that state until the stones are

removed. We won't have to worry about being attacked from behind."

"Clever," my son says, tossing one in the air and catching it. "Let me guess... we'll be handing these out tonight."

"Yes," I reply. "Your wolf forms won't trigger the glow of the calantar flowers. Use your stealth to drop a stone outside each hut in the small villages Vaegon brings you to."

The Alphas nod their agreement. "Sashon," I tell the Prime, "The elf will bring you all to the kelpie land when it's time. We strike two hours after dawn."

"I'll send word to the other packs," he says. "We'll be ready."

We spend the rest of the daylight distributing vials and fitting the fighting kelpies with sashes. As the sun begins to dim, we share a meal of smoked fish, seaweed salad, and all the moonshade tea we can stand.

It comes in handy for the hours we spend placing the stones. I watch in awe as the wolves slink through the darkness, often slipping past drunken fae without being noticed. I catch glimpses of shiny, golden eyes in the distance, but they seem to have no owner. They're silent. And so fast... it's incredible. I've never known a fae with speed like that, regardless of the magic they wield. How any fae could find one of these creatures beneath them is a mystery. They're truly remarkable.

My hopes for the battle rise with each village we visit. And once all the villages are secured, Vaegon takes us back to the elven territory to rest. I won't be sleeping, though. The best preparation for me is to hold onto my mate. I have enough drive and faith to attempt the impossible because of her. She's my reason. The only thing worth risking it all for.

Rue

“I have healing power!” Jade yells at the seer. “Let me help!”

I was shocked to learn that Jade, a full shifter, has healing magic. She told me she spent years using the calantar flowers for a tonic for the Betas in her realm. She and her mates think her connection to the plant, along with her mate bond with Vaegon, allows her to heal. It could be very helpful in the battle. I don’t understand why the seer is against it.

“No,” she says again flatly. “Your power draws from your mate’s source. He needs all of that power if he and Durin are to defeat the queen. More importantly, he can’t afford any distractions.”

Jade growls in frustration and stomps over to where her mates are sitting. “Do something!” she pleads with them.

“I know how she feels,” I murmur to Durin as they try to soothe their mate. “I have no magic to offer, but I’m not ready to let either of you go again.”

Durin lifts me off the grass and onto his lap. We’ve all been in the gathering area since he and the Alphas returned this morning. No one can sleep right now. Not with the battle so close.

“I wish I knew what to tell you,” he says. “I’d prefer you stay here where it’s safe, but I do understand how hard it would be for you to just sit and wait.”

He kisses my nose and cheeks, trying to ease my frustration. “The seer knows things we don’t. There must be a reason she wants you and Jade to remain here. She wouldn’t exclude you just to be cruel.”

Durin is probably right. She may have foreseen something dangerous for Jade and me if we leave. I’ll just have to respect his wish for my safety and hope that fate has something better planned for me than... nothing at all.

Bitterness gnaws at my heart, though I’m not sure who it’s aimed at. I just can’t stand feeling overlooked. Being deemed worthless is almost as bad as being fated to live a nightmare.

“It just feels incomplete,” I mutter. “Surely I’m meant for more than just birthing Vaegon and waiting around.”

“Yeah, fate wouldn’t dare waste your pushiness,” Durin says, nipping at my neck.

“Hey!” I yell, pushing him away.

We laugh and shove each other, ignoring the terrifying unknown waiting for us. It works for a while until Durin’s laughter cuts off. I follow his gaze to an orange-haired fae with a kind face standing next to the seer. Durin jumps up and carries me over to the fae, then sets me down gently beside him.

Durin is the only fae I’ve seen up close and interacted with. I’ve been surrounded by bland elves who all look and act the same. I can’t help but stare at the fae’s wide smile and expressive eyes as he throws his arms around Durin for an embrace.

“Rue, this is my friend Farris,” Durin says, draping his arms around my shoulders.

Farris grins down at me and shakes his head. “So this is the little shifter who captured

your heart. She's beautiful," he says, looking back up at Durin.

Heat rushes to my cheeks, but only because my Omega perks up at the compliment.

He can't see you, Omega!

"Nice to meet you," I say, hoping he doesn't notice my blush and think I'm a weak, simpering Omega like the rest of them.

"Farris is my best friend," he says. "The only friend I had for a long time. Until I met you..." he adds, squeezing me in his arms

"Friend?" I scoff, playfully pulling away from him. "When did I drop to friend status?"

Durin chuckles. "Your mate has to be your friend, or they're not the right mate for you."

I hum and lean back against his warm chest. "I guess you stood a chance against the dryad after all."

He throws his head back and laughs, drawing the attention of those around us. It feels good to share this lighthearted moment. He'll survive the fight. Anything else simply isn't an option. But if we're separated for a time, I'll have this moment to hold onto until he returns to me.

"Why are you here?" Durin asks his friend.

"I have no clue," Farris says, looking around. "Where are we?"

"This is elven territory," the seer says, asserting her control as usual. "You'll go with

Durin to the dark lake and illusion him and these three Alphas.”

She turns her attention to the four of them. “You must stay together, no matter what. The queen is your responsibility. The kelpies and shifters will handle the nobles. Do not let the battle distract you. Get to the queen and eliminate her.”

“I guess it’s time,” Vaegon says, joining his mates and pulling them close. The rest of his family gathers around to say their goodbyes.

I’m ready to get this over with, but I’m not ready to have the seer rip Durin away from me again. “Don’t you dare flash them away until we’re done!” I growl at her. “It’s the least you can do. Show us you have some kind of heart in there.”

She gives that familiar blank stare but doesn’t lift a hand to send them away. I turn and jump on Durin, wrapping my legs and arms around him. “And you... Don’t you dare die.” I press my forehead against his and whisper against his lips. “Come back to me.”

He rubs his nose lightly against mine before kissing me. “Before I met you,” he says, “I believed my only purpose was to kill the queen. Dying to take her down just made sense to me.”

“But now?” I whisper, shaken by his easy acceptance of death.

“Now, I realize my journey doesn’t have to end with her death. Fate doesn’t see me as ruined, just like you don’t. I promise I’ll return. Then, I’ll relax and enjoy my reward—you.”

I kiss him gently and slide down to stand on my own feet. The seer lifts her hands to transport them all away. I press one last kiss over Durin’s heart, then watch as he fades from view.

Jade collapses into Brody's arms, and Paren glances at me while holding onto her own mate. I'm happy they have mates who can comfort them while the others are away. All I have is my Omega, who is just as heartbroken to see Durin disappear. But we're strong. We'll hold onto Durin's faith. He truly believes he'll return.

The seer better hope he's right because, if he's not, my only purpose in life will be to taint that crystalline pond with whatever color she happens to bleed.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:25 am

Durin

Watching Rue vanish from my sight pierces deep. Once all of this is over, I'm never leaving her side. My mood lifts when I see the green, sandy shore of the dark lake teaming with soldiers. The kelpies, adorned with the sashes and charms, chat with each other and the Alphas. Some of the Alphas are in wolf form, pacing impatiently, ready to fight.

I began this journey with only Farris at my side. Now, I stand among hundreds of allies. I have help. There is hope. I think I may have even made some new friends. The Majestic nods his big horse head at me and chuffs. I spot Sashon's bright blonde hair weaving in and out of the crowd as he warmly introduces everyone to each other. I can feel Daylor's influence as waves of courage and drive fill my chest.

But my stomach twists as I search the crowd of bodies but don't find Kahras.

Farris steps closer and grabs my shoulder, somehow knowing who I'm looking for. "I met with the handler like you asked," he says. "I illusioned the mixed fae and snuck them out of the castle one by one. They're in Rue's old hideaway. Most of them will have to sleep on the grass, but they're all safe."

"I hope he brought enough of his elixirs for them to go unnoticed," I murmur, wondering how he's going to keep them from being discovered.

"I'm sorry, Durin," Farris says, wincing. "I couldn't get the lost ones out."

My stomach tightens, and I lock eyes with Farris, waiting for him to explain.

“They wouldn’t come with me,” he says, pressing his hands together apologetically. “I tried illusioning Kahras to join each one, but they were just too loud, even with the calming elixir. He tried silencing tonics and sleeping elixirs, but nothing worked. The bloodlust is just too strong. We couldn’t get them out, so he stayed behind with them.”

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

I hope that the queen forgets about them when we arrive or that Kahras will have come up with a solution by then. “It’s okay,” I reassure Farris, forcing a smile. “We’ll figure it out. How about the servants?”

“They’re good!” he says, perking up with the better news. “They’re with your mother.”

My heart takes the blow hard. My mother has always been nurturing. It’s who she is. Naturally, she’d be the best place for Sarra and Leah. Once this is over, I’ll have to face her and my father. I can’t let the guilt weigh over me right now, though. The reason I pushed them away was to focus on this task. I’ve added a couple of significant distractions since then, but that doesn’t mean I should unbury this one and load it onto my back for battle.

Sashon notices me and quiets the crowd with a loud whistle. I take a moment to admire the army before me—an assembly of strong, determined warriors, each one driven by a fierce thirst for justice. They stand united, despite their differences. The nobles are fueled by hate and arrogance. They work alone. There is no loyalty between them, only selfish ambition.

The magic the nobles hold is daunting, but I believe in this army. The sight of them standing proudly together, along with Daylor’s fierce energy, compels me to step forward and speak.

“ You are the true nobles,” I shout, turning around so I can see each of them. “You should be the ones entrusted with the protection of our realm. When this battle is won, you will reclaim the honor that is rightfully yours. It’s time to cleanse the realm of the filth that plagues it.”

A chorus of growls and stomps fills the air, echoing off the water and the dense trees behind me. I raise a hand to caution them. “But be careful. Keep the list of the nobles and their powers in mind. There are more of us, but the queen chose her nobles for a reason. We will find victory, but it won’t be an easy one.”

I glance over at Trass, standing among the kelpies. “Trass will cast an illusion over us to hide our advance. It should get us close to the castle before they realize an attack is coming.”

Trass steps forward and places a fist over his heart. I return the gesture and look back to the warriors.

“We don’t know if the queen will come out and fight or stay hidden in her castle, letting her nobles do the work. We do know that something is wrong with her magic. She’s weaker.” I look intently at the warriors, urging them to take my next words seriously. “This weakness simply makes defeating her possible , not easy. Your focus is the nobles. Slaughter them. If the queen does venture out of her fortress, leave her to me unless I tell you otherwise.”

I scan the faces before me, looking for any signs of objection or discontent. All I see is a determined group of soldiers proudly accepting the instructions they’ve been given.

“You carry the hope of your kind’s freedom on your shoulders. Use their faith in you. Trust in your training, trust in each other, and trust fate. Today, we reshape the future.”

Sashon shifts into his wolf form and throws his head back to the sky. His thunderous howl is answered by the rest of his kind, filling the air with a primal call to battle. The kelpies join in, rearing up on their hind legs and pounding their hooves into the ground. The air is charged with their own kind of bloodlust. This energy is exactly what we need. We're ready.

Once they've quieted down, I pull Farris forward. "This fae will illusion the four of us going after the queen herself. We need to move quickly through enemy territory. We'll look like nobles, but our uniforms will be off-white so you can easily spot us."

No fae would notice the difference, but it will be glaringly obvious to the Alphas and kelpies with their keen sight.

Farris has been in and out of the castle enough to create realistic illusions of Nydal and the fallen elementals for us. He makes quick work of casting double-layered illusions over each of us. In seconds, we stick out like harpies in a gryphons' den. I'm glad he chose Nydal for me. I don't need the distraction of seeing his disgusting face.

I glance at Vaegon, who's been quiet up to this point. I nod at the elf, and he steps forward to set things in motion. "It's time. In a moment, you'll all appear in the woods near the castle. The battle will begin as soon as you encounter the first noble. Luck and victory to you all."

I stand with my son, watching as the shore gives way to the thick, ominous forest that sits near the castle. He's aware of the queen's formidable power. He knows his magic is modest compared to its source. Yet he stands with his brothers, willing to risk it all for a realm that isn't their own.

They're fighting for the innocent. I'm fighting for Rue. But my son also has mates waiting for him to return. They deserve to be fought for just as hard. I will bring their family home just as I will return to Rue.

There will be no sacrifices today.

Vaegon catches my eye and winks at me. I huff a laugh and shake my head while moving to the front of the line.

The kelpies gather in a large wedge formation made of sleek, black bodies with green sashes. The rich brown, deep gray, and striking white coats of massive Alpha wolves weave themselves among the dark figures. More wolves move to the rear to protect the group from behind.

Lucas, Vaegon, Anders, and I stand to the far right, hoping we can slip around the fighting and sneak into the castle. Or sneak up behind the queen herself if she decides to show her face. Trass hurries to the front and turns to face us all. His vibrant pink hair flows like a banner over his shoulders as he raises his arms to do his part.

“I’m creating the illusion of an empty forest,” he says. “You’ll be concealed from the front and sides, but I can’t cover you from the back. Watch closely what’s behind you. You’ll also need to be as quiet as possible, for my illusions cannot muffle sound.”

Stealth won’t be a problem for the Alphas, but the kelpies will have to tread lightly to keep from giving us away with their hooves.

Trass clenches his hands into fists before throwing them open again, casting an unseen illusion around us. “I’ll need to stay in front of you to sustain the illusion. As long as you’re behind me, you’ll remain invisible from the front,” Trass explains.

We move quietly behind him as a group, doing our best to remain silent. Despite our efforts, there’s a low hum from so much movement in such a tight place. We have no choice but to move on, hoping it’s not enough to draw attention to ourselves.

A few minutes later, we blessedly reach the edge of the trees without being spotted. Those of us in front carefully step out onto the grass behind Trass. The castle wall stands about one hundred paces away, tall and lifeless behind its stone fence. Two guards are stationed outside the gate, as usual, watching Trass as he slowly approaches them.

I'm impressed by how quietly we cross over the healthy grass. But when we reach the barren ground, the soft thuds of feet and the crunch of dead plants surely reach the ears of the two guards.

But they don't look curious or alarmed. They simply turn and open the gates wide for Trass to enter.

There's no way they aren't suspicious. I step forward and signal everyone to stop. The whole progression comes to a halt just as an ugly, orange-haired Alpha struts proudly through the gates.

It's Mannus, that filthy excuse for an Alpha who took Rue. There's only one reason he'd be allowed inside those gates—he must have found out about our plan and run to the queen. He flashes a smug grin at Trass, blocking his path.

I should have melted him into the ground before we left that wretched camp. I'm thrilled to have a second chance at it. We can easily take him and the two guards out and move on. This isn't an issue.

But the fae who steps out behind him is a real problem. It's Vernan.

He can see right through the illusion. He strides forward and calmly surveys the army we've amassed. He knows exactly what our numbers are. I expect him to alert the guards and then flee back inside the walls, but he's not finished here. He raises his hand and crosses it over his body, then swipes it to the side like he's clearing

branches from his path.

The gesture doesn't register with me, but Trass understands right away. He panics and turns back to us. "He's broken the illusion!"

What the fuck?

I didn't know Vernan had that ability. I'm not sure anyone did. Our element of surprise is gone. And if he spots Nydal and the elementals among our ranks, our cover will be blown.

I realize it's too late to worry about that when soldiers begin pouring out of the gate and forming a line. More nobles climb over the walls and join them in their ranks. Their white uniforms almost blend into the stone behind them, but their ugly faces stand out like dark stains.

My heart races as the reality of the situation sinks in. I glance over at Vaegon to see a mix of dread and determination on his face. To my other side, the wolves growl and hold their position, and the kelpies stomp and toss their heads in defiance.

Even with the unexpected turn in the plan, they're still ready.

Trass runs back toward the protection of our group, but a noble named Jenne grabs him with her binding magic. He freezes, rendered immobile by her power, leaving him defenseless and exposed in the open.

Derris, a weather elemental, jumps forward. He raises his hands to the sky and calls down a blinding streak of lightning over a frozen Trass. Derris's aim is notoriously poor. Any moving target would be safe. But with Trass out in the open and rooted in place, his aim hits its mark.

Trass's body stiffens, then collapses to the ground, convulsing violently as the energy courses through him. After a moment, his body goes limp. His clothes sizzle and smolder where the lightning struck, but he doesn't move.

Derris is untrained, but his magic is powerful. Trass is surely gone. An Alpha might survive that, maybe a kelpie. Not a fae.

The first loss hits hard. My soul cries out at me for what I let happen. I'm failing. Right from the start. My pain quickly morphs into an overwhelming fury, and I'm tempted to snuff them all out with one giant surge of my magic. But I resist. The seer's words are rooted deeply into my brain. I look over at Vaegon's clenched jaw and bared fangs. When I catch his gaze, I shake my head, reminding him not to use his magic if he doesn't need to.

Everything has moved slowly to this point. Shock rendered us all unmovable. But that's over. The battle truly begins when a stampede of kelpies charges at Derris. Trass saved a kelpie foal from the nobles, and now the kelpies seem to have accepted him as one of their own.

Derris doesn't know any of that. He just sees a wall of black muscle barreling toward him. His smug smile disappears just before he's trampled by the hoard. I can't see through the mass of bodies, but Derris's screams and the spray of blood in the air tell me he's gotten what he deserves.

The other kelpies and the Alpha wolves have charged ahead, attacking any nobles they can find. Two weaker empaths try to redirect them, but their efforts only slow a few at the front. There are too many attackers for the empaths to focus on.

Jenne frantically tries to bind the wolves closing in on her, but she misses one. A black Alpha wolf clamps its jaws around her waist and slams her to the ground. He shakes her violently for a few agonizing seconds before her body nearly rips in half.

He dumps her on the ground and races toward another noble, bearing his bloody fangs as he closes in on them.

I motion for Vaegon to follow me toward the castle wall. Our small group slips through the chaos unnoticed, almost making it around the far side of the wall. An angry roar from the kelpies halts my steps and draws my attention back to the battle.

Lex, a gravity bender, is holding the heavy kelpies in place for other nobles to pick off. But the Alphas are ruthless. Somehow unfazed by the pull, they blast forward to tear Lex into pieces, freeing the kelpies from their bonds.

I've got to stop letting the battle distract me. They don't need me. I push ahead, focusing on the queen instead. We've nearly reached the corner of the castle walls when a ripple of low sound waves presses against my skull. It intensifies, reverberating through my brain until I'm forced to cover my ears with both hands. I look to see everyone in the fray doing the same, even the nobles who are deeper within our lines.

The kelpies are shaking their big heads around, trying to shake off the painful vibrations. Wolves are on their stomachs, rubbing their paws against their ears.

"Sound elemental! Purple hair!" a kelpie booms out over the noise, recalling the list I gave them.

The kelpie is right. It's a sound shaper named Crait. But who can fight back through the pain? If nothing changes, the nobles will be able to remain at a safe distance while picking off our soldiers with their magic.

It can't end this way. Just one blast of my magic could take him out. It might give me away if any of the nobles see where the blast comes from, but there isn't another option.

I raise my hand toward Crait, but I notice Daylor stumbling forward with his fingers in his ears. He growls and lowers one hand, reaching it out in front of him. He flinches, then blood begins to trickle from his unshielded ear. But he presses on, using his empathic power to make Crait believe he's his own enemy.

Crait gapes at his hands as they turn against him, pressing tightly against his own ears. The horrible vibrations release my brain as they're redirected toward the noble himself. He screams in agony, but Daylor maintains his grip. Then, with a sickening boom, Crait's head explodes, showering blood and brain down on the nobles around him.

They react in disgust, gagging and cursing as they try to wipe the chunks of flesh from their uniforms. But the kelpies and Alphas seize the moment, charging over and tearing through any noble in their path.

Our side is holding its ground. Daylor pulled me back from ruining our chance at victory. I need to distance myself from this chaos to clear my mind. Vaegon seems to be struggling to contain himself, too, based on the glowing hands he's hastily stuffing into his cloak.

We continue creeping along the wall until we're almost in line with the castle. The queen hasn't shown herself yet. It seems she's letting the nobles do her dirty work while she conserves her magic. We need to keep our eyes open for her and any straggling nobles, but this seems like a good place to climb over.

"Hear anything?" I whisper to the Alphas.

They all shake their heads.

"Okay, we scale the wall here," I say.

I watch the three spring effortlessly to the top of the wall with their impressive Alpha strength. It's almost comical seeing them move with such finesse while illusioned as three sloppy elementals. I laugh to myself and pull myself over the wall, landing softly on the other side.

The courtyard is as lifeless as ever. Even the nobles don't linger among the black, thorny vines or dead shrubs. But today, the main castle doors are unguarded. All the nobles must be involved in the fight.

I lead the Alphas to the entrance and drag one of the heavy doors open. When I peer inside, I find an empty, silent foyer. No guards, no servants rushing by, not even a single gryphon flying to or from the treasury.

I don't trust it, but we have to find the queen.

The Alphas follow me inside and close the door behind us. "We'll check the throne room first," I whisper as I walk in that direction. We move quietly along the wall toward the doorway up ahead. I feel a tug on my sleeve and turn to find Anders holding a finger to his lips. He cups his ear and then points to the wall.

Someone's inside.

He takes a deep breath through his nose and holds up one finger, then points to himself, Lucas, and Vaegon. He holds up another finger and then points at me. I understand it to mean there's one shifter and one fae inside. It's incredible what an Alpha's nose can pick up.

Mannus is the only shifter who could be here. As far as the fae, it could be Vernan. Or maybe Folas, hiding like the coward he is.

"They'll think we're nobles," I whisper at a level only an Alpha would hear. "Just

stay casual until you're close enough to take them out."

Anders steps up beside me while Lucas and Vaegon stand as a pair behind us. We stroll through the door to find Vernan standing beside a large fireplace with the greasy Alpha who sabotaged our initial attack. They both jump at our sudden entrance, but only Mannus relaxes upon seeing what looks to be four other nobles.

Vernan, however, doesn't look so at ease. Somehow... he knows.

He lifts a hand and swipes it in a downward motion before backing away. Anders looks like himself again. I look over my shoulder and see that Lucas and Vaegon have returned to their true forms as well. Vernan must have stripped away our first layer when he shattered Trass's illusion. He probably wishes he hadn't, as he now faces two angry Alphas and a double portion of my magic.

"Kill them!" he orders Mannus, revealing the first trace of emotion I've ever seen in his eyes.

Fear.

I would love to take them down myself, really draw out their suffering. Sadly, we don't have time for torture. This is a fight for the realm, not personal revenge.

"What do you say we leave these ones for your brothers?" I ask Vaegon, pulling my magic back inside. He smirks and does the same, stepping aside to let them through.

Mannus shifts into his wolf form, drooling and just as scruffy. I scoff as he crouches down and leaps at me. Lucas doesn't even bother to shift; he simply snatches Mannus from the air with his massive arms and slams him to the ground.

"Shift back!" Lucas growls, pinning him down with his heavy weight.

Surprisingly, Mannus obeys. It must be that Alpha control Rue was talking about. Lucas slings a leg over his body and presses a knee into his back. Mannus reaches behind him, trying to grab Lucas's hands, but it's no use. In a blur, Lucas grabs him by the head and snaps it to the side.

I realize I lost track of Vernan while watching Mannus's fate unfold. I whip my head toward the other doorway, expecting to see the end of his cloak disappearing down the hall. But he's right where he was. Only now, he's missing two eyes and bleeding from the hollow sockets.

Vernan is in shock, his mouth gaping open as he touches his face in disbelief. Beside him stands a pale Alpha wearing a far more composed expression than Vernan ever managed. Anders casually flicks the missing eyeballs from his claws, then looks up to find the three of us staring at him.

He quickly slashes Vernan's throat like he's been caught wasting time. Vernan crumples to the ground, instinctively clutching at the gaping wound. Anders leans down and wipes the blood from his fingers on Vernan's cloak before stepping over the growing pool of blood on the floor. My bloodlust cheers for the intense Alpha, sated just by watching the attack. Anders is a real enigma. If he's part elf as the seer believes, I can't help but wonder if this is how the rest of them would fight.

We could certainly use more of that on our side.

It's unsettling how quiet the room is with Vernan dying in the middle of it. Hopefully, the queen doesn't exit this world so gracefully.

If she's hiding, she'll be in the dungeon with her mixed fae. If she's feeling confident in her noble army, she'll be holed up in her chambers. I decide to check her room first, not wanting to disturb the lost mixed fae if we don't need to. We hurry down the deserted hallways, not passing a single living thing. Vaegon growls low in his throat

as we pass the grotesque display of cruelty in the tapestry corridor. When the queen is dealt with, my son and I will burn every one of them off the walls. Along with every wall in this wretched place.

When we reach the queen's door, it's hidden by its usual illusion. I lean in and press my ear against the cold wood. I hear nothing. I glance up at the Alphas for confirmation and curse when they shake their heads.

"Let's go in, anyway," I tell them. "We might find something useful."

Nothing ever stood out to me in her room, but she wouldn't leave anything significant in the open. Still, we can spare a few minutes to check. I feel for the invisible knob and pull the door open. The Alphas follow closely behind me in case of any surprises.

The room is empty, just as we expected. Except for the ornate bed I spent hours being tortured in. My stomach roils, but I hold back my rage. It would have been so satisfying to kill her here, to stain her pristine, silken sheets with her dark, greasy blood. But she's not here, and we have a mission to complete.

We tear through the room for any hint about where she might have gone, but nothing stands out. I drop the handful of enchanting crystals I found back onto her desk. The dungeon is our best hope now. I head toward the door, but Lucas steps in front of me, blocking my path.

"Wait," he says, pointing to the wall beside me. "Someone's in there."

The queen's room is at the end of the hallway. There shouldn't be any more rooms on this side. I glide my hands along the smooth surface of the wall, searching for a doorknob. It takes a minute, but I manage to find a sliding bolt positioned at eye level. It's unlocked, but the door is closed tight. I'm shocked that the queen is shamefully hiding in a secret room, but it gives me hope that she's even weaker than

we thought.

I pull on the bolt and open the wooden door as quietly as I can. The Alphas move closer as it swings open, revealing the unillusioned side to their view. I don't know what kind of defenses she has in this unfamiliar room. Anything could be waiting for us. But whatever's in there with her, it's just as cornered as she is.

I let my magic swirl inside me. It pushes forth through my hands, igniting them in crackling blue flames. Vaegon stands by my side with arcs of blue lightning racing up and down his arms. Could I have killed the queen on my own? I think so. Would I have survived it, though? I'm not so sure.

The confidence I feel with my son at my side is more powerful than the adrenaline shoving its way through my chest. I throw open the door, and we surge inside, ready to confront whatever awaits us.

A shriek fills the air, but it isn't the queen's.

It's someone I don't have time for right now. Someone I forgot even existed. It's Folas, and he's curled up on the floor, hugging his knees and hiding his face.

The queen isn't here, just this pathetic sack of slime trying to save his own skin. Before I can demand to know why he knows about this room, my attention is pulled away by the space itself.

It's unlike any other room in the castle. It's brighter. There's a large window allowing the sun to spill a warm glow across the floor. To my left, a small bassinet with white, ruffled linens rests against the wall. Behind Folas stands a small wardrobe with pixies and moonflowers intricately carved into it. Every inch of the floor is covered with plush, fluffy white rugs. Shelves run along the walls, filled with jars of shimmery sprite dust and jumping bubbles, along with story stones and little instruments.

They're toys. It's a nursery attached to the queen's own sleeping chambers.

"Do we kill him?" Anders asks flatly, pulling me back to the present and out of my surprise.

"Wait!" Folas croaks, holding up his hands. "Please, don't. I know I'm an ass, Durin. I'm sorry. Just don't kill me!"

"Where is she?" I demand, wishing I had time to enjoy his groveling.

"I-I don't know," he stammers. "When I heard an army was coming, I came here to hide with her, but she was gone."

"Hide with her?" I echo, wishing I'd looked into my curiosities about him. "What are you to the queen, Folas?" I demand through clenched teeth. "Tell me your role, and I won't kill you... yet."

He looks up, searching my face for sincerity even though he knows I cannot lie. After he finds what he's looking for, he rises to his feet. He slowly straightens his robes, then utters the last words I would have ever expected.

"I'm her son."

What the fuck did he just say?

"This was my room," he huffs, twisting his fingers as he looks around. "It's waiting for her next youngling, one less disappointing than me. But yes. I'm the queen's son."

My mind is reeling. I've never heard of her having an heir. Folas isn't treated like royalty. He seems more like a servant, a mere errand runner for the queen. And he's weak. There's no power radiating off of him, no hint of the strength one would expect

from the queen's lineage.

And if she needed a spawn to sacrifice, why the fuck would she spare this fool?

"You're lying," I say, shaking my head. "You've found a way to lie."

"No, I'm telling the truth," he sighs, dragging his boot across the fur rug. "I inherited her timeless magic but not her battle magic. I've been here for hundreds of years, waiting to be blessed with something more. Anything. But nothing else ever came."

"Why didn't she sacrifice you?" I ask, more to myself than the ratty fae in front of me.

The darkness had continually demanded her spawn, yet she insisted she was "trying." Why go to such lengths to produce an heir when she already had a perfectly sacrificial one at her disposal?

"Sacrifice me?" Folas recoils with a horrified look on his face. "What are you talking about?"

"You say you're her blood, but you know nothing about the sacrifices?" I ask sharply. "The offerings she's laid at some dark spirit's feet for more power? She promised it her spawn in exchange for even greater power. You claim to be her spawn, yet here you are."

"I had no idea about any of that," he says grimacing. "But it doesn't surprise me. Her timeless magic seems to be drying up. She's been after my own for years. I've tried giving it to her, but it seems timelessness isn't a magic that can be shared."

I take a menacing step closer, smiling to myself when he flinches. "Why doesn't anyone know about you?"

The Alphas look between us, completely in the dark. I don't have time to fill them in. I need the precious minutes to drag something useful out of Folas.

"Answer me," I press, letting my fingers glow as a subtle threat. "Why are you treated like a pest instead of a prince?"

"Okay, okay!" he says, raising his hands defensively in front of his face. "Short version... My mother wasn't always so cruel. My father made her that way."

"Your father?"

He nods vigorously and continues. "He was her consort. The only one she ever truly loved. But she loved him a little too much."

"Too much?" Vaegon grunts. "How do you love someone too much?"

Folas looks from Vaegon to me a few times before finding his focus again. "He was a typical fae, drawn to many. He was passionate about the other species. Especially one elf in particular."

"Shit..." I say, my head whirling with new realizations.

"Yes," Folas says softly, so meek now compared to the brash asshole I've grown to know and despise.

"When she found out she was pregnant with me, she became fiercely possessive of my father. She forbade him from taking any other lovers, which is where the strict rule for her consorts began."

"I'm guessing he didn't comply," Lucas says.

“No, he didn’t.” Folas grabs the little pillow from the bassinet and squeezes it in his fists. “He just couldn’t let go of that damned elf!”

“Perhaps they were fated mates,” Anders suggests. “The connection has a way of taking control of your actions, whether you want it to or not.”

“I doubt it,” Folas scoffs bitterly. “His actions lead to a spectacle of the elf’s tragic death. Then, my mother locked him in her chambers and refused to let him leave. When I was born, she convinced herself that my father was content with only her. Perhaps he pretended to be happy, I don’t know. But eventually, she allowed him some freedom. He used it to escape her.”

“How do you know all of this?” I ask, still skeptical. “No one seems to know who you are.”

“I had a guardian named Seraphine,” he says with a small smile. “She raised me right here in this room. Obviously, the decor changed as I grew, but Seraphine told me everything.” His slight smile is impossible to miss as he speaks of his caretaker. He must have cared for her very much. I don’t even want to ask what happened to her when he was old enough to care for himself.

“My mother glamourised herself when she was carrying me. She worried the fae might see her as weak and try to overthrow her. No one ever knew I existed. Seraphine said that after my father left, my mother became even more paranoid. She feared someone would use her love for me against her or take me away, leaving her with nothing of my father.”

He sighs and tosses the crumpled pillow back onto the mattress. “Honestly, I think it’s the only reason she keeps me around. She doesn’t hide her disappointment in my magic, but she sees my father in me. It’s enough to keep her from getting rid of me.”

“She never found him?” Vaegon asks, voicing my own curiosity.

He shakes his head somberly. The way his curls bounce around his face gives him a youthful, almost innocent appearance. A big part of me wants to feel sorry for him, but he treated me like dirt. He also did nothing to persuade his mother to change her ways. Now I’m stuck putting hundreds of lives at risk to end her cruelty.

“If she did find him,” he says quietly, “she didn’t bring him back alive. When I matured, she let me out of my room but never revealed my identity to anyone. She told me not to, either. That’s why no one knows about me.”

I have so many questions, like why he had to be such a giant dick to me . But there’s no time.

“I’m not done with you,” I warn him. “But we need to find your mother.”

I grab him by the tunic and shove him through the doorway. He’s coming with us. And if he ends up being the key to our victory, I might even let him live.

Rue

“They’re wasting time,” I growl. “The queen isn’t there!”

Jade and I grew increasingly restless while waiting for word to come. Turns out the seer has a heart after all, or we just wore her down with our relentless questions. She’s been projecting the visions coming to her in the fire so we can see them, too.

The images are tinted orange and a little blurry. Sometimes, they flicker in and out or grow taller depending on the height of the flames. Then, they vanish entirely and a new vision starts. It took some time for my mind to make sense of the distortions, but keeping up with the events unfolding has been even more challenging.

I’m starting to see how difficult the seer’s job is. The visions keep starting over but change based on what Durin and Vaegon do. When Durin went to the queen’s chambers instead of the dungeons, the vision of what happens to the realm was grim, to say the least. But when they found Folas, the vision was of a look of horror on the queen’s face.

What’s worse than the changes is that it’s almost impossible to tell what’s actually happening now and what’s a vision of a possible future. The seer explains which is which as they appear, and I’ve begun feeling guilty for hating her so much. I can’t imagine this kind of thing going through my head at all times.

We watched Durin and Jade’s Alphas search the dungeons with no luck. Right now, they’re running around the rest of the castle, looking for hiding spots Durin might have missed.

But the queen isn't there. She's out in the forest behind the castle with all her lost mixed fae in tow.

If Durin can't get there quickly enough, she might be able to draw more power from the darkness before he and Vaegon can confront her. We're depending on her weakened state. They may not be strong enough to defeat her without it.

"Someone needs to tell them!" Jade shouts, pacing back and forth beside the fire.

Brody tries to soothe her by rubbing her back, but she's just as anxious as I am. Nothing could calm me down right now except the queen's severed head on a pike.

"They need to get out there before she draws more power," I say to the seer as calmly as I can. "We have to tell them. You have to let us go to them."

She looks uncomfortable as the scene from the fire switches back to the battle going on outside. The shifters and kelpies are holding strong, but we've suffered some losses. The nobles are powerful enough. The queen can't be allowed to join in that fight.

"I can't see the end," the seer says quietly, narrowing her eyes at the fire. "I can't see anything past the present anymore."

"That's because you're facing a significant choice yourself," I tell her. "The pressure is on you this time."

The fire shifts back to the queen. She's kneeling in the dirt with the mixed fae standing protectively around her. I can see her lips moving, but I can't tell what she's saying.

I look back to the seer, my heart pounding as I wait for her to decide. She mumbles

something at the fire, likely a spell, but the vision doesn't change. A line forms on her brow, and she waves her hand over the flames. Still, nothing happens. She blinks twice and shakes her head, clearly unaccustomed to feeling so lost. But we don't have time for her internal crisis.

"If Durin dies," I warn her, "you die."

She looks up at me with stony eyes. "If Durin dies, we all die."

She mumbles one more spell, pressing her lips into a thin line when nothing happens. Keeping her gaze fixed on the fire, she finally concedes. "Fine. Go."

My heart leaps back to life. I promised Durin I wouldn't leave, but this is different. We have no choice.

Jade grabs Brody's hand and then my own. "We're ready," she says, with a fiery determination on her face.

"Be careful!" Paren says, clinging to Frederick like she can't bear to watch them go.

Jade rushes over and gives them each a kiss on the cheek before returning to my side. The seer waves her hand, and the world blurs and changes around us, leaving us in a place that's very special to me. One with painful memories and lost memories. But it's the place where my future began.

"Where are we?" Brody asks.

"I thought she'd send us to the castle," Jade says. She begins to growl. "She just sent us here to shut us up! When we find our way back, I'm—"

She stops short when a familiar gryphon with reddish-brown feathers and fur steps

out of the shadows of her cave. “Woah,” Jade whispers. “What’s that?”

“It’s a gryphon,” I say, approaching the creature and falling to my knees in front of her. “A friend.”

The gryphon leans down and taps my head with her beak. I turn to see Brody’s wide smile and Jade’s youthful excited eyes. But the urgency to find our mates didn’t go far. A panicked look crosses Jade’s face as the worry rushes back to the front of her mind.

They don’t realize why we’re here.

“Don’t worry,” I tell them, rising to my feet. “The seer sent us here for a reason.” I turn to the gryphon and smile. “Hi there. I need your help again if you’re willing.”

She clicks her big beak and looks at me calmly.

“We have to get to the castle. The queen is in the forest, and Durin needs to know that so he can defeat her. The kelpies and shifters are battling together to overthrow the nobility,” I add, hoping she’ll grasp the gravity of what’s happening right now. “She can’t be allowed to hurt anyone else.”

The gryphon tilts her head slightly and lets out a low rumble. She unfurls her wings and flicks her head over to Jade and Brody before looking back at me. I don’t know what any of it means. This is only the second time I’ve ever been close enough to a gryphon to try to communicate.

“Please,” I whisper, dropping back to my knees.

Leaves crunch behind me, and I turn to see Jade and Brody kneeling, too. The griffin makes that rumbling sound again, then turns and crouches low to the ground in front

of me. I watch her for a moment to make sure I'm not misinterpreting what she's telling me. But I can't imagine what else it could be.

"I think she's going to carry us," I say cautiously. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?" I ask her.

She makes a trilling sound and crouches even lower. I stand and step up to her slowly, giving her the chance to change her mind. But she doesn't. She turns her head and watches me carefully drape my leg over her back and climb on.

"Thank you..." I whisper, wishing I had something to give her in exchange.

Her wings take up most of her back, so I have to sit closer to her hips. I grip the soft, downy feathers at the nape of her neck, wondering where Jade and Brody will sit.

Just as I find my balance, the gryphon launches us into the air with her powerful hind legs. The ground spins beneath me, and I have to hold my breath until my stomach settles. I catch a glimpse of Jade's worried face below before the powerful wings block my view. I think the gryphon is leaving them behind until she swoops back down and grasps them securely in her long talons. Jade lets out a startled squeal as we soar straight up, then burst through the canopy above the tallest dryad's tree.

I can see the castle in the distance, and it fills me with hope. I imagine what the fire is showing the seer now. Hopefully, it's a swift death for the queen and a safe return for our mates.

We pass over the forest in minutes. As we leave the trees behind, we get a clear view of the battle outside the castle walls. There are many dead bodies, but most of them belong to nobles. They're flattened or scattered in pieces as the kelpies and wolves scour the field for their next prey.

The gryphon swerves to avoid a sudden, blinding flash from below. I look down and spot a noble bending the light. She's blinding anything that approaches her with it, making them vulnerable to attack from other nobles. Two wolves creep in from either side, but she swiftly interlocks her fingers, shooting out rays of light in all directions.

A kelpie, either blinded or closed-eyed, charges through and crashes right into her, shutting off the painfully bright beams of light.

My gaze shifts to a noble with his hands outstretched. A wolf is suspended in the air before him, its front paws clawing desperately at the invisible grip around its throat. It gasps for breath, clearly fighting for its life. My heart already mourns for the Alpha, but another wolf flashes up and rips the noble's throat clean out. The wolf falls back on all fours and shakes it off, and I have to rejoice a little for my own kind.

I turn back to look for the part of the forest we saw in the visions, but I'm distracted by a wolf snatching a flying fae from the sky just beneath us. Another noble slips on the blood-soaked ground while trying to retreat through a gate in the thick stone wall encircling the castle. The nobles are falling fast, but the queen is safe in her hiding place.

I try to spot her among her trees, but they're too dense. I do see a black stain that runs from the back of the castle to a bigger circle in the forest. It looks like some sort of a decayed pathway, likely leading straight to where she is.

The gryphon ignores the forest and flies straight through the grand doors of the castle. She lowers Jade and Brody to the ground and then lands beside them, allowing me to climb off. I'm relieved when she stays close. Every small sound we make bounces around the large, empty space, making me feel like an easy target.

"They're almost here," Jade says, smoothing her clothing and taking Brody's hand.

I feel a stab of jealousy as I realize she's been communicating with them through their mate bond. It's not a connection of words, so she couldn't give them our message. But they can share emotions and sense each other's presence. Perhaps that's Jade's role in all of this. Without that bond, it could take us forever to find them. But in seconds, they blast through a doorway, looking frantic as to why we're in the last place they want us to be.

"Don't be mad!" I tell Durin, who's pulling a terrified green-haired fae behind him. "The queen is hiding in the forest. You have to get out there."

He releases the fae and grips my face, making sure I'm unharmed, then hugs me to his chest. "Fuck! Of course she is," he grunts. "Okay. We have to move fast. You and Vaegon's mates need to find somewhere safe to hide."

The gryphon lets out a sudden roar, echoing throughout the towering foyer. Jade stares at her in awe, but my attention is drawn upward. Some of the echoes aren't actually echoes. They're answers. A group of four even larger gryphons emerges from a hidden ledge at the top of the room.

The cave gryphon squawks at them as they descend. Three of them grab an Alpha in their talons and head straight out through the tall open doors. The last gryphon snatches Durin in one set of claws and the fae in the other, wrapping its talons securely around them like cages.

They disappear behind the others, and I scramble toward the doors to follow them. The cave gryphon swoops overhead and lands in front of me, blocking my way. I snap out of it and sigh, knowing I can't go with him.

Being torn apart like this over and over again is leaving scars on my soul. This is the last time. If he survives, I'm never leaving his side again. If he falls, I'll be joining him still.

Durin

The gryphon releases me from its tight grip just outside the tree line. My feet thud quietly against the ground as I land, and I quickly turn to Folas and put my finger over my lips. He nods and looks nervously at the intense Alphas in front of him.

The gryphons fly off, but they don't head back to the castle. They veer toward the shouts and howls outside the castle's walls. One by one, they dive into the chaos. Screams erupt almost immediately after their descent. Moments later, one gryphon reappears, flying toward the forest with a noble clutched in its talons. His white uniform is drenched in blood. I'm not sure if it's from the battle or the gryphon itself, but either way, that noble is done for.

With the kelpies, wolves, and now gryphons all working together, the nobles stand no chance. The seer was right. They have it under control. I can finally shift my focus to the queen, free from the gnawing worry for the others.

I turn back and notice a dark path snaking across the lifeless ground, leading into the trees. The bases of the trunks near the path are blackened, and the encroaching darkness seems to claw its way up, reaching hungrily for the branches and leaves above. Inside the castle, colors fade. Out here, it feels like light itself is lost.

There's no rustling of leaves or roots guiding our feet. It's eerily still and far too quiet. As we move along the path, the darkness beneath me feels like it's sucking me in. I move as stealthily as the Alphas, but Lucas has to hoist Folas over his shoulder. His clumsy movements betray his lack of training.

After a few minutes, the ground vibrates beneath my feet. I stop, and the others halt behind me. Peering ahead into the shadows, I catch sight of the queen on her hands and knees beneath a small copse of blackened trees. Dryad trees... or what once were.

Her fingers trace patterns in the dirt as she murmurs to the ground. She's absorbed in her task, completely oblivious to our presence.

"Is it her?" Vaegon asks, appearing to my right.

I nod and take a step closer. When he and his brothers follow, a loud hissing and shrieking fills the air around us. I don't have to see to know it's the lost mixed fae. They immediately begin peeking around tree trunks and crawling out of the underbrush, forming a mob that moves quickly toward us.

I search the shadows for Kahras, but he doesn't seem to be controlling them. They're under the queen's spell, submitting to her power. There's no recognition in their eyes from the day I met them in the dungeon. They seem to want me dead, just like on my first day in the castle.

Vaegon and I could easily defeat them, but he could have ended up just like them. And Kahras cares for them. They matter. We can't just kill them and move on. I turn to see Vaegon raising his hands to strike as they close in on us.

"Don't kill them," I tell him. "Just disable them." He nods in understanding and turns to face them.

I raise my hands, trying to work out how to keep from harming them too severely. But before we can bring a spark to our fingertips, the mixed fae freeze mid-step or on their hands and knees. Some close their eyes and sigh, while others look around frantically before stumbling forward.

Straight toward Anders.

If I needed more proof of his elven heritage, this would do it. Anyone else would flee from a hoard of mixed fae coming for them. Not Anders. He stands unfazed, calmly observing them as they approach.

“The spell...” Lucas mutters as the mixed fae gather around his brother. No hissing or growling. They’re no longer violent. They’re emotional, falling at his feet and grasping at his clothes. He lets them, even opening his arms to the ones who haven’t reached him yet.

Folas peeks out from behind a tree and asks, “How is he doing this?”

I don’t bother responding to him. “Anders, stay here with them. If their rage returns, call for us. And make sure Folas doesn’t run off.”

He nods, and his brothers smile proudly at him before falling in beside me. I take one last look at the peaceful mixed fae, hoping Kahras is alive to witness what Anders can do for them.

We move forward without worry of the mixed fae, closing in on the queen in seconds. She doesn’t even glance up as we approach. She’s either relying on the mixed fae for protection or lost in whatever task she’s currently in the middle of. Or maybe both. She’s filthy and disheveled. Her hair is a stringy mess, and her dress and hands are stained black from the ground beneath her.

I missed it before, but now that we’re closer, I notice a body on the ground beside her. My heart sinks when I notice the light blue braid lying beside it, caked with dirt and leaves. It’s Kahras.

I can see his chest rise and fall with his breath. Thankfully, he’s still alive. His eyes

snap open and meet mine as a tear rolls down his face. He stayed with the mixed fae until the very end, and I'll stand by him now. He has the missing piece to his cure. I'll make sure he gets to use it.

I start to shout for Lucas to get Kahras out of here, but I freeze when I see strange shadows sprouting out of the ground all around him. The black wisps snake over his body and tighten around him, holding him in place as the queen continues to murmur to the dirt.

Kahras quickly grows pale, and his eyelids droop. But the queen seems to flourish. She rises to her knees and stretches her arms out to each side. Her eyes flick open, and tiny shadows spill out and begin swirling around her. The weight of her magic presses against us, growing stronger as her dark ritual continues.

Kahras is her sacrifice. The darkness is draining his life to fuel the queen's power.

"We need to kill her while she's distracted!" Vaegon growls.

His power surges through his arms, sending sparks from his fingertips as he awaits my order. But a chilling realization strikes me... the queen isn't the real danger.

This dark force—whatever it is—is the source of the queen's magic, making it far more powerful than she is. I don't think it accepts her sacrifices as mere offerings, bestowing a fraction of its own power in return. I think it siphons the very life from her victims and transfers their essence into her, hoarding its own magic for itself.

All while slowly leaching power from everything around it.

It seems to be anchored beneath this spot, but its reach is spreading—the dead trees, the blackened path, the lifeless gardens and unfamiliar thorny vines creeping up the castle walls, even the servants' hair... The darkness is a predator, stealthily draining

the life out of the very realm itself.

I can't see Kahras well enough to figure out how to help him, so I send a ball of light into a tree just past him, giving me a second to find my aim. But as soon as the glow passes over his body, the whisps recoil and dart back into the ground. Kahras is free. He coughs and rolls onto his stomach to catch his breath.

Folas's cry rings out from the shadows, jerking my attention behind us. Lucas shifts into his wolf form and races over to the large tree where he's been hiding. Seconds later, a loud growl and piercing shriek fill the air. Lucas emerges with Folas's arm in his jaws, trying to wrench him free from thick gray vines that have coiled around his ankles.

Vaegon blasts the vines away with an irritated huff then directs his hands back toward the spellbound queen.

"Forget her!" I shout. "Go for the source!"

Vaegon responds without question, aiming at the darkest patch of ground in front of the queen and waiting for my signal.

I thought he'd return as a baby. That I'd have to tear myself away from him to walk into this danger. But here he is, by my side, looking to me as a leader. He really is the key. Not only because of his power but also the strength he inspires in me. I feel invincible right now, and I intend to transform that feeling into a reality.

"Now!" I shout, and we strike together, unleashing a torrent of magic into the ground.

The air vibrates with our combined power as an explosion of fire and energy pours out of our fingertips. The blast hits whatever lies at the bottom of the pit, sending a shockwave that shakes the ground beneath us.

A cloud of charred roots and blackened dirt billows into the air. The ground trembles violently and shifts beneath us as the darkness continues to reel from our attack. Fissures splinter the ground, widening under the pressure. More shadows creep over the forest, leaving only the blue glow from our magic to guide us through what comes.

I glance down at the queen, relieved to find her still murmuring to the ground. Hopefully, she stays entranced long enough for us to defeat the darkness. Facing them both at once could be disastrous, and I'm not sure how much magic she managed to draw from Kahras before he got away.

"Again!" I yell, gathering as much magic as my hands can hold.

We send another powerful blow into the gaping crack. The hit sends a sheet of debris flying into the queen's face. Unfortunately, it's enough to snap her out of her trance. Her eyes widen in surprise at the turmoil happening around her.

Ignoring Vaegon and me, she zeroes in on Kahras, who is crawling away to safety. "No! It's not enough!" she growls, jumping to her feet and charging at him.

With the ground laid open, the darkness is unbound. Gray, thorny vines erupt from the cracks, grasping hungrily at anything close by. A thick one grabs the queen and slams her violently onto her back.

The vines come for us, too. Thorns whip through the air, barely missing my face as they thrash around us. Some wrap around my legs, piercing into my flesh. The shadowy wisps spill out of the cracks and slide over our boots and ankles, and I can feel some of my stored magic being drained away. Vaegon and I have to switch from attacking to defending ourselves. The darkness can't be allowed to consume our power.

The light from our magic seems to push back the shadows, just as it did for Kahras. As long as we're shooting it outward, the shadows retreat. They writhe and twist like they're alive, reluctant to leave but in too much pain to stay. Each time they creep closer, reaching for us like desperate fingers, they falter against even the faintest glow of our hands.

The queen screams in frustration at the vines, her aged voice suddenly full of life and power. She splays her fingers wide and digs them into the ground. Each joint strains and trembles under the weight of her magic. All sound and air seem to be sucked away, replaced by a low, growing hum.

She takes a breath and unleashes a blinding surge of white from her fingertips. The light floods the darkness, overwhelming my senses and throwing me off balance. The air slams back into my chest in a violent wave, and the hum transforms into a piercing shriek that leaves my ears ringing.

I don't think the blast itself touches us, but the sheer force of it shakes the ground and causes me to stumble further. The vines around her explode into a cloud of gray dust, and the surrounding shadows retreat back into the darkness.

She immediately sets off for Kahras again. I throw my hands up to protect him, but Lucas rushes in and pulls Kahras out of her reach. The queen snarls and hurls a flash of magic at him.

I react quickly, throwing out my own to redirect hers up into the trees.

It's enough to finally get her full attention. To her credit, she doesn't waste time questioning how there are two of us. Instead, she cuts through a new vine that has coiled around her wrist and whips her hands in our direction.

Two bolts of bright magic hurtle toward us, but Vaegon deflects them with two of his

own. He sends one of hers into the ground, but the other veers off course and pierces deep into my thigh.

The searing pain rips the breath out of my lungs, and I drop to my knees. My magic instinctively envelops the wound and staunches the flow of blood, keeping me in the fight. I use my position to my advantage and drive another blast of magic into the chasm we created.

More quakes rumble beneath us as I push myself to my feet. The queen loses her balance and falls right into the grip of a whipping vine. She remains calm this time, locking her eyes on us as her body begins to glow. The shadows slink away, but it casts an eerie light on the wicked grin slowly spreading across her face.

Her magic flares out around her, blasting the vines away. I throw up a wall of blue flames, forming a barrier between us, but she just laughs and directs her attack at the darkness.

“I don’t need you anymore,” she taunts it.

With a flick of her wrist, she sends a surge of magic into the gash at her feet. The ground moans and shudders. The queen takes a step back as the edges of the crack crumble, leaving a narrow canyon in its place.

Without turning to face us, the queen sends a frigid gust of wind, snuffing out my flames and paralyzing us in an icy grip. I strain to break free, to fry it away with my hands, but I can’t move at all. Vaegon growls as he struggles against it, too. But we’re frozen, bound by a hidden layer of ice.

She chuckles and takes a sultry step toward us. My magic flares in response, illuminating my arms and hands as it presses against her trap. The icy bindings begin to heat up, and I can sense them weakening. I can feel the heat at my side as Vaegon

does the same.

The queen steps over cracks and severed vines as we push back against her magic. But we aren't quick enough. She grabs our faces and smiles up at us like we're treasures. There's dirt stuck between her teeth. Her light hair is a tangled mess, woven with black and grey debris. She looks like she just stepped out of a violent windstorm. For once, her crazed exterior hints at what lies within.

"What gift do you two have for me, hmm?" she asks, digging her fingers into my cheeks.

I can sense her probing around, searching for my power. But I've already poured what I'd grown into the ground. What remains is mine, even what she shared with me. My magic accepted and absorbed it. There's no separating what has become one.

I move my eyes to the side and see the faint blue tint of her fingertips where they press against Vaegon's skin. She's siphoning the magic he's been growing for so many years. Her eyes roll back into her head as she grows more powerful by the second.

I pour everything I have into the cold cage around me, and I can feel its hold begin to weaken. Vaegon growls and manages to move his body again. My heart races, and I gather my power to strike as soon as I'm released.

But she replaces the cage with a mere thought.

Vaegon roars in frustration. The queen chuckles, but the grating sound is cut off when Lucas rushes forward and dumps Folas on the ground beside us. Her gaze snaps to the movement, and she watches in horror as black wisps begin to swirl around his feet and creep across his body like serpents.

Folas screeches and tries to run, but a long vine coils around his knees and pins him to the ground. Shadows slither across his face and body, tightening around him like they had with Kahras.

“No!” the queen croaks, releasing our faces and falling to her knees beside him. “You can’t have him!”

A chilling whisper rises from the ground to answer her. It seems to circle around us a few times before crawling into my ears. “You promised him to me.”

“I never promised him!” she screams.

“He’s mine,” the voice hisses, wrapping vines around her arms and dragging her away. She breaks free, blasting the restraints and running back to the only remaining piece of her lost love.

I’m surprised she doesn’t offer up Vaegon or me instead. She obviously figured out who Vaegon is. Knowing her, she sees him as her property and feels she has every right to. Maybe she sees that it’s already after us, too. Or maybe she’s too greedy to part with any of us.

Instead of responding to the darkness again, she drops to her knees beside Folas and continues ripping off the vines that hold him. Her fingers claw at the shadows but pass right through them.

“Mother, please!” Folas gasps, choking as the dark wisps slip into his mouth. “Use your magic.”

“No!” she growls as the shadows close in around them both. “It could kill you.”

She stands and stomps on the vines, then tries to lift Folas off the ground. It doesn’t

help. The shadows have their hooks in him.

Her grip on me loosens as she struggles. I push against it, managing to free my hands. But before I can strike her, she tightens it back around me again. She's distracted but not distracted enough. We're trapped and defenseless, and the shadows have begun creeping toward us again. If I could just get one finger free, I could use my glow to drive them away like before.

The light... I don't think the queen has noticed that the shadows retreat in the glow of our magic—and of her own. She doesn't realize how easily she could free her son.

“Release us! We can defeat it together!” I yell, grasping at our only chance to get out of this.

She ignores me and pitifully tries to blow the shadows away.

“You can save him!” I shout, relaxing against her hold.

She pauses and looks down at Folas's pale, tear-streaked face. He looks up at her and sobs, pleading for her to listen to me. She glares at me before looking back down at her weakening son.

I feel more power draining from me as the shadows creep up my legs. I doubt she has a soul left to save, but perhaps her obsession with Folas's father will compel her to act. “He'll die if you don't let us help!” I yell.

With a gentle touch, she wipes away his tears, then suddenly leaps to her feet. The cold grip falls away, and my hands immediately illuminate. The shadows release me, but the queen raises her hands toward Vaegon and me in warning.

I nod, letting her know I got the message, then turn and channel my magic into the

source. Vaegon follows, showing her that we're no threat. She watches us suspiciously before glancing back at her crying son. Wisely, she turns back to the ground and unleashes a powerful strike into the source, joining our magic in the assault.

The ground around the fissure crumbles, leaving behind a gaping, black hole. Vaegon and I continue directing our magic down into the abyss while the queen steps closer and unleashes another massive blow.

The vines wither and break apart. The binding shadows around Folas dissolve into swirling wisps before disappearing back into the ground. He lies still, free, but remaining at his mother's side like a youngling waiting to be comforted after a fall.

The queen collapses beside him and pulls him into her arms. She cradles him like she cares for him, but she doesn't give a shit about Folas. She only cares about what she lost. Folas is an ass, but I'm starting to see that he has a good reason to be.

If only I could forget about this darkness and incinerate her where she kneels. But we have to destroy the biggest threat first.

"Bursts seem to work better!" Vaegon yells, and he's right. The direct hits have done more damage than us pouring our magic into the abyss. We pull back together and gather our power.

"Now!" I shout, and we send a lethal blast down into the chasm.

A hiss shoots up out of the hole. Some of the oppressive darkness in the air begins to lift, and all the remaining vines and shadows dissipate into nothing.

"Again!" I yell, and we send forth another barrage of our magic down into the darkness.

I flick my eyes over to the queen, who has forgotten about us while helping Folas to his feet. Even if the darkness is as close to death as it seems, we still have her to deal with. I growl in frustration as we send another blast into the depths.

No wisps escape this time, and the vines have given up. The ground beneath us cries out, but I can still faintly sense its energy. One more solid hit should be enough to end this. But before we can send one, the queen traps us in her icy cage again.

I strain against it, but she's too powerful. My magic boils inside, hot enough to give me some space, but it's not enough to fight her.

That's it. She used us then bound us again before we could touch her. She could easily finish off the darkness on her own. She just needed us to get Folas free. We traded our freedom, and the freedom of the entire realm, for his.

I wish I could warn Lucas and Anders to run, but my chest is squeezed too tightly to speak. All I can do is close my eyes so I won't have to witness what she might do to them if they attempt to save us.

The queen lets out a ragged shriek, and I jerk them back open. I look over to see her clutching Folas's tunic with a vice-like grip. Her movements are jerky and unnatural as she stumbles backward toward the void. Folas struggles against her bony fingers, but he's weak. The queen easily pulls him along with her.

"There!" Vaegon grunts, pointing into the deeper forest.

A figure stands silently between two trees with his hand outstretched. In the dim light, I can just make out the glint of his yellow hair tied up in a distinctive knot. It's Phen, the telekinetic.

I left him with his family, hoping to shield them from the pain of losing him. But here

he stands. I don't know how he knew to come, but I'm so damn thankful he's here.

The queen is oblivious to him. She probably assumes the thing in the dark pit is behind what's happening to her. Even if she could move, she wouldn't know where to direct her anger. The dirt crumbles at her feet as she teeters on the edge. The only thing keeping her from falling in is Folas, fighting back against the pull of Phen's magic.

Vaegon strikes beneath her feet to force her into the pit. But she's still clinging desperately onto Folas. As much as I loathe the little bastard, I don't think he deserves to die. Especially not alongside his heartless mother.

I slice through her wrists with a blue bolt of my magic, severing her hands from her body. Her fingers release Folas, and her hands fall to the ground at his feet. He stumbles backward and falls onto his ass, then scrambles away to safety.

The queen screams, flailing her arms wildly as she falls backward into the abyss. She can no longer use her hands to attack, but she's not defenseless. She has to die.

I rush to the edge of the crater and send her down in a shroud of blazing fire. I gather all my hatred and fury and pour it into the flames. They dim slightly as she pushes against them with her mental attack, but my will is too strong.

My magic rains down on her as she plummets. Flames wrap around her face, blistering and cracking her skin. Her eyes seem to widen in shock as the burning flesh peels away from the gaping sockets. Her lips curl back in a grotesque semblance of a grin as her face sizzles away from her skull.

Her mental push crumbles as her body turns to ash. I withdraw my power and watch her descend, enveloped in a raging blue inferno. As she sinks deeper into the darkness, the flames flicker out, and her hoarse cries fade into silence.

She's gone. There's no coming back from that. All that remains is what's left of the darkness she's been swallowed by.

Vaegon joins me, and we drive strike after strike of our magic down its depths until the ground stops quaking and the sun streams through the trees like it should.

In the natural light, the scene loses the eerie feeling, but it remains profoundly sad. More trees are charred or split, many toppled from the magic that had been unleashed. The ground is full of wide cracks, gaping like open wounds. The evil that had infected the soil has been removed, but chunks of Faerie are just... gone. Nothing can grow here in this state.

I remind myself how much worse it would be if no one had intervened and put a stop to the spread of death. Still, the damage to this once beautiful forest weighs heavily on my heart. It will take a lot of work to truly heal this place.

I look around in disbelief that it's really over. I want to thank Phen and ask how he knew to come here. I want to celebrate with Vaegon and his brothers, and with the mixed fae and Kahras. I want to check in with the kelpie and shifter soldiers and see the nobles lying dead at their feet. But above all, I want to let my mate know that I survived, our son is safe, and she'll never have to worry about anything ever again.

Rue

Jade's relentless pacing isn't helping my nerves. I get that we all handle stress differently. And if her Omega is having a meltdown as big as mine, I can see how the movement might help. But watching her stomp back and forth and hearing her footsteps echo through the empty foyer is making my chest feel like it's about to explode.

Wandering off alone would be dumb, so I decide to go stand with the gryphon, who is by the castle doors. Keeping watch, maybe? I'm not sure. But it's across the room from Jade, and I'm hoping the gryphon's big body and feathers might block out some of the sights and sounds of Jade's anxiety.

If she's okay with me joining her, that is. I step cautiously up beside her, hoping she lets me stay if I'm quiet. She shifts her eyes from the courtyard and blinks down at me.

I smile, even though my heart is fraying one fiber at a time as I wait for news about Durin. "Hey," I say softly. "I hope you don't mind me being here. Omegas tend to amplify each other's stress when we're upset."

The gryphon considers me for a moment. I wring my fingers, wishing I knew the right thing to say. Wishing I didn't have to hide from the part of Jade that's also an annoying part of me. Wishing this whole thing would just be over already.

The gryphon suddenly crouches, then launches herself into the air. I assume at first that I'm bothering her and she wants to be alone, but she grabs me with her talons and

carries me straight up to the top of the tall room.

I gasp as my stomach flips over. Below, Jade stops her pacing just long enough to look curiously up at me. Brody shrugs and waves. They both disappear as the gryphon carries me over the ledge and lands in front of an open doorway.

A black gryphon with a white head stands by the entrance with his chest puffed out. He must be some type of guardian. The cave gryphon gives a little trill and bumps her head against his chest. He leans down and bites the plumage around her neck before stepping aside to let her pass. I wonder if they're family of some kind or if this is just how gryphon hierarchy works.

With the guardian moved aside, I get a glimpse of gold through the doorway. Lots of it. The cave gryphon glides through the tall opening and looks back at me. I can either stay on this tall ledge, resisting the urge to look down, or I can take a peek into the gleaming room that's sure distract me for a bit.

I walk past the other gryphon, bowing my head as I pass. When I step through the doorway, the warmth almost suffocates me. The ceiling is made almost entirely of glass, letting sunlight pour into the room. The light bounces off piles of gold and shiny gems, painting the walls with bright splashes of color.

Some gryphons lounge on nests of pure gold while others pick through the treasure, moving pieces around to their liking. Two juveniles chase a large, purple gem as it rolls across the floor, screeching at each other as they fight to grab it first. The smaller one snags it, and the other one crashes into him, sending them both tumbling into the treasure pile.

When we first got here, I wondered how such majestic creatures could live in this lifeless castle. It makes sense now. They love shiny things, and this room is one giant sparkle.

My smile slips away when I think of the pouch of gold Durin left in the cave before he turned me away. I'm not sad because of the pain I felt in the moment but because I know he's out there right now risking his life, possibly losing it.

I push the tears away and turn to the gryphon to thank her for bringing me here. I find her standing at the entryway with the guardian. Two new gryphons land on the ledge and join them in the room. They chirp and trill for a moment before the cave gryphon turns my way.

She walks gracefully past me and climbs right into the gold pile, digging around with her claws. I watch her patiently, enjoying the dancing reflections her movements cause along the walls. After a few moments, she returns with something clutched in her beak and gently lays it down at my feet.

I bend down and pick up the heavy, solid gold crown, admiring the deep blue gems lining the bottom. They remind me of Vaegon's wild hair when he was born. I laugh to myself, imagining trying to wear this giant thing. Even if I managed to keep it on my head, I doubt I'd be able to walk under its weight.

"It's beautiful," I tell the gryphon, holding the crown out to her. "Thank you for showing it to me. And for bringing me here. I feel much calmer now."

She unfurls her wings and leans down to nudge my shoulder with her beak. I push the crown closer, trying to give it back, but she doesn't take it. She nudges me again, pushing me back toward the entrance.

I think she wants me to leave. I try to lay the crown back down, but she trills at me and moves me along with her wing. With no other choice, I turn and head back out through the doorway, unsure what to do about the very shiny treasure I'm walking past the guardian with.

He doesn't even look at me. The cave gryphon squawks something at him, then takes off, grasping me in her claws and carrying me back down to the bottom. Only she doesn't drop me off with Jade and Brody. She soars straight toward the castle doors. I twist around in her grip and see the two gryphons swoop down from the treasury, pick them up, and follow us outside.

My eyes dart around as I try to figure out what's happening. I grip the crown, worried I might drop it. Are we needed for something? Is Durin hurt? Or Vaegon?

I can't see behind us, but the battle with the nobles seems to have quieted. Ahead, I can see the part of the forest where the queen was hiding. The dark patch among the trees has lost some of its shade. There are no bolts of blue or walls of fire. It's quiet. I'm not sure whether that's a good or bad thing.

The gryphon swoops down and weaves between trees. It's terrifying, dangling helplessly in the air, narrowly missing branches and trunks. I want to close my eyes, but I force myself to keep them open—I need to see Durin.

My heart pounds in my chest as I catch sight of Anders and a large group of mixed fae. The gryphon comes to a gentle stop, setting me down on the ground before moving aside to give the other gryphons space.

A flash of bright blue catches my eye, and I take off through the trees. The crown is heavy, slowing me down, but I've gripped it so tightly for so long that my fingers are stuck curled around it. I lug it along and finally make it around the last big tree trunk.

Durin is there, alive, clasping arms with a fae I've not seen before.

I want my feet to keep moving, but they stop, leaving all my focus on my relief. I stare at his beautiful face while trying to convince myself what I'm seeing is real.

When I finally snap out of it, I look around at the others with him, searching for my son. The green-haired fae they were dragging around the castle is on his knees in the black dirt with his head buried in his hands. Lucas shifts back from his wolf form and joins Vaegon and the handler we saw through the fire.

They're alive. All of them.

Durin spots me and rushes over with a wide grin on his face. He grabs me in his arms and lifts me off the ground, checking my face and wiping my cheeks before kissing me firmly on the lips. "I love you," he whispers, his soothing voice more appreciated than ever.

I sob in his arms, letting his scent wash over me. I wish I could hug him back, but the crown is too heavy. I'm about to toss it to the ground when it hits me why the gryphon gave it to me—she was telling me Durin had won.

I look up at his beautiful face and laugh at myself. I'm an idiot. But I don't care. I heave the heavy crown up and place it on top of his bright blue head. He gives me a puzzled look, then lifts his eyes up as if he could see the crown sitting there.

"Well, look at you... king of the fae," I tease. "Does that make me your royal friend?"

Durin throws back his head and laughs, almost losing the crown. He straightens it with a grin and says, "I think you're due for a promotion, don't you?"

I hum, pretending to consider it. "Like what?"

"How about queen of my heart?" he asks, trying to keep a straight face.

I roll my eyes. "I don't know... I have a few dryad friends who might be a bit

jealous.”

He chuckles and kisses the tip of my nose. “Let them be jealous. They don’t stand a chance against a king.”

I resist the urge to grab his long ears, settling for the hair at the back of his neck instead. I pull him down and kiss him hard. It doesn’t matter who’s watching. I need this connection with my mate. I lose myself in him, deepening the kiss until my lungs scream for air.

Reluctantly, I pull away and rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his still-beating heart.

I watch Vaegon, standing proudly with his family. They’re gathered with the mixed fae shifters and the handler.

“He is not claiming all of them!” Jade growls, gripping Anders’s hand and shoving her finger in the handler’s face.

The handler freezes, taken aback by the frightening little Omega. But he soon recovers, and his loud laughter makes Jade crack a smile. “Don’t worry. That won’t be necessary,” he assures her.

I jump when the seer appears beside us, but for once, my joy isn’t sucked out of my soul. I even find a smile for the stale elf, though I know it won’t be returned.

She eyes the crown resting on Durin’s head before moving toward the crater. A hush falls over the forest as we listen to what she has to say.

“Magic comes from the sun, not the soil,” she says, peering down into the shadows below. “Gifts from the dark are short-lived and come at a cost. Gifts from the light

are free and boundless, outshining time itself. Let this be a lesson to us all.”

Now would be a good time to recognize the gifts I’ve already received. Fate made itself the bad guy to ensure the realm found freedom. I lost my pup, but I gained a son I can be proud of. And I can still be a part of his life if he decides to stay.

Even if he doesn’t, Faerie has changed for the better. Durin and I can enjoy those endless days in bed. But I think we’ll have a lot of fun seeing the changes in the realm now that everyone is free.

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Durin

I'm not sure how symbolic this crown is supposed to be. I really have no desire to be a ruler. The realm needs one, though. Someone to make sure it's protected. My power isn't going anywhere. It will continue to grow, and grow back, for as long as I'm alive. It would be ungrateful not to use it for good.

But power isn't everything. And fae don't get to be in charge just because they're fae. I set Rue on her feet and take her hand. "Seer, will you take us to the battlefield? I need to see how everyone fared."

"Of course. I'll join you," she says, raising her hand.

The blackened part of the forest blurs, giving way to a different scene of death. All across the grass, kelpies and wolves work together, dragging the bodies of dead nobles into a large pile. There's a short line of our fallen warriors, each adorned with delicate flowers to honor their sacrifice. My soul weeps for them, but I'm thankful the toll is so few.

"Durin!" Sashon calls, tossing a severed arm aside as he rushes over. The Majestic quickly joins him, standing proudly at his side.

"Look at that crown!" Sashon whoops and whistles, inciting the rest of the Alphas to howl and cheer. "I knew you'd do it!"

"We did it," I say, clasping his forearm. I glance at the Majestic, then smile at them both. "That's why we're going to need more crowns."

Sashon huffs a laugh and brushes it off, but I'm serious. "There are four species of high fae. Five if you count the dryads. There's no reason for any one of them to be in charge of ruling or protecting the others," I say, taking off the crown and plopping it on top of Sashon's head. "I'd like to establish a kingdom of rulers who work together like it should have been from the beginning. And I want it to start with the two of you."

Sashon beams and strikes a few poses with the crown before offering it to the Majestic. He snorts, I think out of humor, and stomps his feet. His long mane falls over his eyes as he bows in appreciation.

"What about the elves?" Rue whispers next to me.

The only two elves with any real power we've seen are Vaegon and the seer, who we're not exactly fond of. To be fair, though, they did what was necessary to save the realm. That's what makes a good leader—not someone who seeks the approval of those around them. Plus, I learned that Vaegon is the reason Phen was there to help us at the end. The seer had a vision, and Vaegon acted on it. I'm sure we would have fared much differently without their help.

"It's not up to me," I tell Rue, pressing a gentle kiss on her fingertips. "We'll let them decide."

The seer closes her eyes and gives me a small bow. "The elves will meet and discuss. Thank you, Durin." She straightens and turns to Rue. "I'm sorry for what we had to put you through. I truly am."

Rue huffs and leans against me. "I forgive you," she tells the seer. "But just know that I plan on getting to know Durin's illusionist friend. You'll get to try on a lot of new expressions—smiles, frowns, that face everyone makes when they eat something sour..." Rue smiles wickedly. "I can't wait to see what an expressive elf looks like."

The seer looks only mildly disturbed, but I'm sure she's panicking inside. I wonder if the elves will choose to stay hidden or join the rest of the realm now that it's free. There are still twisted individuals here, but that will always be the case. They'll be dealt with as they're found, but overall, this is going to be a safe place for every species.

Vaegon walks over and gazes up at the castle behind me. "Shall we burn it down?" he asks casually.

He has no history with this place, no nightmares or scars that were born there. He's offering this for my sake.

"I'd love to reduce the whole thing to ashes," I tell him, turning to look at the sad, lifeless building. "But the castle itself never did anything wrong." I kick at the brittle grass along the base of the wall. "I think we should restore it. Bring it back to life."

"The gryphons' home is there," Rue says, reaching out to Sashon for the crown. "It's beautiful. The rest of the castle can be beautiful, too."

I kiss her on the top of her head and look at our son. "There is one room that needs to burn. Would you like to join me?"

The queen's bedroom sits at the end of the castle. Burning a chunk off the building won't hurt anything. And that place can't be allowed to remain standing, whether Rue and I decide to live in the castle or not. That room and everything in it need to die with the queen.

I glance over at Folas, who's sitting in the grass, staring at nothing. I've imagined killing him in so many ways, but he's endured enough torment of his own. Growing up in a hidden room, isolated except for a guardian and his depraved mother... he has his own scars that need healing. He needs new life breathed into his soul.

I won't be able to do that, but I know someone who can. And once I've made amends with my parents, I'll ask my mother to help him. Right now, there are shadows of my own past waiting to be destroyed.

Rue

Everything has changed since the queen's death. Faerie is like a whole new realm. Shifters lounge on the beaches of the dark lakes while kelpies and elves fill the markets, trading moonshade tea and fine fabrics. The castle is alive with color, and the courtyard garden has been restored, lush and blooming as it should be.

There are no more servants. Anyone working in the castle is there by choice and compensated well. The dungeon has been repurposed into a special sanctuary for Mannus and Bock, who get to spend the rest of their days chained to the walls and staring at each other in silence. Who knew there could be a fate worse than death? Durin is quite clever.

Vaegon and his family did choose to move to Faerie. Lucas said their fear of the humans in their realm caused them to be isolated and always on edge. No matter how secure it seemed, a single human wandering too close to their territory or one flash of fangs at the market could spell disaster for all of them. Knowing this realm is free now, and has so many powerful and honorable leaders to keep it that way, they believe they'll feel much safer here.

They'll be much happier, I think. Shifters are social creatures, who are deeply connected to nature. They crave community and exploration. Here, they have an entire realm of diverse creatures to meet and beautiful places to discover.

They brought their pack and some other packs with them. Watching them settle in, enjoying the freedom of a realm that was always meant for joy, is one of my favorite things to do. I laugh each time one of them gazes up at the sun, marveling that it

doesn't try to kill them.

Jade and I have become good friends. We both really enjoy visiting the gryphons. They often take us on rides over the realm, showing us beautiful places even Durin didn't know about. Faerie is so beautiful. Everything is perfect now.

Even Folas has found some healing. He's been staying in the hut Mother and I hid out in. The seer told him that's where his father hid from the queen until he died. It seemed a fitting place. And it's safe enough to protect him from the forest creatures. Durin mentioned he's not exactly the fighting type.

We live in the castle now, in Durin's old room. He said it was the one place in the castle he felt somewhat safe. It's also where he met his friends Sarra and Leah, who made the time he spent here bearable. The castle holds some bad memories for him, but the worst part of the structure is gone. I admire that he isn't letting those memories defeat him. It's nice having a space big enough for us and Vaegon's family, for my mother, and many other elves, fae, and shifters who want to live here, too. It feels like we've created a pack of our own. I didn't realize how much I needed one.

The seer and I even made amends. She sat me down by her fire and gave me something I thought was lost forever—my memories. Not really the memories themselves, but visions of my heat, from the time Durin arrived to when I woke up in his arms. I saw his confusion, my silent plea for his help, and his struggle to decide what was best for me.

I heard my whimpers and growls and saw how each one affected him. The sweetness he spoke of was there. I was meek with him at times and needy at others. And he took care of me. Anything I begged for, he gave me. Anything I demanded, he let me take. It was all there in the seer's visions.

I felt compelled to forgive her. She didn't have to share her gift with me, and I don't think she did it out of guilt. She's never shown any guilt over what she's done. But she did show compassion and gave me my heat back. Which is why I'm able to go into this next one unafraid, excited even.

I wish I could be aware and remember everything after, but that's not how it's meant to work. Durin can tell me all about it when we're done. Maybe another pup will come from it. Maybe not. I'm happy either way.

The seer said that Jade and I will have longer lives than most shifters since we are mated to fae, even without a mate bond for me. A fated match is bond enough to make that magic work. We'll have plenty of years to enjoy each other, no matter what the heat does or doesn't bring.

Right now, I'm ready to get it started. The fever is just now setting in, and I'd like to enjoy one good round before I'm lost to it.

Durin

The green of Rue's eyes stands out against her cozy nest of blue and purple blankets. Jade and Paren filled our room with as many soft items as they could get from the elves to help her through her heat. At first, Rue stared blankly at the pile of blankets on the bed, unsure what to do with them. But once the heat progressed, she went right to work building the perfect nest for herself.

I guided her gently through the early pains of her heat, kissing away her discomfort and giving her the pressure she needed. Now, I'm watching her pupils slowly expand, taking over her beautiful emerald irises.

She holds my gaze until all the green has slipped away. Then, she looks around the room, seeming a bit lost. I go to reassure her but freeze when a soft whimper escapes her lips. I'm technically in control while she's in this state, protecting her, but I'm such a slave to her it's pitiful. The sounds she makes, the way she needs me... I just can't put a thought together if it's not about pleasing her.

I bring her hand to my lips and whisper a kiss against her fingers. She stiffens. Her eyes snap up to meet mine like she just realized I'm here. A low growl rumbles from her chest, but I see her shoulders begin to relax. The wildness in her eyes simmers down as she recognizes me.

She narrows her eyes at our hands and slowly pulls hers away. When she returns her gaze to my face, she gives me a fierce look and a bigger growl.

I keep my chuckle to myself and lie down. I don't know how she'll react to me giving

her my back, but I'm hoping it makes her feel a little more in control. I spent some time talking to Sashon about heats and shifters in general. I want to be sure I'm doing the best for Rue as her mate. He said trust is everything.

I wait for a growl, a whimper, or even a tiny Omega attack. What I get is a stunning black-haired beauty tentatively crawling up beside me.

She bites her lip and flicks her gaze from my face to my body. I close my eyes, giving her the space to decide what she wants to do. I keep them shut while she shuffles up to my side and wiggles her way under my arm. She slips one knee between my thighs and presses her body tightly against mine.

Her hands glide along my bare chest and over my shoulders. I feel her hair tickling my arm as she presses her nose into my chest and takes a deep breath. Chills cover my back when she tentatively licks my pec and trails her tongue up to my clavicle.

I wrap my arms around her, enjoying her warmth as she continues to scent me and taste my skin. I'm excited to experience this heat without guilt and to know the way she's acting with me is real.

She suddenly stops and pulls away. I open my eyes to find her looking at me with those intense, black eyes.

"Hey there, mate," I whisper, trailing my fingers down her spine.

Her eyes widen at my words and dart toward my neck. A frown tugs at her lips as the tips of her fangs slide out between them. The nails on one of her hands dig into my shoulder, and she uses her other hand to grab my hair and pull my head to the side.

I know what's coming, but the sweet burn of her bite still pulls a loud moan from me. She growls and bites down harder, shaking her head back and forth to make sure it leaves a good mark.

When she's done, she licks the wound, then pulls back and examines her work. After a moment, she releases her grip on my hair and trails her fingers softly across my forehead, down the bridge of my nose, and along my jawline.

Her eyes linger on my lips, and her fingers follow, pressing and tugging on them. Her eyes shine as she captures the bottom one with her fingers, then sucks it into her mouth.

I feel a pinch from her fangs. The pain is nothing compared to the excitement I feel when she throws her leg over my hip and grinds her slicked core against my shaft.

Arousal shoots through my stomach and down into my balls. My knot throbs against her folds, craving the deep pressure of her walls closing around it. I try to hold back and let her lead, but she tears down my will, uttering a beautiful word that takes me back to the time we first met.

"Please," she whimpers, rocking against me. "Please."

I wrap my hand around her thigh and slip my cock in all the way to my knot. She moans and pulls it greedily inside. After savoring it for a moment, she lifts her head and stares at my ears. I expect her to reach for them, but she just looks at them curiously while rolling her hips and grinding against my knot.

I squeeze her tight and grind back, growing my knot until she shivers. I lean in to kiss her, but she's still focused on my ears. She tilts her head to the side curiously and then looks at me with confusion.

"Alpha?" she asks.

Before, Rue calling me Alpha would have stung. She was terrified of them during her first heat. But now, looking down at my little Omega mate, totally enthralled with her Alpha's pointy ears, I'm damn proud to be that for her.

“Yes, mate. I’m your Alpha,” I tell her, glamouring a pair of impressive fangs of my own.

Rue growls viciously when she sees them. I roll on top of her and lean down, finding the place on my neck she usually chooses. She’s frozen in surprise, and I take the opportunity to latch onto her exposed neck. I bite gently first. It feels wrong to hurt her. But it’s what her Alpha should do. It’s what she wants. So, I bite harder and growl against her skin, reveling in the moan it tugs out of her chest.

When I think it’s been long enough, I lick the wound and pull back, checking to see if it looks right. It’s mine. Of course it looks right. It’s perfect, just like my mate. Part of me wants to carry her through the halls showing it off to everyone. But maybe I should wait until after her heat. I’m sure she’d prefer that. Before they heal, I’ll study them and glamour them on each of us to wear proudly. Her mark will tell everyone she’s taken, and guide my fangs to the perfect spot each time we mate.

Rue lifts her hand and brushes it across her new mark. My gaze travels from her neck to the tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. Her lip quivers like it did in the cave when she thought I’d left her. But there’s no devastation in her expression. She looks happy. Thankful. At peace.

I’ll carry my scars with gratitude. I’d face a thousand deaths and a lifetime of pain just to see her smile. I don’t need a grand mission to find meaning in life. Rue saved me from that emptiness. She’s my purpose.

The realm is safe, with honorable guardians protecting the new order. All I need to do now is thoroughly satisfy my mate and give her a heat so memorable, even the fever can’t make her forget.

I can’t think of a calling more noble than that.

The End