



WORLDS OF
PROTHEKA

DARK ELF'S DEVOTION

CELESTE KING

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PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheke” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

CONTENTS

Books in The World of Protheke

The World of Protheke

1. Vanessa
2. Keillon
3. Vanessa
4. Vanessa
5. Keillon
6. Vanessa
7. Keillon
8. Vanessa
9. Keillon
10. Vanessa
11. Keillon
12. Vanessa
13. Keillon
14. Vanessa
15. Keillon
16. Vanessa
17. Keillon
18. Vanessa
19. Keillon
20. Vanessa
21. Keillon
22. Keillon
23. Vanessa
24. Keillon
25. Vanessa
26. Vanessa
27. Keillon
28. Vanessa
29. Keillon
30. Vanessa
31. Keillon

Preview of The Naga's Mate

32. Jemma
33. Uzha
34. Jemma

35. Uzha

BOOKS IN THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA

Orc Warriors of Protheke Series

Mates of the Burning Sun Clan Series

Dark Elves of Protheke Series

Thoruk's Prize: A Monster Romance

Naga's of Protheke Series

Minotaur's of Protheke Series

Demon's of Protheke Series

Vampires of Protheke

Gargoyles of Protheke

THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



VANESSA

My back aches as I arch over the furniture, but I don't dare to take a break. In the dark elf mansion, there is no room for error, and while I am lucky that our master, Ikre Wondro, accepts humans to fill the roles as servants in his house, I know that it is not out of kindness.

Emma, a close friend of mine, has been working here for nearly a year. It's an impressive amount of time, but with a master that rarely comes back here, it's easier to stay employed. I'm grateful that she found me this job where I won't be forced to my knees before a dark elf male like in most other occupations here on Liiandor.

As I scrub at the windowsills, checking for dirt in every crevice, I hear heavy footfalls in the hallway. They don't sound like a human; they are much too deliberate, almost like they are announcing someone's arrival.

To confirm my fears, the door to the bedroom flies open, and I turn to see a dark elf male standing in the doorway. He's tall with broad shoulders and his hair is tied back from his face, showing off his angular face.

His dark eyes are narrowed in on me.

I swallow hard, dropping to my knees immediately. My eyes stay glued to the ground, and I know that I already may have fucked up by looking at my master. As a human, though, it's nearly impossible not to incur the wrath of a dark elf, even if it is only by breathing.

Each soft thud of his boots coming closer makes my heart pound, and I have a feeling that he is keeping his pace slow to torture me. When he stops before me, I don't dare move, and I especially don't jerk away as he grips my chin, forcing my head back.

My whole body trembles, and while I let him think it's because I'm afraid and cowering, it's really because of the rage fueling me. I am a little afraid of what he will do to me, but that doesn't stop my cheeks from burning with hatred as this male glares down at me like I'm a piece of meat he's considering devouring.

I already know before a word comes out of his mouth that I'm going to have to leave this place...again. It's been a nice three months, but I refuse to let the dark elves use my body any way they want. I will work to earn what I need, but I won't give up my body when my skills as a maid and chef should be enough to garner a wage.

Though I am a little sad to go. This place always had so much leftover food since the owners are never here. The zagfer and human servants split it secretively, making up for the poor amount that we are paid.

Ikre, or that's who I assume he must be, grins down at me. He looks more like a worg descending on a thistle than a master greeting his staff. I grit my teeth and hope that someone will come to save me before it's too late because the way that his eyes light up as I flush and tremble tells me that he is the unforgiving kind.

Without letting go of my chin, he drags his thumb up to my mouth, rubbing hard across my lips. I bite back a whimper as he presses so forcefully that I swear he's trying to bruise them, and when I don't react, he digs at the seam of my lips.

"Open your mouth for me," he coos. "Let me see what that mouth was meant to do, what it will do for me later."

I want to shake my head no, but as his hand on my jaw tightens, I don't have a choice. His hand forces my lips apart, and his thumb dives in, thrusting to the back of my throat immediately.

I cough, sputtering against the intrusion, and he chuckles. "Come now. Suck. Show me you're worth your life and I'll let you earn it."

Not seeing another choice, I close my lips around his thumb as he continues to thrust it deep into my mouth, nearly knocking me back. His hand digs into my chin harder, and I want to cry because his grip is so tight. He may break the skin.

"Those damn lips. The gods gave you those for a reason," he continues. "If this part of you is so pleasurable, I can't wait to see what the rest of your body holds." My thighs clench together out of reflex, and he must notice. "You're so damn fuckable. Don't deny what you were made for."

I gag as hits the back of my throat again, but he doesn't pull back, gripping the back of my head with his free hand as he pushes his thumb further down my throat. I want to pull away, but I can't.

Tears slip free of my eyes, tracking down my cheeks, and he howls. I was right about the kind of elf he is. "Oh, I can't wait to break you," he hisses as he finally retracts his hand, keeping my head tipped back as he watches me cough and sputter, spit dripping down my chin.

"Gods, imagine if that was my cock instead," he groans. "Don't worry. You'll find out soon."

"Please," I gasp out as I start to regain my breath. "Please just let me go. I'm only here to clean."

I know that if this continues in the manner he wants, I will be facing a life worse than death. Many have told me that my values and convictions are useless on this planet, that they will be ripped from me like everything else, but I cling to them nonetheless.

I won't be used.

"Ikre!"

He stiffens, letting go of my head so that I drop forward on my hands and knees as I continue to heave. Snot, spit, and tears coat my face, and I don't look up as Ikre draws himself up to his full height.

"Ummmai," he retorts.

"What are you doing with that bitch?"

He scoffs, and when I dare a glance up, I see he's still turned away from her, his features a mask of annoyance. "Humans don't count," he mutters.

"I'm your wife!" She storms into the room a few steps. "Everyone counts." Her gaze slides to me, and the malevolent intentions gleaming there make my stomach turn. "If she is going to be a distraction for you, I'll handle it."

He mumbles something under his breath, and I make out, "...ruin everything." Then, Ikre turns on his heel, striding from the room, and leaving me with his wife.

I was almost relieved when I heard someone call for him, but now I'm not sure if I should be. Is it worse to face a male elf driven by lust or a female elf driven by jealousy? Neither will end well for me; that much I know.

I shift, about to plead my case and tell her I will willingly leave when my body jerks up in the air with the flick of her wrist. Biting down on my lower lip, I withhold the yelp of surprise as she twists me, and suddenly, I'm thrown

forward, my body crashing into the wall with more force than I expect.

A scream breaks through me then. My shoulders hurt, having been shoved too far back, and I'm not positive she didn't break my nose. My whole face feels bruised at this point, and I don't have a chance to recover my breath before I am in the air again.

"Learn your place," she seethes, and I'm thrown forward, crashing through glass.

The window pane slices at my skin, but it is nothing compared to where I land. We are on the ground floor, so I'm lucky that I didn't have far to fall. Only she threw me straight into their rose garden, and my weight is bearing me down into the thorny vines.

Nausea roils through me as I try to shift forward, the stems slicing open my already sensitive skin. I take a deep breath, gritting my teeth as I jerk forward into a crouch. My entire body burns from being slammed into a wall or shredded by the thorns, and it is agonizing as I slip behind the last few bushes and out of the flower beds.

What's worse is I actually feel thankful to that woman for showing me mercy. It could have been worse, and I, in fact, expected for my values to be ripped away from me. If I wasn't already planning on leaving, I am definitely not allowed back now, so I'll have to find a new place to work.

Dragging my broken body away from the elf's house, I pat the lone piece of bread in my pocket, and tears start to well in my eyes. I don't know how I am going to find another safe job like this, and fear coats my tongue and down my throat.

But I keep going, forcing my feet in front of each other until I cross off their property. On Protheke, I have no money, no status, no magic or freedom, but I keep my head held high because if I let them take my dignity, then the dark elves have taken everything from me.

KEILLON

I don't often receive an order like this one.
And from the King himself, no less.

Normally, I'd put one of my subordinates on it, but this is too sensitive a task to leave it to a bumbling soldier. They are fit for battle, certainly, capable in the ways of the sword and magic, but not of subtlety. And any misstep could spell disaster for Liiandor.

It is curious, too, that spies have been able to infiltrate the island in the first place. Though I don't know from where they hail, I have my suspicions. We are sheltered by the rocky spires that surround the island from the north side, but it is not so from the south.

King Kres has ensured our safety on Pref, but there is always traffic from Kaynvu that can't be so thoroughly vetted. Few travelers would go out of their way to visit Liiandor, and fewer still would intend to make it their home.

Liiandor is an acquired taste, certainly.

In light of the world beyond these mountains, ours is a secretive Kingdom that avoids sparring with other nations if we can help it. Our King prefers it that way.

And I do, too.

Who exactly is this spy, I have to wonder, a grimace curling at the edges of my mouth as I pace the narrow streets of lowtown in fine merchant clothes, my face altered by magic to appear older, gruffer, so no one will recognize me. Down here, I can smell the hoqin dung most succinctly. It is not a scent that washes out easily, and I'll be glad to be finished with my

task.

My men had him.

Then, without delay, they lost him too.

I press my lapels flat as I step over a gap in the rough cobble, feeling further down to ensure that my dagger is still in place, just in case things go pear shaped. I don't expect it to come to that, but it's always good to have a contingency plan.

My magic should be enough to disable the spy, in any case.

But my intent is not to make a scene, and all eyes are on me and my nearly empty coin purse. If I had time to disguise myself more haggardly, I still wouldn't have done it. It's bad enough that I have to walk these streets in the guise of a moderately coined k'sheng.

Worse, still, that these clothes itch.

A stray human ambles into my path with a heavy load, her body straining to keep up with the other slaves. It's with the smallest effort that I make a stone roll beneath her heel, sending her sprawling in the street, the fresh produce rolling in every direction. Where the pedestrian gaze was on me, now they're distracted by her and her master, who whips her until she's bawling for forgiveness on her knees.

A smile finds me as I exit the crowd before they lunge for the produce.

For a foreign spy, lowtown is as good a place as any to hide. He could be anywhere, but he's only one dark elf. Most of Liiandor's residents have a certain look about them, with a particular cut of cloth only available to us.

He stands out, and unfortunately for him, I've already caught wind of him.

The distraction in the street wasn't just to keep me from being spotted, but also to flush him out, and he took the bait. When everyone else gathered around, he left in a hurry, pacing around this corner and that to avoid being spotted by approaching city guards.

He seems to be an ordinary dark elf, with plain features and a healthy build beneath a rugged suit of leather that doesn't belong on Pref, but something else is off about him. Something that I can't quite put my finger on. Maybe he's using magic to disguise himself as well, and he's not what he appears to be.

It's clear he doesn't know I'm in pursuit. Not yet.

Slow down, I tell myself. He'll see you and disappear again.

I don't want to lose my advantage, but when he takes another turn, I have

no choice but to follow, all the little hairs prickling on the back of my neck. My hand instinctively goes for the dagger when I'm met with a roaring fireball, coming straight at me.

I dodge just in time, but can't bring up a wall of air before he slips past me and back into the busy street. "Fuck," I hiss to myself, pivoting and chasing after him.

I grit my teeth and find the mana to topple a stone wall ahead of the spy, kicking up dust and nearly dragging him beneath the ruin. Screams erupt at the unfortunate accident, of humans in agony and elves in sheer fury. The King won't be pleased with my methods, but I am not afraid to get my hands a little dirty to stop this dark elf.

He manages to catch himself and tears into foot traffic, a hand flying back to shoot magic bolts wildly in my direction.

They miss, catching several unfortunate zagfer instead.

I duck under a low beam and slip through the alley in an attempt to cut him off, magic building in my chest, ready to explode. I use it to fuel my next spell, battle magic that comes easily to me. A thousand ghostly daggers peel through the air in his direction, but even as they cut through his form, it disappears, leaving only a ghostly afterimage.

My heart nearly stops.

"Fuck," I say again with more emphasis, pivoting in a circle. "Where are you?"

Just as I think I've lost him, I spot him running for his life down another street.

A true grin forms on my face as I let the wind hasten my steps. "If you were innocent," I tell him, though I know he can't hear me from this distance. "You wouldn't be running."

My feet aren't touching the ground anymore as I chase after him through the air. I'm gaining on him, and within a minute, I'm hot on his tail again. When he looks back, his eyes are wide, though he says nothing, scowling and sending another bolt flying at my heart.

I create a shield of air and deflect it, making it scatter like sparks into the sea of humans and dark elves. More screams follow, and the citizens ahead seem to realize what all the excitement is about.

Several dark elves try to stop him with naked swords, but he flits past them like a ghost.

They're choking on their own blood when I hit the ground again and

shove past them, eyes locked on my target.

He won't get away, I promise myself. There is a reason the King entrusted me with this mission, and I will not disappoint him. I grit my teeth and press on, chasing my elusive quarry.

Finally, I burst into an open square to find the object of my pursuit.

He stands in the center of a bustling crowd, his feet planted firmly. There's a confidence to his stance that throws me off guard, and that's when I notice several more suspicious figures in my peripherals.

It's difficult to tell if they're of his creation or not.

Our spy has friends, I think, considering that maybe I should have brought backup, after all. One of these things—I can't imagine it's even a dark elf, with the way it moves—is difficult enough to corner. But three?

I hesitate to strike, the energy around me pulsating with potential.

It's too late to run as the combined spell roils to a blistering heat, nearly evaporating me where I stand. I push off the ground with all my abilities, rising twenty feet into the air as the square below becomes a bloodbath. Dark elves caught in the torrent of the spell become little more than fish chum, their unlucky servants and slaves, equally so.

This time, I don't hesitate, diving straight for the first creature. I can't tell if it's the original, or if there are more of them, but this one feels tangible and real when I throw myself into it, certain now that it's not an elf. It has the wrong type of magic. Too raw and powerful to have come from anyone but the highest of nobles.

We tumble briefly before I pin it to the ground.

But the crowd pushes in on us, throwing accusations at us both for the damage we've caused. I don't see the spy's comrades, but hands pull me away from the strange creature. With a tilted, elvish smile, the thing grins at me and vanishes as if it never existed.

I roar, tearing out of their grip as light dances over my dark skin. They should know better than to handle me, even if I am disguised as a k'sheng. I've lost my target, and it takes all my strength not to release the fatal fury burning inside of me.

"You do not know what you have done!!" I snap at the crowd, unleashing only a little of my magic to set them back a few paces. I could punish them all for interrupting my mission. If I had more time, perhaps, I might unleash a blast more deadly than the spy's. Instead, I storm through the crowd, which gives me a wide berth.

It could not have gone far.

And if I let it escape... I can't imagine the damage it will wreak on the city. When the King hears about my failure—

“No,” I say, resolving to finish this now. “I don’t tolerate failure.” *Nor does the King*, comes the thought at the back of my mind, spurring me into a dead run.

VANESSA

“Sandy!” I open the door to our home and push my way inside. I hold back my groans for the most part. My body still aches, but there’s no need to let my little sister see my pain. “Sandy, where are you?”

She doesn’t respond, which is unusual for her. Every day, she hurries to greet me when I return from my job. We smile, hug, and laugh together each time. Then, I head to the kitchen and start preparing dinner for us to enjoy.

“Hey, Sandy?” I frown. Taking a few steps into the house, it feels awfully quiet. And eerie. I don’t like this at all. “Where are you, my love? Are you hungry?”

She’s not in the kitchen, nor in the living room. The last places to check are our bedrooms. When I can’t find her in her room, my heart starts beating faster. I break out into a cold sweat. Where is my little sister?

Then, I check my bedroom. And she’s lying on the floor, unconscious.

“Sandy!”

I toss myself at her, despite the horrific pain in my limbs. None of that matters to me. My little sister isn’t responding to my screams or my desperate attempts at waking her up. I shake her shoulders and cry her name, but nothing is making her open those eyes again.

I start inspecting her more closely. Blood drips from her head, soaking her hair. A horrific sound leaves my mouth as I realize what’s going on.

Sandy is dying.

With tears rolling down my face, I struggle to lift her body up to my bed. I lay her down as carefully as I can. It’s difficult to focus. I don’t understand what’s going on. Why won’t Sandy wake up? What happened?

I stumble around our house for a few minutes, trying to clear my head and figure out what to do. Then, I remember that there's an old human doctor who lives not too far away. He could help us.

I don't even remember to put shoes on when I exit my house, which worsens the pain in my legs. That quickly becomes an afterthought as the image of Sandy, unconsciousness on the floor, lingers in my head. It's haunting. Why is my baby sister like this? Who did this to her?

"Doctor!" I pound my fist into his door, silently hoping that he's around. "Doctor, please open the door!"

When he does, he stares at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. He takes my wrists in his hands gently, probably to stop them from shaking.

"Vanessa, what's wrong? Why are you behaving like this?"

"I-It's my sister!" I exclaim, unable to catch my breath. "I think she's dying!"

"Sandy?" He shakes his head. "No. It can't be."

He follows me back to my home, pulling me along as my feet start to give out from underneath me. They're bleeding now. Each step is a stab to my skin.

"Please, sit. Why aren't you wearing any shoes? Vanessa, you need to take care of yourself!"

"This isn't about me! This is about Sandy!" I point towards the bedroom once we're inside the house. "Please, take a look at her. Tell me what's wrong and how I can help her. I-I don't want her to die, Doctor, I won't be able to handle it."

"Don't worry, child. It's rare to have a young girl drop dead without explanation. Did she show any symptoms before she collapsed?"

"No, she was fine! Just this morning, we had a normal conversation!" My chest is crumpling with each sob. "Please, Doctor! Please save her!"

He sits beside the bed and places his hand over Sandy's forehead. I watch, but I'm a complete wreck. I try to muffle my sobs with my hands, but it's not working. The Doctor notices the bleeding wound on her head and sighs.

"Do you have any rags and bandages? Bring them here."

I don't respond, but I leap into action. I bring him everything he tells me, but there's a despondent gleam in his eyes that I can't ignore. It's making me sick. There's something we can do to save her, I'm sure of it. This can't be the end.

“I’m sorry, Vanessa, but—”

“Don’t tell me that,” I interject. I wipe away the mix of tears and snot trailing down my upper lip. “Tell me what’s wrong with her. I want to help her.”

“This is a complicated situation. I don’t know if I should say it.”

“Doctor, please!” I take his hand and tug. “Tell me what’s going on! I deserve to know, I’m her sister and guardian!”

He presses his lips into a thin line. A deep exhale exits his nose.

“Your sister is suffering from a brain clot. This injury is severe and she desperately needs a healing potion or a healer to visit. However, these solutions are problematic. For one, only dark elves are healers. I’m sure you know by now how they treat us. Besides, finding a healer is rare enough on its own.”

“Of course, that’s out of the question.” I nod, chewing my fingernails off. “What about the potion? I can buy it! Just tell me how much it costs and I’ll fetch it right now.”

“Ah, Vanessa.” He smiles. It carries a twinge of sadness. “It’s not that simple. It’s an incredibly expensive healing potion that not many can get their hands on. Even if you had the money, it would still be difficult to obtain. These potions are sold in the black market for this very reason, but even still, they’re way out of budget.”

My knees buckle. I clutch onto the nearest chair to prevent myself from collapsing onto the ground. My vision clouds as I gaze upon my sister. She’s sleeping so peacefully upon my bed, but she’s suffering.

“How did she get injured, Doctor?” I whisper. More tears fall and I can’t tear my eyes from her. “How did this happen?”

“It’s possible that she fell while she was alone in the home. She might have hit her head on an object, which explains the wound and the subsequent clotting in her brain.”

It’s my fault. I leave her alone while I head to work. She injured herself and I wasn’t around to help her. I couldn’t save her.

“The injury was made worse by the fact that she was laying there for quite some time,” he continues. Those words are a punch to the gut. “I’m sorry, Vanessa, but without a healer or a healing potion within a few, I’d probably say five, days, there’s not much we can do.”

“No. There must be something.” I can’t do it. I can’t lose Sandy. “There’s something I can do. I’m not going to let her die.”

“Child.” He grabs my shoulder and makes me look at him. “How are you going to obtain the money for that healing potion when you struggle to make ends meet as it is?”

I grit my teeth.

“I’m afraid to say this, but you must give up on her. It’s not what you wanted to hear, I understand that, but there’s nothing we can do to help her at this point.”

“That’s not true!” I swat his hand away from me. “I can help her! I can get the money we need!”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

It’s an option that always lingers in my mind, especially on the difficult days where I wonder how much more I can take. I hear stories and tales about the human women who frequent the dark elf night clubs, selling their bodies for hefty sums of money. The dark elves pay well and they’re eager to spend nights with human women, even if they puff their chests out and talk about how disgusting humans are.

“I’ll figure that out.” I wipe away the last of my tears. What is crying going to do? It’s not going to heal my little sister. “Thank you for letting me know what’s wrong with Sandy. I know what I have to do now.”

“I would love to know the details about that,” he says. I escort him to the front door, but he refuses to leave. “Vanessa, look me in the eyes and answer me! Don’t walk away from me when I’m speaking to you.”

I pause, tossing him a glance over my shoulder as I linger near the exit. “Please stay with Sandy in the meantime. I need to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“To earn the money that I need to buy her that healing potion!” I turn my whole body to face him. “I don’t care if the odds are against me right now. I refuse to give up on her. I’m going to help her even if I have to give up everything to do so!”

“What do you mean? Why are you going to give up everything?” The Doctor takes a step towards me. I turn away. “Vanessa, don’t leave without answering me!”

“I’ve already made up my mind on this. Don’t try to talk me out of this because it won’t work.”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do, but if it means risking your body and well-being, please re-think your choices! Little Sandy might not have a future anymore, but you still do!”

“Don’t say that about her,” I snap. “She’s going to live.”

“There’s no way you can get the money within five days. Unless... Vanessa.”

I’m opening the door. There’s a club I often see hidden in the outskirts of lowtown. Dark elves flock to it. They don’t even try to hide it.

“*Vanessa!*”

I shut the door behind me.

VANESSA

Just standing in front of the club is making my head spin. My hand rests upon the building beside me, and I peek around the corner as dark elves and human women enter the establishment, some through the front entrance and others through the side.

The club is situated in Liiander on the outskirts of lowtown. It's well-known because it caters to the insatiable desires of dark elves who crave human females. I've heard rumors about this place, good and bad ones. I swallow hard as I see various dark elves enter the club, guffawing and talking loudly amongst themselves. They say the most vulgar things about women. It makes my skin crawl.

I don't like the way they stare at the women as if they're pieces of meat. They're going to stare at *me* like that.

Oh, no. What am I doing? I'm making a mistake.

But this is for Sandy. The little voice in my mind doesn't know how to shut up. *She's going to die if you don't get the money in time.*

I want to turn around and run home, but I can't stand the thought of seeing Sandy unconscious on that bed. She's dying slowly while I'm here trembling in the middle of the street. I'm a coward! What kind of sister would I be if I turned back now?

She needs me. I need to be there for her, no matter what it costs.

With that in mind, I take a step forward. Then, another one. I continue walking until I make it past the swinging doors of the front entrance that nearly slam into my back as I make my way inside.

There's another set of doors. Inside, I see flashing lights, countless

moving bodies, and faint music. A guard flanks the doors, laughing with other dark elves as they make their way inside. His smile dies once he sees me.

“What are you doing here? You don’t work here.”

“I want to,” I reply, holding my chin up high. I hope this makes me look confident. “How do I start working? Who do I need to talk to?”

He snorts. “Me. I’m the one who lets people in and out of this place. The human girls who work here need to pass an... *inspection* before they start. It’ll be no different for you.”

“Okay, then.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Where’s the owner or the manager of this place? I want to talk to—”

“No, no,” he says, waving his hand. “You’re not going to talk to him. You’re going to show me what goods you have.”

“Goods? I-I don’t understand—”

“Are you stupid? No wonder you’ve resorted to selling your body. You don’t have a lot of brains to work with, do you?” He taps the side of his forehead and cackles. “Come on. Take off your shirt. I want you to show me your tits.”

“What? Anyone can walk in and see us!”

“And?” He juts a thumb over his shoulder. “If you want to perform in there, you’re going to have to get used to having all eyes on you. Now take it off.”

He’s referring to my shirt. Bile rises in my throat, but I fight to keep it down. While holding back tears, I slowly lift my shirt up and over my torso. I stand in front of the guard while he ogles me. He’s only focusing on my chest.

“You’ll do fine here,” he purrs, tilting his head to the side and never taking his eyes off me.

I lift my arms to cover my chest. Goosebumps cover my arms. I feel disgusting. Why does this have to happen to me? Why is the world so cruel? It’s taking all my strength to not burst into tears right now.

“Aww,” he coos. He’s taunting me. “It’s alright. It’ll all be over soon. I’ll let you into the club when you do one last thing for me.”

I wrinkle my nose. He smiles. “Get on your knees and suck me off.”

No. I’d rather *die*.

“I’m not going to do that,” I snap. I can’t listen to him anymore. I pull on my shirt. “Where’s the manager? This is a waste of time—”

“Woah, woah, hold on. Where do you think you’re going?” He grabs me by the arm and holds me in front of him. “You’re not going anywhere until you do what I asked. Get on your knees. I need to know how good you can use that mouth.”

“No!” I shove him away from me. “I’m not going to!”

He snarls, shoving me to the ground. My knees bang into the concrete, making me cry out in pain. He takes this as an opportunity to start undoing his belt and tug his pants down his legs.

No, no, no! This can’t be happening!

I understand what I’m getting into. I’m going to do stuff like this, and much worse, for clients. But that’s the thing. I plan on doing this for a client, not some random guard who’s on a power trip!

How do I stop him? He’s much more powerful than me. If I run away, he’s going to chase me, tackle me to the ground, and do horrible things. I should just comply, right? That will be the easiest thing. Get it over with and try to forget about what happened.

I close my eyes. He’s unzipping his pants.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?!”

“H-Hoshale!” The guard races to pull his pants back up, but they keep falling down because he took off his belt. There’s a noticeable bulge through his pants. “I can explain. It’s not what it—”

I scream and cover my head as a dark blue jet of magic erupts from the other side of the room and collides into the guard’s chest, slamming him into the wall.

Trembling, I slightly raise my head and see a dark elf standing in the doorway that leads into the main club area. He stares at me with a dirty scowl.

“Are you the owner?”

“Close. I’m the manager. I call the shots here.” He leans his shoulder on the wall and crosses his feet at the ankles. He huffs out a laugh. “So, explain to me what was going on just now? Who are you? You don’t look like one of my girls.”

“No, I’m not, but I want to work here. I need the money.”

His expression softens. “Get up so I can look at you.”

I do exactly as I’m told, dusting out the wrinkles in my clothing. He circles around me with his hands behind his back, inspecting me as if I’m on auction. He hums gently to himself.

“You’d fit in with our current selection of women. You have an incredible body.” He takes me by surprise by pulling on my loose shirt and bunching up the extra fabric behind me. It shows off the rest of my figure. “You’re going to drive them crazy, I know it. You’ll be a moneymaker. A star, even.”

“When can I start, then? And how much can I earn in one day?”

He smirks. “You’re eager for the job. I like that. I like seeing someone willing to give it all for their craft.”

“Does that mean I’m hired?”

Hoshale stands directly in front of me. His tongue trails over his teeth. “What’s your name?”

“Vanessa.”

“Do you know how to dance, Vanessa?”

“I...” Dance? Not really. I’ve never had the need to dance before, but I guess it’s a requirement now. “I do. I know how to dance a little bit.”

“That’s perfect. You’ll do amazing here, I promise. Come on.”

“Huh?” I whisper, watching as he opens the door to the main area and beckons me to follow. The guard is still plastered on the floor beside him, unconscious. “...What am I going to do?”

“You have to show me that you’re worth keeping around. Don’t worry, you’re still hired, but I want to see your potential. I need to have an idea of how well you’ll perform once you’re alone with the clients. Do you understand where I’m coming from?”

“...Not really. No.”

He sighs. “I need you to put on a show. A damn good one.”

My mouth falls open slightly.

“Oh, come on! Don’t act as if you’ve never done this before. With a body like that, I know that you’ve been slutting around for the other clubs in town. Don’t worry. I don’t hold grudges, but now you have to prove yourself.”

He whistles and it attracts the attention of two human females who make their way over. They are dressed in scantily clad outfits.

“Mimi. Ayanna. Please show Vanessa to the dressing room and give her some spare clothing. She needs to perform in ten minutes.”

“W-What? Wait, I didn’t expect all this!”

“What did you expect, then?” Hoshale laughs. “Did you think you were just going to walk in and have my clients throw money at you that easily? No. Here, you have to earn your share. Now, go on. We can’t keep the crowd

waiting!”

“But—”

“Throw away those awful baggy clothing she has on, will you? Get her into something more appropriate. Something that shows off her tits and curves. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.” One of the girls tugs me on the arm. “Hurry up. Don’t keep him waiting.”

“I don’t understand—” I glance at Hoshale while Mimi and Ayanna pull me away. “What do I do while I’m up there?”

“I already told you! You’re going to strip, dance, and put on a fucking show for my clients! I’ll throw you out of here myself if you don’t!”

I grit my teeth. This is my chance to prove myself.

Sandy. She’s the only person I think about while these women tug off my clothing. *I’m doing this for her.*

KEILLON

The music pulses through the air so violently it feels like a light touch on my skin. I try not to let that show on my face as I lean back on one of the plush couches, my eyes roaming the Liiandor club casually.

My taste for this place has been quickly diminishing as of late. I blame it on my experiences at L'amour when others invite me, saying the City of Sins has ruined me, but that's not true. I've always felt a little uncomfortable in these situations, seeing human women beg for money like this.

I've never cared much about the humans and how they live, and I have no problem sinking into one. It's just when they're on display like this, their faces either desperate or emotionless, it's hard for me to swallow.

I guess I'm not like other dark elves. I don't want to hear them beg or cry – not when I can tell they truly don't enjoy it. Some girls cry while their arousal drips down their legs, and that's a turn on. I'd rather they come with me willingly, not push them past their breaking point. I'm not blind that they ride me so they can eat, but I don't torment them, at least. This is their job, like how I have mine, and I don't see why others want them to be terrified just to get off.

For many years, I'd drag myself into places like this to keep up my reputation. I did enjoy the sex, but I didn't find it as fulfilling as others. When I did find an interesting woman, I'd take her, but I've started to second guess my actions after my trip to Vhoig.

The Archduke's eyes are still burned in the back of my mind.

I've never wanted a human that badly.

The only reason I'm even here tonight is because I tracked the spy back to

this place. It's an easy location to hide; I'll give him that. Dark elves flock to here at night, hidden in the crowd in the dim light, and it's always bursting at the seams with the club's reputation of procuring any human female to be used to the buyer's heart's content.

It would be easy for the spy to masquerade as a staff member or patron, and at any point, he could slip by me. I'm fairly certain he's still here, though. I've been watching the exit points closely, and no one has left yet. The show has just begun.

I'm also closely in tune with the types of magic around me, and this spy has a strange feeling to his magic. Few dark elves train enough to feel the signatures of others, but I find it more identifying than a scent or a voice. While I may not be well trained in how to use magic, I can pick up the signature of magic from across the room, and I feel traces of it now.

The only problem is I can't find the source. I'm stuck here, waiting until I can find an easy way to shift through the crowd, trying to find the spy before he slips through my fingers.

As I continue searching for my target, the manager comes out on the stage, the lights illuminating him as he grins wide. "Welcome to Pègre! I see several familiar faces in the crowd." They howl at that, and he waves. "You'll all be happy to hear that our first act tonight is a new girl!"

Everyone noticeably leans forward as the light changes color and softens, and the manager backs off stage to the side, watching himself as the curtains part. A girl stands there in a black, tight corset, her breasts pushed up, though they don't seem to need the help. It stops just above her hips, and a matching thong cuts across her waist. Kneehigh, white socks complete her outfit with black pumps, and immediately, heat shoots through me.

She's gorgeous.

Her blue eyes are stunning, and her skin is creamy. There's a slight tan to it that tells me she works outside, and I guess keeping her beautiful brown hair at shoulder length helps keep her cool under the hot sun. It looks so much like silk I want to bury my hands in it.

And I'm not the only one that thinks that. As the music starts up, she takes a daring step forward, swinging her hips, and the way that her curvy body moves doesn't match the innocence in her eyes. She seems out of place when I look at her face, but as her hands cascade down her body, it's hard not to follow them.

She glides one hand down the front and the other up her breasts to grasp

her throat as she sways. I shift forward, trying to contain myself. That becomes difficult as her fingers find the clasps of the corset, though, and on beat, she unlatches them one by one.

I find my eyes following every inch of skin revealed, spotting the symmetrical birthmark splayed across her stomach in the shape of a butterfly just before the corset drops.

Screams break through my thoughts, and I realize that other elves have risen to their feet, shouting at her.

"Come on, sweetheart!"

"Part those legs!"

"Lose the thong next!"

"Bend over for me!"

It makes me sick to my stomach, especially as she makes a show of turning to the side, rolling the first sock down her thigh slowly. Her firm ass is poised in the air, and I have to block out the comments on that.

As she turns to the other side to roll the next sock down, flashing her full back to the crowd for a second, the screams turn into a frenzy, and red edges my vision. I don't understand why I'm feeling this way, but I want to pound in the faces of all the dark elves watching.

The girl stands up, left only in a sheer, lacy bra and a very thin thong. Her hand slips under one of the straps, knocking it loose, and then it moves to the other. She keeps swaying to the beat as one hand slides behind her back and she unhooks the bra.

The room holds a collective breath as she waits for the chorus to hit, increasing the tempo before she lets it drop, and then the room is in an uproar. I'm surprised no one has bought her yet, but I guess that they don't want to end the show early.

The thought makes me want to tear through the room, not allowing anyone else to see her. And as the bridge starts to swell, the lyrics dying out as she reaches for the string of her thong, I'm on my feet.

I can't stand it any longer. It's not even a conscious thought to buy her for the night, but I don't want anyone to see any more of her. They've already seen enough, and every elf's eyes are glued to her, memorizing her sinful curves. Her body is a pure work of art.

She's going slow, and I can't dive through the crowd fast enough.

"I'll buy her!" I shout, leaping up to the stage beside the manager. "End this. I don't want anyone else to see what's mine."

His lips curl up into a smile. "Stop!"

The music cuts off, and the light shifts to the manager as he steps onto the edge of the stage. The woman scurries back, crossing her arms over her exposed breasts.

The elves are screaming, cursing and yelling threats at the manager as he stands there coolly, waiting for them to shut up.

"She's been bought," he announces. "You all know the rules. This is a demonstration. If you want to see more, you have to buy her."

Elves glare at me, cursing at me. I know that there would have been a bidding war, and so does the manager. As he saunters back toward me, I can already tell he's thinking of the price he could have gotten me and how he'll charge me more.

"Three riel," he says, and I balk. I've paid less for rooms across the cities; gods, I've paid less for a boat before. It was a piece of shit, but it lasted me three days and got me to a better port.

"Two," I counter. I don't want him to put her back up for auction. "You and I both know I could buy a slave or two for two riel, and she's just for the night."

"Yes, but look at her." He purses his lips, his gaze casting back toward the woman, and I almost snap when he finally says, "Fine. Two riel."

I dig the two crimson coins out, the black triangles glinting on top as I drop them in the hand. It almost seems fitting to hand over coins with the symbol of the Guide on them because looking at this woman, I feel like I have died.

What is going on with me?

"Send her to my private room. Number seven."

He inclines his head. "She'll meet you there."

"Don't let anyone else see her," I bark out.

The manager chuckles. "Of course."

I stalk off, still listening to the insults and jeers of the other elves as I climb the steps beside the stage that leads to the upstairs lounge. Grinning, I listen to the manager try to calm the crowd as he introduces the next girl, but we all know the same thing.

None will be as good as this one.

And I bought her.

She is mine.

VANESSA

"**Y**ou made quite an impression," Hoshale tells me as he leads me up the steps backstage. "I've rarely had an elf stop a dancer because he just *had* to have her. He paid handsomely for you, you know."

I nod, but I'm trembling. He swiped the club's clothes from me, leaving only the thong and heels on me. As we climb through the cool building, thankfully not passing by many others as there is another performer on stage, I keep my hands wrapped around my chest.

"I mean, you're really quite lucky. You may end up getting paid more for just entertaining one man. It's impressive."

At that moment we hit the top floor: the VIP lounge. I don't feel lucky as the sounds and smells assault me. It reeks up here, like sex and sweat and—I hope I'm wrong about this one—piss. The rest of the club has been so clean, and I can't believe that up here is just forgotten. That smell has to be purposeful.

And it fills me with fear.

"He's a new customer," Hoshale is saying. "Be sure to treat him well."

There aren't any doors on the first few rooms that we pass. Do they have to pay more for doors? I'm not sure, but either way, it makes me nauseous. Not just because I don't want others to see me as I'm forced into whatever this dark elf has planned, but also because I can see what is going on up here.

The first room on my left drowns out whatever else the manager is saying. I'm too focused on the screams coming from it, and I can't tell if it's pleasure or pain. I shouldn't look, but I make the mistake of turning my head.

There's a human woman, her legs hooked over the dark elf's arms before

her. He's holding her in the air, fucking her from the front, while another male has her pinned between them. Her face tightens with every thrust, and I have to look away from the sight, my muscles tightening reflexively.

Across the hall, it's the opposite sight. The woman is naked and on all fours but no one is touching her. Instead, she has plates of food placed along her, and on the curving end of her spine, a candle is balanced. The wax drips down the edge, racing to her skin, but she doesn't even react.

It isn't until we are almost out of view of her that I notice the other candle that has fallen over between her shoulder blades, solidifying in her hair, and when the dark elf tips the second one off, he howls with laughter as her skin turns bright red under the heat.

That's what happens up here? It's not just sex. I thought the worst thing would be being passed around or choked out until I couldn't breathe. I didn't expect literal torture to bring sexual pleasure to these elves.

But why wouldn't it? They find so much joy in hurting us in our daily lives. They love to hear us scream as they take us, force us to our knees and use our bodies like toys, not something that needs to function. Why wouldn't they get off on the pain alone, too?

The next room we pass by is two humans and a dark elf. I'd expect it to be two women, but to my surprise, it's a man and a woman. I guess nothing matters to the dark elves as long as there is pleasure in it.

And as the human male talks down to the woman, who is flat on her back beneath him as they fuck, telling her all the things he'll do to her, the dark elf behind him encourages it. He laughs, slapping the male's ass, which he is buried inside of, and he seems to be enjoying the train of screwing and insults without caring about the prying eyes of others.

I don't know what to make of it. All I know is that Hoshale continues to lead me down the hall, and I grow more apprehensive with every step. Will there be other dark elves in there? Will there be more humans?

I can barely stomach the idea of sleeping with this dark elf. How would I be able to take more than one person or elf touching me without losing it?

And losing it isn't an option. I know that I will be used whether I am compliant or not. I've heard that the more I resist, the more dark elves will drag it out, enjoying the screaming, so I resolve to keep my mouth closed no matter what awaits me.

"Here we are," Hoshale says as he stops before the last room at the end of the hall. Thankfully, this one has a door, but I still hesitate.

My legs twitch, and for a second, I consider running. I'm not held here. This club doesn't enslave its women. It's open to anyone who needs money and can stomach the work. I'm not sure if I fall into the latter, but I am most definitely the former.

With that reminder, I know I can't go anywhere. If I run, my sister will die, so I take a deep breath, and nod.

I wonder to myself if this will even be enough money. Will I have to come back here again tomorrow? The night after? How much of this can I truly stomach?

I've heard that the girls who work here get twenty percent, and he did say it was a hefty amount. I have to cling to that hope as the door swings open with a flick of Hoshale's hand.

Women here don't survive in the lifestyle very long, and I know I will last even less than most. I just have to hope that I work hard enough tonight to never have to do this again.

My whole body trembles as I step into the small room, and I see the setup is the same as all the others. There is one couch pressed against the back wall and another facing the door. They almost meet into an L shape, with a table center in front of the two.

The couch in front of me is empty, but the one pushed back against the wall seats a dark elf. His long, dark hair is a rich shade that is rare among the dark elves, and it falls in waves down his back. It's wild, almost unkempt, and when the light hits it, I swear there are a few silver strands that match his sharp eyes.

He's beautiful.

Not in the ways that most dark elves are beautiful. They have nice face structure and long hair, but there's a cruelty lining the features. This elf is truly beautiful, though rough and wild, and I can't believe I find him attractive.

I'm frozen beneath his intense gaze as he works his way down my mostly naked body, lifting a goblet to his lips. I don't have to see the contents to know that it's elven wine as he takes a long, slow sip, never taking his eyes off of me.

I should be shivering beneath his gaze, but there's a flush of heat on my skin wherever his eyes linger. I don't know why, but I feel compelled to come closer, and I shove it all down. I should hate him for buying me, for thinking of my body as a commodity.

But how can I when I've offered myself up? It's not like he took me off the streets and forced me into this role. If not him, it could have been more elves who may look at me with a more dangerous gaze.

Am I making excuses for this elf? I wouldn't be here if this world would just be a little kinder to me, and it is because of his kind. Everything that I have to do, that any woman has to do, is because we've run out of options. Because of the dark elves.

But this elf... There is something about the emotion swirling in his eyes, excitement and possessive need. There's no cruelty, I don't think. Or maybe I'm wrong.

Gods, I hope I'm not wrong.

"Play nice," Hoshale says behind me, jolting me out of my thoughts, and I realize just how charged the air is now that I'm no longer trapped in the elf's gaze. "Be a good girl."

The door swings shut as he turns and walks away, and I face the dark elf who bought me for the night, finding that his gaze never left me. His right ankle still rests on his left knee. His right hand sits on his bent knee and his left hand holds just the stem of the goblet before his mouth.

He's leaned back on the couch so casually as he observes me that this feels oddly intimate. On the stage, I never forgot what I was, what I was doing.

In here, though, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Does he want me to dance more? Why hasn't he risen or taken off any clothes or made demands?

I've spent my entire life learning how to serve this race, and the number one consistent rule that I've always obeyed is to keep my head down and wait for an order.

The first one, I've already broken. I maintain his eye contact, knowing the hell that may come from it.

But the second one, I try to stick to. I stand, shaking in the center of the room as the dark elf observes me until I feel I can no longer stand it. I try to say it's fear and not anticipation swirling in my stomach as I whimper out, "Master, what do you want me to do?"

KEILLON

I can't take my eyes off of her. Not off her curvy form or the way her hands cling modestly to her chest or the way that the longer I stare at her, the more she tries to cover herself. I continue to stare, and she starts to cross her legs..

Gods below, she's innocence and sin personified. Her eyes are so sweet, so piercing as she holds my gaze, but her body makes my knees weak.

She's like a numiscu blossom, beautiful but deadly. I am so drawn by her, but I am almost certain that one taste will be deadly. Even without getting too near, she has me paralyzed just like the blossom.

I know that I saw her on stage, but taking her in this close feels different, more intimate. There aren't lights and other elves in my way, and I can take as long as I want, memorizing every inch of her.

But the longer I stare, the more painfully hard I become.

I've never been attracted to a human woman before. I barely notice women at all, but I've been with some dark elf females, those that usually try to use me for my status. It's been decent enough, but I've never found myself so stiff and needy just by looking at someone.

I lick my lips as the tension in the air grows impossibly thicker, and as she shifts her weight again, a thrill shoots through me. Is she feeling even a modicum of what I am?

It's like I want to torture myself as I snap my fingers, and the low hum of music plays in the room. No one else can hear it, but in here, it seems to vibrate through the very air, and I shift forward, planting both my feet and resting my elbows on my knees as I give her a hungry grin.

"There are clothes in the corner." Her eyebrows pinch together as I say it, but she doesn't look relieved. Another tendril of eagerness shoots down my spine. "Pick a new outfit. I want my own personal strip show."

She scurries to the table in the corner where three or four outfits wait at my request. I was curious to see what she would pick when given choice, and when she plucks up a lacy, blue number that I've been dying to see on her skin, I almost melt onto the floor.

She dares a glance back at me, and I nod, raising a hand to my eyes. It's clear that she's uncertain about dressing in front of me—more so than undressing in front of a room of elves—and I personally would love the surprise of seeing her in a new outfit.

I wait, sipping the bitter wine until I hear her shift closer.

"I'm ready," she says.

When I drop my hand, I'm breathless.

This outfit is more revealing than what she wore on stage. The three piece set is so lacy and thin that I can see straight through to her skin, and I find myself fighting the urge to go to her and rip it all off.

"Dance," I tell her, and my voice sounds raspy. "Strip for me. Give me a lap dance."

I pant it all out, and I squash down the shame at my behavior. I am supposed to look like a patron of the club, so why not make the most of it? I'm not asking her to do anything more than she already has really, and I did pay for her. It would be a shame to waste the night...

Her eyes hold mine as she starts to sway, and I can't figure out where to look. Should it be at her hips that I want to hold as she does that same movement on top of me or at her pillowy lips that I want to see around my cock or at her breasts that bounce as she moves, begging me to free them so that I can bite and lick to my heart's content?

I groan as I lean back, taking her in as much as I can, and when her hands slide around her torso to unlatch the thin belt around her, I want to scream. I want to revel in this moment and strip her down at the same time.

She steps forward as she drops the belt, revealing that gorgeous birthmark again. I want to trace it with my fingertips, and I lean forward as she comes closer, abandoning the wine in favor of grabbing her waist.

How is this woman making me lose my mind?

"That's it," I encourage, and she comes closer so that she sways between my knees. I'm tempted to lay a kiss on her belly, a fire burning in my core,

and I just need to touch her.

She distracts me as she runs one hand up her body, though, until my eyes reach her cleavage, which is just above me. She flicks one strap loose and then the other until I feel like I'm going to explode.

Somehow the movements are both graceful and sexy. It's unbearable how well she seduces me, and I know she's not even trying. She's just trying to make it through the night and earn a little bit of money.

I'm relieved that I bought her before anyone else could. They would rip her apart, stealing her innocence without thought or appreciation.

I wouldn't say that I have ever cared about the way humans are treated, really, but with her, this woman between my hands that is now reaching for the latch of her bra, I don't want anyone else to touch her.

No, she doesn't need to be broken. Her innocence needs to be siphoned, held in place as she gives into her fleshy needs, not ripped away. I want to see those wide, blue eyes filled with shock as I make her explode. I want her to be in awe of an orgasm, not eluded one.

There is so much I want to do to her without breaking her spirit or her soul. I want to fill her, show her all that I can make her do that she will love without destroying her worldview.

I want to shatter her mind, not her body.

When her bra pops open, all the thoughts rush from my mind. She makes a show of sliding the fabric from her chest slowly until her breasts are bouncing just before my eyes, and I am stunned.

She drops the bra to the ground, still swaying with the music as one hand goes to her hair and the other runs down her stomach. I let my hands skim down her sides with the motion until I reach the back of her knees.

Leaning back, I tug at her left leg first. "Come on," I encourage.

She looks uncertain, and I relax back on the couch, pulling at her until she halfway falls on top of me. I nudge her left knee onto the couch, then the other, and she stops moving for a second, breathless as she hovers over my lap.

The scent of her arousal washes over me, and I shift up, unintentionally rocking up against her, and she bites back a quiet yelp. I can't help it as I want to get closer, and I lean up, taking almost all the space away from between us.

"Have you given a lap dance before?" I growl out, my hands on her hips.

She shakes her head, and I grin. I almost want to praise her, call her a

good girl, but I swallow it back. What a little blossom.

"It's the same as the dancing you did before," I tell her. I know many other dark elves would have slapped her for stopping, for not being bare or climbing on them without command, but I could never do that to her. I almost enjoy the naivety that is in every one of her movements. "Just move your hips"

She bites her bottom lip, and I want to tug it out from between her teeth as she sits back on her heels for better balance. We still aren't touching, and I fear I'm going to explode from all this anticipation. Still, I don't rush her.

She moves above me, and I just know that when I do get inside of her, those hips are going to work me like no one ever has. I'm not going to know to react, and her sinful body just may make a fool of me. The first time around, at least.

I lean back to take in the show as her hands continue to glide along her body, her hips keeping up a rhythm, and the heat that's been slowly building clutches me. I can't take it anymore, and I grab the edges of her lacy thong that she's still wearing.

She stiffens. She doesn't dare stop dancing, but as my fingers grip at the only fabric keeping her somewhat covered, albeit not really, her whole body gets tense. It's clear to me that she's reluctant to take them off, just like she was on stage.

While I don't want to break her or harm her for my own use, I am not a weak man. I am not celibate nor do I possess the self-restraint of the gods.

So my fingers tighten around the thin string until they dig into her skin, and I growl, "Take them off..."

And just as I hoped, her eyes flash. There's a hint of fear there, but there's something else that I cling to, that I want to explore, and it nearly undoes me.

VANESSA

I *can do this*, I keep telling myself. *I have to do this. For my sister! For her, I can do anything.*

But is that the reason that I keep going or is it the excuse I use to justify what I'm doing?

Because the way that his lips keep curling up in that wild grin and his silver eyes flash with promises that I actually want fulfilled, I don't know what I'm thinking anymore.

I'm glad my knees are propped on the couch or they would have given out by now. The dark elf has barely touched me all, just the lightest grazes along my skin that send electricity skittering along my body until I am desperate for more.

I'm almost relieved when he grabs at the strings of my underwear and tugs. "Take these off..." he growls, and the way he says it makes me wetter than I already am. I've soaked through the thin fabric already, but I don't immediately do as he says.

I initially stiffened when he reached for them, fearing what would happen when they came off, but now, I lean forward, planting my hands against the couch on either side of his head as I continue to move my hips.

"Help me," I whisper out.

I may be an idiot for not immediately obeying him, but my mind is elsewhere. It is not on this planet, obeying the usual subservient rules, and I almost expect a punishment. Instead, the elf growls, low and deep, and heat flushes between my legs as he rips the underwear away.

"Better," he says as he tosses it aside. "Now, grind against me."

Even though his voice is a deep command, it's lighter as he encourages me, pulling me further down. My knees slide open until I am pressed against him, and he helps me keep my rhythm though I don't need it.

He leans back, throwing his head against the couch with a deep, guttural roar. He reminds me so much of a predator with the way he watches me. His gaze is sharp and intense, and he barely talks, just watching and growling like he's waiting to pounce on me.

My nipples harden at the thought, and I realize I want him to pounce on me.

He shifts beneath me so that we're pressed more firmly together, and as I keep going, abandoning the music to go faster, stronger, I realize that I'm working him up, too. His erection has become apparent, and Holy Maws, this elf is huge!

If I ever get him out of these pants, he just might split me in half. That should terrify me, but I find that it sends thrills of excitement through me, and I almost reach for the button of his pants.

I know that I'm inexperienced. I'll have a hard time taking him, I'm sure, but that doesn't mean that I don't know what to do. I'm not utterly clueless, as I've proven the rest of the night.

In lowtowns, it's not hard to get an education about the flesh anyway. Women can be found in alleys with dark elves or humans rutting away. I've even passed by some in front of storefronts on their knees before their male patrons, almost like they are advertising their goods.

I'm not like that. I'm not like them in that way, but that doesn't mean that I can't be as good. Many dark elves pay highly for girls who are untouched, and I have a feeling that the way my body reacts to him, having never been touched before will earn me enough points that I will be paid well.

The dark elf shifts again so that my breasts brush against his chest and his nose almost bumps into mine. His hands dig harder into my hips, so much so that they might bruise. I should care, but I don't. I almost want him to grip me harder, like he really needs me.

He bucks up against me, and I cry out, making him grin.

"Do you like that?" he asks as he rolls his hips up, hitting between my legs at just the right spot.

I whimper as I nod, and I jolt forward as he does it again. There is almost no space between us, and I find myself staring into his eyes, my hips slowing to a more sensual, less desperate pace. I was working to an orgasm with the

still clothed elf, but now, I'm leaning harder into him, waiting for him to kiss me.

I've never seen a dark elf be hesitant before, and that almost makes me want to jump him more. It's not that he seems unsure. It's like he's savoring every one of my movements as his gaze jumps from my eyes to my lips and back up.

When he tilts his chin up, I don't hesitate. I lean forward, my mouth crashing into his, and I swear I feel electrified. One of his hands comes up to grip the back of my head, pulling tightly at my hair, and I want more.

His tongue flicks at the seam of my lips, and I let him in. He's clearly experienced as his tongue whips in, commanding mine as he groans at the taste of me.

I submit to him, letting him rule my mouth as his hand slips from my hip to my ass. I jolt at the touch, but he grabs me hard, holding me in place. It's more sexual than I anticipated, since I usually hate men when they try to grab at me there. Now, I roll my hips into his hand as he squeezes my curves there, and I find it satisfying.

His fingers follow the curve of my body, brushing at the very top of my thigh. I shudder as he slips more inward, and I know that he's going to learn one thing: I don't hate this.

His mouth stutters as his fingertips graze the wetness leaking out, and he pulls back to look at me. He glides a finger between my folds, gathering up my arousal and watching me as I fight not to react. I can't keep it in, though, as he rubs against me, and my thighs tremble as I cry out.

"Oh, blossom, you are more excited than I thought you'd be." I pant as he lifts his hand, looking at the slick wetness clinging to his fingers. "As sweet and paralyzing as a numiscu blossom," he murmurs before thrusting his fingers toward me. "Clean me off," he coos.

I expect to feel my body recoil, but without thought, I dive forward. He pushes his fingers deep into my mouth, and instead of finding it unpleasant, I find my body growing hotter.

I slide my tongue between his fingers, sucking hard on them as he pushes back, testing my mouth. I don't dare pull back, and it is not because of fear. I don't want to. I want to prove to him what I could do.

He groans, pushing up against me as he watches, and his eyelids seem to grow heavy as he licks his lips. "That's it," he says. "Get it all."

I do as he says until he pulls his fingers from my mouth and grips the

back of my head again. "Do you like how you taste?" he teases, and I nod.

He growls, like the very thought turns him on, and he pulls me forward so that his mouth can claim mine again. His free hand goes to my back, dragging along the skin. It's not forceful but it's much harder than he had been before, like he wants to grasp every part of me.

His tongue lashes mine, and he jerks back to give me a lustful look. "Your pussy tastes amazing on your lips." And then he crashes against me again as his hand slides down to grasp my ass again.

I whimper, hoping he'll go in again, but this time I want more. I want him to truly touch me. Before, he barely grazed the skin as he felt how wet I was but there are so many places I want those fingers.

Instead, he gives my ass a tight squeeze and guides his fingers down my thigh, pinching lightly. I yelp the first time, and he chuckles, swallowing my protest, but I like the sting. Once I know what to expect, I groan as he does so.

He shakes his head as he breaks our kiss, his hand digging deep into my thigh, and he's grinning wide. "You look so innocent, but you aren't really, are you?"

I'm not sure what to say to that. I am inexperienced, but in this moment I wouldn't call anything I'm doing innocent. I also think I know what answer he wants as I dive forward, nipping at his lower lip and earning another growl.

"No," I whisper out. "I'm not what people expect, but find out for yourself."

His eyes flash, and I don't know what I've done. Those words can be dangerous, but I don't care. He's driving me mad, and even though I'm a little afraid, I'm also out of my mind right now. I know what is coming, so I might as well be eager for it, right?

That's what I tell myself as he pulls my lips back to his, pulling the bottom one into his mouth and sucking so hard I whimper. His hand glides back up toward my ass, and his fingers tease the inner skin of my thigh until I think I might ask him to take his clothes off.

This is not how I thought my night was going to go at all. I never thought I'd want the dark elf to undress, to touch me.

What is he doing to me?

KEILLON

This girl tastes *incredible*. She's on top of me naked, and yet, I can't seem to break away from her mouth. I'm not one to take it so slow, but I just can't get enough of her. Her taste is drawing me in as she grips my hair, pulling me closer. I know that I could do this all night.

My hand teases the edge of her pussy. I want to explore her, watch her come apart on top of me, but as I start to press closer, something washes over me.

I jerk back, stilling as I cock my head, trying to determine if I was imagining it. But I know I wasn't. No matter how desperately I want to ignore it, I know I just felt the spy's magic. He's here.

"Hey," she whispers, sitting back slightly, her grip on my hair loosening. "What's wrong?"

She almost sounds disappointed, especially as she shifts my hand further under her. It's clear that she didn't want to stop, and as I turn to stare into her piercing blue eyes, I'm tempted to tell her that it's nothing and dive into her.

But then another tendril of that magic alerts me, and I force myself to remember that I am here to do a job. I can't be distracted any longer. Even if I want to ravage this woman, I know what is more important.

I cup the back of her head more tenderly than I have all night as I shake my head. "Nothing is wrong."

Pulling her back into me, I savor one last kiss and the feeling of her body pressed to mine before I break away, leaning forward to whisper in her ear. Her back arches, her head tilting to the side like she's anticipating me to kiss her neck, and gods, I'm tempted.

Instead, I whisper in her ear. "I think it's time for you to sleep."

Before she can respond, I press the sleeping acupuncture point on her neck, enhanced with my magic, and she falls over. I catch her, laying her out on the couch and brushing her hair back.

Looking around, I don't see a blanket, but with a snap of my fingers, I summon one from the lower floors. While I'm not advanced in magic, there are some key spells I know, and that one is particularly useful on the battlefield.

As I wrap the blanket around her nude form, I realize how odd this is. I've never been gentle with anyone, and yet, this entire night I've been unlike myself because of this woman.

Honestly, she's pulling emotions out of me that I never thought I'd experience as I linger by the door to the room and glance back at her. As I slip out, I cast a barrier spell that will break with the sunrise. She shouldn't wake before then, and I don't want anyone bothering her, especially since I've left her so defenseless.

With the woman tucked away, I force my senses on the task at hand. Out here in the hall, the magic is easier to track, and with a wave of my hand, I sent a tracker along the magic trace. This spell took me a long time to learn, but it makes it much easier to find someone now that I can detect the noticeable differences of magic in the air.

My magic coasts along it, pulsing a thin golden vein that guides me forward. It disappears into a door farther down the hallway, and I pull up my magic, letting it coat my hands before I land the heel of my boot into the door.

The lock breaks as the door splinters open, and the first thing I see is a human woman. She looks nothing like the girl I left behind, who I feel is already drawing me back. This woman is thin, too thin, and blonde.

Her body is crumpled on the ground, blood smearing her face, and I'm not sure if she's passed out or dead. I cluck my tongue, tearing my eyes away from her. That one is not my problem, though it does spark a taste of fear in me.

Who did that to her? Is the girl I left behind in trouble?

I push the worries away, reminding myself that it doesn't matter. That's not why I'm here. It was all a ruse to track the spy.

Then why do I feel so empty since I've left her in that room?

Fuck!

I need to get my head on right, and I dive into my magic, using it to clear my thoughts. It's another tool I use on the battlefield, though more for my men than myself. I typically live for the fight, and I don't need help getting zoned into the task at hand.

Right now, though, I'm struggling to focus on my mission. The tendrils of my magic weave through my mind as I push the door open, and suddenly all I can think about is the spy.

It's even easier as I see the golden tendrils of my tracker spell leading to the back corner of the room. It swirls around a dark elf sitting on the ground, green light casting along his leg as he tries to heal a wound that I'm not sure is from me or someone else who grew tired of his antics.

"There you are," I growl, and the door slams closed behind me, a barrier spell barring anyone from entry.

I'm thankful these rooms are soundproof. It's not that I fear someone will stop me. Dark elves aren't exactly known for stepping in to assist others during an altercation. It's more that I don't want a distracting and jeering crowd of drunken elves allowing him to slip through again.

His magic forms a thick cast around his leg as he draws up to a standing position to face me, and I grin. "You can't run now, and that seems to be your only trick."

His eyes dart around, but I don't give another labored breath before I leap forward. I slam into him, throwing our bodies into the table in the center of the room so that it breaks out from under us.

Before I've even fully landed, my hands are around his throat. I could dispatch him without getting so close, but sometimes, when it gets personal, I like to use my hands and not my magic. It feels a little bit better to claim a life that is rightfully mine when it's pulsing beneath my palms.

The elf slams his feet into the ground under us, flailing and trying to buck me off. His hands wrap around mine, green electricity coating along my skin, but I have a protection spell that will beat any of his attacks.

He coughs and sputters, clawing at me, and to my surprise, he lands a solid blow against my elbow, twisting it so that I let go, more from shock than pain. I hadn't expected him to know how to fight, and as he shifts to his side and slides out from under me with my weight thrown off, I stare in curiosity.

I'm already in a crouch as he's heaving, the magic around his wounded leg weakening, and it alerts me to how truly limited his power is. I shake my

head, tsking as I tell him, "You are only making this worse on yourself."

I slam a hand forward, the orange glow projecting out from my hand to hit him with a blast twice as hard in the chest. He slams into the couch, toppling over its back, and I leap over the furniture.

I land over the spy, dropping down to one knee on his chest. I bring two fingers to his neck, touching another sensitive spot there. My magic flows over him from the neck down, encasing him in an easily maneuverable trap for me to deliver him to the King.

"That should hold you until we get back to the castle."

The spy barks out a harsh laugh, shaking his head manically. "No," he coughs out, and his body is twisting violently, fighting against my hold, and my eyebrows pinch together in confusion. "No, my job is done here."

A smirk finds me, and I snort. "I don't think you are in the position to negotiate."

I notice a beat too late, but his veins are turning black, working up his body until his skin is a mess of black, thin lines. He continues to laugh as his head tips back, the black coating up his jaw, and I dive forward.

"No!"

I touch the pulse at his neck, sending a bout of healing spells through his bloodstream. I'm not entirely sure, but it looks like he cast a poisoning spell over himself. My magic fights to eradicate what he's done, but it's gone too far, and in seconds his eyes turn glass and his mouth hangs open, slack.

He's dead.

"Son of a bitch!" I scream, slamming my palm into the couch and sending it flying across the room. It careens into the other broken pieces of furniture – though I'm not even sure when we broke the second couch – and stops as it hits the back wall.

I stand, shaking my head. I may have lost the information, but at least I stopped the spy. I dispatched him the way I was meant to, so I have completed my mission.

I throw a fireball at the body, and it engulfs the skin in flames. I turn, leaving the room before the smoke and smell of burning flesh singes my nose. The spell is meant only to burn skin, so I know that by the time anyone notices that something isn't right in there, there will be no evidence of the fight or me.

Ducking out of the room, I make my way down the stairs. I stop by the manager, dropping a tip for the girl and instructing him to send clothes up for

her, real clothes, and leave them outside the door. He raises his eyebrows but nods, and I make a comment about not disturbing us until sunrise so that he won't try to sell her to another buyer tonight.

As he turns to fulfill my request, I slip out the stage's side door into the night. I expect to feel a sense of relief or pride, but all I feel is a little empty. As I walk back to my hotel, I keep glancing back toward the club, and it takes every effort of mine not to return.

What is happening to me?

VANESSA

My eyes open slowly, fully expecting to feel some sort of pain between my thighs. Nothing.

I sit up and observe my arms, legs, and abdomen. No hand-shaped bruises splotch across my skin. I'm still naked, but I'm wrapped in a blanket. I look around, but the dark elf is nowhere to be found. I stay silent for a few seconds, wondering if I will hear his voice in the distance, but there's no one.

Dusting myself off, I pull open the door to see a stack of clothes. I snag them, dressing quickly before I pull the door open again. This time, I find Hoshale leaning on the wall outside with his arms crossed. He's waiting for me. Before I know it, he's tossing something at me and I nearly miss the grab. It's a small velvet pouch that is nearly bursting at the seams.

It's bulging with money, but this seems wrong. The dark elf and I didn't *do* anything together. I didn't satisfy him, but he still left me a tip. I don't think that usually happens around here.

"You did a good job in there," the manager says, smiling at the way I can't take my eyes off the pouch. "He mentioned being happy with the service, so he gave me this money to give to you."

"...Thanks."

"Don't thank me. *You're* the one who put in the hard work. That customer looked like he was difficult to please, but you managed to break down his walls. Good job." Hoshale chuckles. "At this club, we pay our women directly. That's why we have a lot of regulars who stop by and earn some money with us instead of peddling in the streets."

I nod. I can't believe I did this. I emerged from this situation with my

dignity still intact, sort of. I didn't have to do anything besides kiss him for this money! Are things always this easy in a place like this?

"We still have some standards we need to follow. For one, our women need to have killer bodies. Like yours." He nods in my direction. His eyes trail my body, but I'm too transfixed by the money to pay attention. I watch him with my peripheral vision, though. "You're welcome to come back anytime if you need the work."

"Sure," I whisper. I duck my head. "See you around."

"Likewise."

I hurry out of there before the embarrassment of having that dark elf ogle me flagrantly starts to kick in. Outside, the air feels fresh and invigorating. It sweeps through my hair. My hard work for Sandy is paying off. I've ever felt this way before. I'm truly *alive*.

Bringing the pouch to my chest, I close my eyes and let out a deep sigh. *Thank you.*

I could fall to my knees and cry with happiness right now, but I have a mission to complete. I clutch the bag tightly before snaking my way through the streets towards the black market. Lots of suspicious types eye me as I pass. Some of them even notice the pouch I'm carrying, so I'm careful not to stay still for too long. This money is for Sandy. Not for anyone else.

Finally, my little sister will receive the healing that she needs. The Doctor will take care of her and she will be okay. We will be okay. Our life is improving, all thanks to that dark elf.

The image of him lingers in my mind for some reason. I shake it off as I enter the old doctor's shop. I clutch the money pouch tightly with my hands as I approach the counter. He's holding two vials of purple liquid.

"I-I would like to buy a healing potion. Please." I plop the money on the counter. "It needs to heal brain clots."

He sighs. "That's one of the most expensive potions around."

"But I have the money!" I gesture towards the bag. "Please. I think this is enough!"

Reluctantly, he empties the bag and starts counting the money. It's agonizingly slow. I press my lips into a thin line, watching his finger land on each coin and pulling it to the side. He's mumbling numbers and tossing me a glance every now and then. If this isn't enough, what do I do? Go back to that disgusting place?

Please, please, no.

“Well,” he says, gathering the money into a pile. “You’re able to afford one vial of this potion. You barely had enough.”

Fuck yeah. I can’t contain the smile that forms on my face. Sandy is going to be healed from her brain clot! She’s going to live!

“T-That’s perfect! I would like to buy one immediately.”

“The only issue is that I don’t have a supply for it right now.” The doctor places all the money back in the pouch, ties it closed, and slides it back to me. Just like that. “I’m sorry.”

“...What?”

“It will take one month for the vials of that healing potion to arrive at my store.” He turns away from me. He grabs a rag from the edge of his counter and starts wiping down his shelves. “I’m sorry. Perhaps, I should have told you about this sooner.”

“No. No, please.” I shake my head, gripping the counter with my hands until my knuckles turn white. “This can’t be right. You probably have something in your storage! Can you go check?”

“I already have. I keep diligent track of all the healing potions I own and I ran out of that particular one last week. I have already made the order for a fresh batch, but it will take a month to arrive. I’m sorry. It’s not easy to get your hands on.”

“Can you check again? Please. I just need a little bit of it. Half a vial, even! You probably have that, don’t you?”

“Are your ears not working, girl?” The doctor glares at me. He stops cleaning. “I already told you that I don’t have the healing potion you’re looking for.”

I slam my fist into his counter. Red spots appear in my vision. I can barely think.

“It’s for my sister! She needs the potion within five days or she is going to die!” My fists tremble. “You’re the only doctor who sells healing potions for humans!”

“What do you want me to do? Do you expect me to tear the whole world apart just so that your sister can live?” The doctor laughs cruelly, shaking his head. “You women are more delusional than I thought.”

“Aren’t doctors supposed to be helpful?”

“That’s enough from you.” He rounds the corner, shoves the money pouch into my chest, and grabs me by the arm. “I don’t have the potion. Now leave.”

“Wait!”

He flings me into the street and I tumble onto the ground, knees first. The pouch lands near my body and I grab it before someone takes it from under my nose. That’s the last thing I need right now.

“Please! I need your help!” I gather myself and toss all of my strength into the door, hoping to re-enter the shop. The doctor locks it from the inside. “Please let me back inside! Check your storage one more time, please! I can’t afford to lose any more time!”

I slam my palm into the door until I start feeling a sharp pain in my hand. It doesn’t deter me. I use the other hand to do the same until both of my hands are aching. I plead with the doctor to open the door. I even go to the front windows and start banging with my fists, but he sweeps the curtains across them so that he doesn’t see me screaming.

“I just need a little bit of that potion! Please!” Desperation claws through my chest. Tears flow down my face. I don’t notice the stares or the laughs directed towards me by the beings passing me in the street. “Let me talk to you one more time! Please!”

I don’t want to give up, but what else can I do? The only doctor around who sells healing potions for humans is ignoring my request for help. Everyone who passes me laughs, sneers, or ignores me outright. I’m alone in this fight and my poor little sister is suffering from a brain clot that I can’t fix!

What should I do? My fists are bleeding from pounding on the shop door. I must have broken a bone or two from doing that, but I don’t care. This is nothing compared to the life-threatening injury my sister suffers from.

“Tell me where I can buy a healing potion! Please!”

No answer. Since my hands are useless now, I start kicking. This rattles the door. I take my anger out on the wooden structure until there’s no energy left in my body.

I probably look crazy to everyone passing by. I *feel* crazy. I’m enraged by the lack of help, by the lengths I have to go to earn money, and by the fact that everything that I did for Sandy doesn’t matter anymore. She’s going to die.

My baby sister is going to die. I slide my back down the shop and take my head in my hands. The grief of losing her will drive me insane. I don’t want to lose her! I would do anything to trade places with her. To ease her suffering. I’m stuck in a hole and no matter how desperately I try to claw up

the walls, nothing is working.

I'm a failure. I'm pathetic. What am I even good for? No one respects me, humans and dark elves alike. I'm about to lose the only light in my life to an injury that I can't heal myself.

I'm sobbing hysterically in front of this shop, expecting no help whatsoever. But suddenly, a deep voice interrupts me.

"What are you doing?"

KEILLON

I don't know what to make of this situation, but it sparked the curiosity in me. Originally, I came to the black market in search of information. There are dealers who linger in the shadows here, ready to spill any and all types of details for the right price. In my pocket, I have a few pouches ready to toss at them when I find them.

I didn't expect to find *this* one, though. It's the human female who hasn't fled my mind since the last time I saw her. She's crying in front of an old medicine shop, hands in her hair while her back rests against the closed door.

She's noisy. I heard the commotion from farther away and I came to see whether some decrepit drunkard was getting stabbed. That often makes for good entertainment.

But it's just her. She looks pitiful. It's easy for me to turn away from most scenes and pretend I never saw them in the first place, but this is different. I know this human. I saw her in that club. She's completely tantalizing. What are the odds we bump into each other again?

There's a reason for this, I'm sure.

"What are you doing?"

She looks up, eyes swollen and red. I don't know how to help her. Do I lean over and pat her head? Help her up?

No. She starts crying even harder now, which is embarrassing. What do I do about this? It's not like I want to hurt her, but the strangers passing by probably think I'm a thief or a rapist who wants to do her harm.

Luckily, these aren't the types that will jump into the fray for a random human woman.

In the back of my mind, I'm resisting the urge to step back and walk away. I shouldn't be concerned about humans. They're like the little pebbles that get stuck in the soles on my boots. They're meant to get trampled, stepped on, and swept away.

She fosters an interesting emotion in me. I don't want to see her like this. It's pathetic. Pity sparks in my heart and I can't help but grab her by the wrist and pull her to her feet. She lets out a small sound.

"You're dirtying the road," I say.

Quickly, she dusts herself off. Her hands are trembling, red, and bleeding from a few scratches. Even in this state, my eyes trail her body and imagine taking her somewhere more secluded. My mind trails off to the possibilities with her. The different positions I can put her in. The ecstasy I would feel with her body in my hands.

She's still crying. She keeps wiping her eyes, but the tears keep coming. I frown. This is making me want to scratch my skin off.

"Come on." I take her wrist and start dragging her through the streets. She fights back, trying to claw at my fingers, but it's no use. "Be quiet. We can talk in a more isolated place."

"I don't want to go!"

"You will."

I sense the fight leaving her the more I drag her along. Finally.

I lead her back to the hotel I'm staying at, ignoring the odd looks and the snickers while I make my way to my room. She's sniffing behind me, but my aim is to get her into my room and learn what's going on. What could possibly make this human woman act so erratically in the middle of the black market streets?

"Alright." I brusquely push her into the hotel room, close the door, and lock it. "What happened to you? Why were you crying outside that shop?"

"I-I... I don't..." She's breathing too quickly and the words can't leave her mouth. She glances around the room and resorts to hugging herself. "I don't know. This is complicated."

"Lucky you. I have the time." My foot twists around the leg of a chair, pulling it to my legs. I sit down. "Go on. Explain yourself before I start getting bored. I won't tolerate this behavior for long."

"My sister is ill," she says, fighting through the hiccups and sobs. "The Doctor says it's a brain clot and she needs a special healing potion for the ailment. That's why I went to the club. I needed the money to afford the

potion.”

Desperation clouds her eyes. I’ve never seen anything like this. She’s willing to sell her body for a family member. That’s noble, albeit incredibly stupid. I would never put myself in such a precarious situation for my family, but that’s probably because I don’t like them that much to begin with. Whether they live or die, that’s nothing to me.

“I’m assuming you didn’t get the money you needed, then?” I left her quite the sum back there in the club. Did she not receive the whole thing? I will gut that pesky manager if he nabbed a few coins while no one was looking.

“No, no, I did! It was barely enough, according to the Doctor, but he said he didn’t have any vials of it! The next batch will come in a month’s time, but I can’t wait a month. My sister will die within five days if I don’t get her a healing potion!”

“A healing potion is what’s causing you to sell your body to dark elves?” I wet my lips as I observe her body. She’s wearing worn-out clothes that mask most of her figure, but I can still see the curves. “What a shame.”

“I’m willing to do anything to save my sister. I don’t want to lose her.”

Usually, I turn a blind eye to the actions of humans. They’re silly little creatures and most of their decisions don’t make much sense.

Yet, this human captivates me in a way that makes my head spin. What is it about her? I think it’s her body that’s driving me crazy. She’s absolutely beautiful, and I can’t stand the idea that she’s giving herself away to earn some money. She shouldn’t continue disgracing herself, it’s unbecoming.

There hasn’t been another human who has enraptured me like this one. She possesses something unique about her and I plan on uncovering what it is.

No one else can have her. I want her to be *mine*.

“I can help solve your issues, you know.” I tilt my head, looking at her with half-lidded eyes.

In return, she stares at me with wonder and a slightly open mouth. Cute. She’s driving me wild.

“Do you know where I can find a vial of the healing potion?” She clasps her hands together and swallows hard. “Please? I’ll do anything for it. It’s for my little sister.”

“Calm down.” I hold up a hand. “You’ll get your healing potion as long as you can give me what I want, whenever I want. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

She’s enthusiastic about this. I like that. So eager to please.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a small vial of purple tinted liquid that glimmers in the light. I hold it up above my eyes, twisting it and observing the liquid from all angles.

It’s one of the most advanced healing potions around, capable of healing even the most life-threatening wounds.

Brain clots, for example, are healed in seconds with a healing potion like this. It’s one of the best around and it’s more than anything this human can even dream of affording. I’m willing to give it to her.

On one condition.

She stares with wide eyes at the vial in my hands. Her breath hitches slightly and she nearly takes a step towards me. I beckon her.

“Here. Would you like to see it?”

“What is it?”

I smirk. “You’re selling yourself for an object that you’ve never seen before?”

“That’s a healing potion?” Her jaw drops. “I-Is this the one that will cure my little sister?”

“It will cure her of any illness. Brain clots, heart failure, you name it. This potion is potent and it’s worth a fortune, but I want to give it to you.”

“Really?” Her hand claps over her mouth. Then, she composes herself. “Thank you. Thank you so much! You have no idea how much I owe you.”

“I know.” I laugh under my breath. “The potion is worth more than ten thousand ipia. Do you understand how expensive that is? I’m sure you don’t. It’s an unfathomable number.”

“It’s not something I can earn in a day or two of work in the club?” Her voice is small and meek.

What a stupid question. I don’t blurt that out loud because she’s calming down from her earlier crying session and I don’t want to spark another one so soon.

“Never. In fact, you’d have to work your entire lifetime in that club to afford something like this. It’s difficult to obtain, but here it is. Right in front of your eyes.”

“Can I...?” She reaches out for it. “Hold it?”

Just as she’s about to wrap her fingers around the vial, I pull it away. She flinches.

“You’re not going to touch it until you give me what I want.”

“What is it that you want? I can give you anything I have, but please.”
She doesn’t take her eyes off the vial. “Please give me the vial.”

“You’re not even going to hear my request?” I tease, enjoying the way her bottom lip trembles as I taunt her. “Strange manners.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to be my lover until I get tired of your body.” That’s what happens when a dark elf beds a human. The passion is strong, but short-lived. Then it fades away.

She gulps.

“I’m curious about you,” I say softly, focusing on her features once more.
“You’re pleasing in my eyes.”

My body aches for her, but the human doesn’t need to know that.

VANESSA

His lover. I consider, staring at the vial in his hand.
“If I agree, I can have it?”

That charming smile is back, curling the edges of his mouth. “I’m an elf of my word,” he says easily, his expression softening as he takes me in. “But it’s a take it or leave it sort of deal, and once you agree, there’s no going back.”

I nod, then nod again. “Yes. I’ll do it.”

Confusion rumples his brow. “You haven’t even heard the terms.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “If it does what you claim, I’ll do anything you tell me to.”

“Careful, human,” he warns. “You don’t even know me. How can you be sure that I won’t break that pretty body of yours once the deal is done?”

He’s right, I don’t know him.

Not really.

But after last night, I have a sense about him, and I’m starting to think he’s all bark. I’ve seen what happens to humans in the hands of the wrong elves, and he doesn’t seem like that sort of creature. Even in the club, he seemed to harbor disdain for his own kind.

I step into his range, ignoring the vial to stare into his silver eyes. “I’ll take my chances.”

Twice now, he’ll have saved me from a worse fate, if his word holds any weight. And his kindness has no equal. Where the other dark elves have spat on me and treated me like trash, there is no condescension in his tone when we talk.

I am not his equal.

We both know that, but I can almost imagine that we are, behind closed doors. He's not quick to strike me when I fall out of line, and has even promised me a small fortune in medicine for... what? To be his lover?

I would spend a lifetime in the mines if it meant Sandy improved and could grow into adulthood, free of her affliction. And this dark elf promises that he'll lose interest in me soon. Even if he has a stringent list of demands, I could tolerate them indefinitely so long as my sister can live.

He considers me hard. "Is that a 'yes?'"

"Haven't I already said so?"

"I'd like to hear it again," he says, catching my hand in his and turning it over as if he means to put the vial into it. He kisses my palm, instead. The heat of his lips lingers even when he pulls away. "Just so there's no confusion."

My breath catches in my throat at the simple gesture.

"I'll do it. I'll be your lover."

The dark elf studies me. I don't even know his name, and yet I'm promising myself to him without hesitation. It's the vial I watch again, noticing how he closes his fist around it and leads me to the couch, dragging me down with him so I'm seated on his lap.

Being this close reminds me of the dance I performed for him, but this time, a different sort of tension nearly snaps between us. Like a magic trick, I watch his hand to be sure the vial doesn't disappear by some sleight of hand. "What are your terms?"

He grins at me, teasing the short strands of hair out of my face. "Slow down a little. There's no hurry. What's your name, blossom?"

My jaw tightens, but the vial doesn't disappear.

It's as if he's holding it hostage, as if I haven't already told him that my sister is running out of time. She needed this medicine yesterday. "Vanessa," I whisper, trying to push down my ever present panic. "And yours?"

"Keillon."

"Keillon," I echo. "It's a pleasure."

Those silver eyes of his rake over my form. "The pleasure is all mine. Truly."

When his gaze dance over the hollow of my throat, I glance away for the first time. "Now that the formalities are out of the way..."

"The terms," he concludes.

“Yes.”

I think he’s going to drag this out forever when he finally speaks. “I’m not the kind of elf to do this sort of thing. I have responsibilities to the Crown that take precedence over *other* facets of my life. So, I’ll make this simple.

“There are two rules that you need to follow for this to work.”

I nod slowly.

Now that the medicine is almost in my grasp, my nerves come back to haunt me. I know all too well what it’s like to be bound to a dark elf that considers humans little more than furniture for their amusement, and I can only pray to the Thirteen that he is not one of them. Perhaps this entire thing has been a trick. I wouldn’t put it past his kind, but Keillon genuinely seems different.

I have to trust my gut.

“First, while you’re with me, you cannot return to see your family.” He offers a pregnant pause for me to comprehend his words. This wasn’t exactly what I had expected, but he seems to be an important dark elf, and I suppose it makes sense. “In light of that, I will allow you to write home, so long as you leave the envelope unsealed for me to read the contents before it goes out. You may not say anything about me or our arrangement, do you understand?”

His hand slides up my waist as he stares hard into my eyes.

“I understand.”

“I don’t anticipate it will be a long tryst,” he says with mild amusement. “So, take heart in the fact that I’ll get bored of you soon.”

I purse my lips. It doesn’t hurt, exactly, not like my old masters’ beatings. Not like being thrown out of a window and into a rosebush. But it still stings a little.

“I’m not unreasonable, either,” he amends. “You will be well compensated for your time with me, and when I’m finished with you, you will be released from our agreement. You could even return to the club, if it suits you.”

There’s something in his expression that tells me he’s not being completely honest with me, but I ignore it. Anything for that vial. “And, the next rule?”

His handsome lips turn up. “Ever eager, blossom.” Then, he sighs, his mouth forming a serious line. “Second, I need your complete obedience. You will do whatever I say, whenever I say it, without question.”

I can see why this rule is second.

I've heard dark elves are into some wicked things, and from what I saw in the club, it's entirely possible I won't survive his fleeting passions.

Anything, I remind myself, *for Sandy*.

Even my own life.

"Agreed," I say easily. "It's a most generous offer."

Too generous.

Even he doesn't look as if he believes me. "Are you not going to ask how much money I intend to give you?"

"You're giving me the medicine, right?"

"Of course," he says in turn, producing it from his hand and placing it in mine. "And one ipia a day throughout the length of our agreement."

I can barely withhold a gasp.

It's too much, but I won't turn it down. There's a pain in my chest. This dark elf is going to give me everything I desire, in exchange for a few nights—a few weeks at most—of doting on him however he wishes. I should be elated.

Instead, I feel dirty.

This is what prostitutes do, and I'm starting to realize how difficult a thing it is to sell myself to the highest bidder, no matter the price. When I first walked into that club, I thought I'd make a few easy jetons dancing, but *this* is far too much.

My head is spinning when I nod, clutching the vial to my chest. "I am yours."

"That's what I like to hear," he murmurs, dragging me in closer as his sweet breath washes over me. "I'll give you time to deliver the medicine, and then when you return to this hotel, our deal goes fully into effect. You will tell your family *nothing* of what has transpired between us, nor that you even know who I am."

I shake my head. "I won't. I promise."

There's a softness in his eyes that melts my worries. "Good girl," he says, sending a shiver up my spine, not entirely unwelcome. "But first," he says, cutting himself off as he leans in to kiss me softly, our lips barely brushing at first.

I part my lips for him, crooning when his tongue slides in.

It's just like last night, when he worked me over slowly, never groping unnecessarily or tearing at my clothes. I follow his lead, pressing into him

with a little more urgency. My mind is elsewhere, but I'm not afraid to show him how grateful I am.

His chuckle is deep as he withdraws to look at me. "While I appreciate the enthusiasm," he begins, his hand sliding down to rest on my hip. "Shouldn't I sample the goods first?"

As impatient as I am, I do my best impression of calm and collected.

"What would you like?"

He flashes that damnable smile, the one that makes me weak at the knees as he glances down at his bulging crotch. "I want you to kneel."

Surprise radiates through me, but I slide off his lap to kneel between his legs. "Like this?"

"Exactly," he says. "Now, blow me."

KEILLON

I maintain a neutral expression even as my body tightens in anticipation. This woman makes my balls ache, but I don't want her to realize it. For now, at least, she needs to know I'm in charge. If I can't control myself, how can I hope to master her?

I stroke her rich brown hair, finding pleasure in how she fumbles with the buttons of my trousers. "What's wrong, blossom? Haven't you done this before?"

Vanessa bites her bottom lip. "Of course I have."

"There's no shame in being inexperienced," I say, appreciating how her innocent gaze flicks up to meet mine. I had my suspicions at the club, but now, I *know* she's never done this before. Something ignites deep inside of me, burning hot. I chase my knuckles over the soft round of her cheek. "Do you want me to teach you?"

Her eyes flare slightly, and her mouth moves to form words, but fails.

I can imagine how the tip of my cock would rest just so on that full bottom lip of hers. I can imagine, too, the warmth of her enveloping me, and the pain in my groin intensifies.

I need her, I think.

Though my body appears relaxed, I'm poised to strike, taut with potential as she fusses over the buttons with renewed stubbornness, this time managing to unfasten two of them. When my cock springs out, she makes a little 'oh' with her mouth.

I let her explore at first, her fingers tracing the throbbing veins of my cock as if it's the first one she's ever seen. My core tightens, and my cock

leaps a little, setting her back a few inches. "Don't be afraid of it," I murmur, relieving myself with a stroke. "It's not a weapon."

"I know," she says, almost defensively.

I'm eager to paint her with my release but if I handle this badly, the rest of our agreement won't be an enviable thing. And if she is as inexperienced as I suspect, I'll have to be gentle with her. "Let me show you how."

Her jaw ticks, but there's enough uncertainty in her gaze that encourages me.

I catch her hands, which are small in mine, and close them around my base. "Like this," I say, sliding them up and adding pressure, her fingers tightening after a few thrusts as she takes over the simple move. Can she see how favorably I react to her?

Does she know how she can destroy me?

"Now, kiss the tip."

Another flash of those cold eyes, and I'm hard pressed to stay sane. But her mouth closes in on me while she watches my stone cold expression.

I won't break, I tell myself. *I won't break*.

Her lips part, and before they reach my cock, her tongue darting out to trace the crest of my head. Something clenches inside of me, taking all my focus as precum beads at the tip. Her warm exhale envelops me before her mouth does, and she takes me in with a little moan at the back of her throat. She closes her mouth over the drop and concludes the kiss. "Like that?"

Gods, I think, *save me from myself*.

"Yes," I say in the most authoritative tone I can manage, catching her hands and encouraging another sweep. "Who told you that you could stop?"

A guilty expression comes over her, then a look of determination. "No one," she says, stroking with more emphasis, gauging the shape and girth of my cock. "What else do you want me to do?"

I can only imagine how her untested body would surge beneath mine if I lost control of myself and mounted her right here on the couch. *All in good time*, I assure myself, flicking the tip of my dick against the softness of her lips. "Kiss it again, but this time, open your mouth a little wider."

She does just that, letting me in a little before her teeth graze my sensitive skin. The base of my spine aches with anticipation.

"Wider," I command.

A heated blush blooms over her cheeks and spreads down, over the soft swell of her breasts beneath the simple tunic. And she goes a little further, my

tip striking the palate of her mouth, making me weak.

She withdraws, then sinks down a little further without instruction, her tongue cupping my length as I slip into her marvelous throat. It works around me before she can't take anymore and pulls away again, her diligent hands stroking even as she recovers.

"Good girl," I tell her, dragging my nails down her slender arm. "You're doing great for your first time."

She says nothing, her brow furrowing with resolve. There's something even an elf can fear in her expression. It is good, then, that I've cast that notion of terror out long ago, as I submit myself fully to her handling.

Vanessa just needed a little push before momentum takes over, and she gets a few ideas of her own. She kisses the tip again, trailing her lips down my length as she strokes, reaching the spot between my cock and my aching balls. As if in consolation, she kisses each of them before grazing her teeth back up to the tip and catching another little drop between her lips.

She tastes it before coming back for more, a new sort of eagerness inspiring her actions. I lean back fully and allow her to explore, fighting the urge to come in her mouth when her heat closes over me again. I want this to last, but I know it behooves me to keep this short, or we'll be here all night, and I'll never want to let her go come morning.

We still have an agreement, after all.

Her gentle bobs become feverish, and I tousle her dark hair, lacing my fingers through it before catching a fistful and dragging her further onto my cock. I *told* myself that I would let her take the lead, but when she surges around me in surprise, I nearly come again.

I let Vanessa go when she struggles for air, and she comes up with a gasp. Saliva drips from her full mouth and she wipes it away, still breathing hard. Her uncertain gaze falls on me, like she's not sure if I mean to strike her for needing air.

I take over stroking myself, lingering on my tip as I wonder what sort of masters she had before this that would have made her so docile and willing? An elven female would have spat in my face and called me selfish before storming out of the room.

But this human, this beautiful woman, attends to me again.

Her touch kindles the heat inside of me as she takes over, working me over diligently with kisses and fingers made of fire. That pressure is back, making me push deeper into her yielding mouth. This time, she accepts more

of me, likely realizing just how much she can take before she's overwhelmed.

Her free hand slides up my thigh as she positions herself over me, forcing me down with an eager thrust of her own, making me choke on my next praise. "Very- good."

She drags her teeth gently up my length before freeing her mouth for speech. "Just 'good?'"

"For a beginner," I amend, refusing to let her think she's a natural at this, though my body is screaming for her to finish me off. There's a flash of uncertainty in her eyes as she delves back down, daring to prove me wrong.

A moan escapes me, and I let her try.

I'm not sure how many more fibs I have in me when she circles my tip and dives down, almost reaching the hilt with her generous lips. She holds there, cutting off her airway again, pushing me deep into her throat.

My cock twinges, and I know I'm about to blow.

There are so many places I want to put it, but this time, I consider how my seed will look plastered on her innocent face. I grab a fistful of her hair again and drag her off just as the first hot stream escapes me.

Her mouth is still open, catching some before I adorn her visage with my own brand of pearls. And she takes it. Like everything else, she allows what would otherwise be a disgrace to her gentle disposition.

When I'm finished, I release her and tuck myself away. "Go home. Take the medicine to your sister and ensure your affairs are in order."

She remains between my legs, wiping my come off with a sleeve.

Her flustered expression is priceless, as if she had already forgotten the nature of our deal and is only just remembering why she blew me in the first place. Or is it disappointment because I didn't offer her more encouragement?

"I expect you back here tonight. Do you understand?"

Her nod is muted as she gathers herself and rises. She still seems stunned when she takes her leave, her gait a little unsteady before she disappears down the stairs. I shut the door tight and drift to the window to watch her slip into the crowd, unnoticed by most.

Being with her feels so good, but am I doing the right thing?

VANESSA

I clutch the vial tightly in my fist. Taking a deep breath, I enter my home and find the old Doctor sitting on a stool beside my little sister. She's laying in bed with a white rag draped across her forehead. She's asleep. Her cheeks are tinted pink.

"Vanessa," he rasps. "Where have you been? Sandy asked for you a few times, but I was unsure of what to say."

"You don't have to worry about me, Doctor. Thank you for all your help with my little sister. I appreciate it from the bottom of my heart." He stands up as I approach him. As he reaches out, I place my hand in his and transfer the vial. "Take this. It's what she needs to get better."

His eyes widen once he realizes what I just gave him. To top things off, I also hand over the pouch full of coins that Keillon gave me at the club. He splutters.

"What is this?" He shakes his head. "How did you get these items? Are you alright?"

No. Not in the slightest.

I smile, but it quivers and fades quickly. He's staring at me with a deep frown.

"I..." Do I say it? Do I bear my heart out to this poor old Doctor who has done so much for me when no one else ever has? "I am taken care of. Please don't worry. And please." He tries handing me back the money pouch, but I gently push it into his chest. "Take the money. This is for taking care of my little sister."

"This is far too much for such a task! I can't accept this."

“You will.” My voice is stern. His eyebrows shoot upwards. “You need to take care of yourself and my little sister while I go away.”

“...Go away? What do you mean? Vanessa, what is the meaning of this? You still haven’t explained to me how you obtained this healing potion! It’s nearly priceless! You didn’t have the money for this!”

“Yes, yes, it was a gift.”

“A gift? What—”

He keeps hounding me with questions. It shows that he cares, but on the inside, I want to shrivel up and bawl like a child. Why doesn’t he just accept my offerings and let me ruin my life in peace? I don’t like dealing with the fact that I’m making horrible choices.

“Like I said, I’m going away for a while. It might be a few days, weeks, months, I don’t know, but I will make sure to send money. I would also like to send letters to Sandy so that I can update her about my life, and she can do the same with me.”

“What happened to you?” The Doctor sets aside the money and the vial upon Sandy’s night table. “Who did this to you? How did you change within the blink of an eye?”

“I didn’t change.”

“This isn’t like you. You’re not like this.” He takes my hands in his. He squeezes gently. “I see you as a daughter. I watched you grow up in this wretched place and saw how you made the best of what life gave you. It pains me to see you spiraling down this path of no return.”

“I-I’m not!” The crack in my voice gives me away.

He tries prying my mouth open to see if I’m on some sort of illicit drug, but I fight him off.

“Why are you acting as if you can do everything alone, my child? You can ask for help!”

“No one can help us! We’re powerless humans!” I exclaim, placing some distance between him and I. “I have to do this for our survival. It’s for Sandy. I’m willing to give up everything I have for her.”

“Vanessa...”

“Please take care of my little sister. That’s all I ask of you. It’s the only help you can provide me moving forward.” I point towards the vial. “Once she takes the medicine, she will be healed, but she’ll need to be taken care of since I’ll be away for a while.”

“And why’s that?” He smiles sadly at me. “Why are you going away?”

I shake my head. I can't answer.

"I don't know what awaits me where I'm going, but it's going to be difficult. It won't be a paradise where I live my days with my feet kicked up."

"So then why are you leaving to a horrible place?"

"Because it's for my sister's survival. I want to give her a better life, and this is my only option to accomplish that."

The Doctor sighs, closing his eyes. It looks as if our conversation managed to deepen the wrinkles across his face.

"Sandy is a picky eater sometimes," I say, gazing at her sleeping form. "She likes the eggs from the marketplace, as well as gallus meat. It's her favorite. She's not a fan of much other meat."

Despite his reluctance, the Doctor takes note of all of Sandy's likes, dislikes, and other small details about her that I can list off the top of my head.

He unscrews the vial and I lift her head off the pillow. He slowly pours the potion into her mouth. It takes effect almost immediately. The color returns to her skin. My baby sister lets out a small sigh of relief, even in her sleeping state.

"She's better," I whisper, covering my mouth to silence my incoming sobs.

The Doctor nods, pats my shoulder, but doesn't say anything more. I don't think he wants to fight about my impending decision. He retreats to the kitchen, while I stay at Sandy's bedside. I trail my fingers across her chin, admiring the ridge of her nose and the curvature of her cheeks.

This is the last time I will see my baby sister for an indefinite amount of time. I take a deep breath. Tears emerge quickly.

The sun sets outside, causing the sky to turn orange and purple. I plant a kiss on Sandy's temple. Then, I whisper to her how much I love her. She's the world to me. I probably would have impaled myself on a dagger already if it weren't for her.

For Sandy, I'm willing to go towards any extreme.

That's what I'm doing right now, isn't it? I'm returning to Keillon, where my fate awaits me.

"Please take care of yourself, Vanessa," the Doctor says. He's leaning on the kitchen counter with a mug of hot liquid in his hands. "I want to see you again someday, and I'm sure Sandy will, too."

"I'm going to come back," I promise. "I just don't know when."

“She’s recovering well because of the potion.”

“Yeah?” I stare at her with a small smile on my face. The tears fall steadily, but I try to stop them with the back of my hands. “She’s a fighter. I’m proud of her.”

“I hope you’re not making the wrong decision.”

The Doctor doesn’t meet my confused gaze. He silently brings the mug to his lips and takes a long sip.

“I’m doing this for her.”

“I don’t know if Sandy will want you to destroy yourself for her sake.”

I shake my head. He doesn’t understand. No one does! They don’t know that everything will benefit Sandy in the end. The money Keillon gives me, I will send here. If she needs any more treatment, we will be able to afford it. This is *good*.

I’m strong. I can do this for her. I have to stop crying, though. I pause at the front door to clean my face and rub underneath my eyes until the skin is raw.

“Just remember what I said?” The Doctor looks at me again. “Take care of yourself out there.”

“I will. You should do the same. And please, make sure Sandy doesn’t suffer anymore. If she needs anything, send me a letter.” I give him the note of a small drop box address that Keillon had taped to the side of the vial. “I will do everything I can to help.”

He nods. “If you need anything, you should let me know, too. I want to help you.”

I smile. I’m beyond help, at this point. I’m on my own now.

“Sure,” I reply. To calm his nerves. “Thank you for everything, Doctor. I can’t wait to see you again soon.”

I’ll be strong. I bite my lip and I don’t turn back.

I won’t cry anymore. Those days are long behind me.

I make the gradual walk to Keillon’s hotel. It’s distinctive, even in the distance. Only the best of the best stay in a place like this. He certainly qualifies as such.

With each step towards his hotel room, the dread only amplifies within me. What is he going to put me through? He’s going to humiliate me. Break me. Make me his, but then toss me to the side once he’s bored.

He said it himself. It’s going to happen.

I knock on his hotel room door. He answers quickly, ushering me into the

room and sitting me down on a chair. He's dressed up nicely. There are a few candles lit up on the table, as well as two empty plates opposite one another.

"What's this?" I ask, dumbstruck with what I'm seeing. "I thought you were—"

"What? I can't treat you to a nice dinner?" Keillon smiles. I press my thighs together. "You must be hungry. Have you had anything to eat this entire day?"

"No." I usually can't afford meals for myself. I resort to eating the scraps. "I haven't."

"Well, then this is perfect." He holds out his hand for me to take. "Let's have dinner together."

KEILLON

I thought Vanessa was going to be more receptive to having dinner with me. Even with her natural curves, I can tell that she's too thin. Her ribs poke through and her cheeks are hollow. It shouldn't concern me the way it does.

I'm honestly not sure what to say to her. We've only had one conversation before, and I don't necessarily want to talk about her ill sister again.

For one, she'll start to cry and it was heart-wrenching the first time. I don't think I'd be able to stomach it again.

And I don't want that to be the only thing we talk about. I know nothing of her, and while I usually try to keep it that way with the women I bed, if I'm keeping Vanessa long-term, I'd like us to be on some semblance of speaking terms.

But Vanessa hasn't said a word since the food arrived. I'm not really sure what she likes so I ordered an array of dishes that looked good, having them delivered to my room. I even plated her meal myself, and she's just been staring at it.

I don't know what I expected. I guess I thought she'd wolf down the food, and I'd feel prideful to see her curves start to fill out more as she ate better, not that I should care about that kind of thing.

"Is everything to your liking?" I hedge, and she just nods.

She doesn't even lift those eyes to me, and irritation flickers through me. Why is she suddenly acting like this? I gave her such a good deal! I've already shown her that I won't hurt her, I pay her well, and I feed her! Why is she upset?

I slam my fork down with a barely contained huff, and even that doesn't get her attention. I'm about to lose my mind already.

"Why are you being so quiet?" I snap, and then, sucking in a deep breath, I try to reel my anger in. "I don't want a lover I can't talk to. It would be a waste of my time. It's like fucking a doll. I want a bedmate, not a toy."

Vanessa tips her head up slowly, her eyes narrowed as she assesses me, and I'm surprised by the flash of anger in them. I almost want to smile because at least I am getting a reaction out of her.

"Isn't this what you want?" she snarls at me, and I'm taken back. I didn't expect her to talk back to me like this, and it shouldn't turn me on so much that she does. She's feistier, less innocent than I realized. "Someone obedient? A puppet?"

Her mouth is pulled down in a deep frown, and she looks so unhappy that I want to make it right. I can remind her how beneficial this can be for both of us.

Arousal tears through me with her defiance, and it reminds of the night at the club. She looked so innocent with those big, blue eyes, but her body was begging for me to bury my fingers in her pussy. There's so much hiding under her carefully crafted facade, and I want to break through it.

I'll have too much fun educating her because not only do I love this behavior, but I love correcting it. I love seeing her break and then try to make up for it, much like when I commanded her to take her underwear off but she didn't. Instead, I ripped them free and she kissed me so desperately that I entirely forgot what I was supposed to be doing that night.

In an instant, I'm around the table, pinching her chin as I tip her head back to look at me. Fear colors her eyes, but, though she seems to be trying to hide it from even herself, I see that hint of arousal. She likes it when I'm like this, and I am all too eager to oblige.

She gasps as my grip tightens, but she doesn't try to break away. In fact, I think she leans up as I bend to kiss her hard, our lips bruising each other's as my tongue lashes against her. Her lips part with a soft moan, and she arched back to give me better access as I sweep in, commanding her under me with just my tongue.

Vanessa may look at me with disdain, but her body gives her away without her even realizing it. She goes practically weak in her chair, and I have to fight to hold her to me as she whimpers against me.

I jerk back, watching as her eyes blink open slowly. Her eyes are still

hooded with desire, and I don't miss the way her knees pinch together as she shifts. My harshness may frighten her, but it seems to excite her even more.

"You should learn the right words to please me," I hiss, leaning close enough to tease her. Her eyes are focused on my mouth as I tell her, "Next time, your disobedience might not result in something you want. I might shove something else in your mouth, like my dick."

Her eyebrows raise, but it's not with fear. She licks her swollen lips, and I think about undoing my pants right then. She almost looks like she wants it, and fuck, it's taking all my self restraint not to slam deep into her throat.

Vanessa may be inexperienced, but what she lacks in knowledge, she makes up for in vigor. While I might have to give her some guidance, she can suck better than anyone else I've ever met. Her mouth is just perfect.

I run my thumb along her bottom lip, pressing hard as I wrench her jaw open. My balls throb at the sight, and I cluck my tongue. "Is that what you want, my little blossom? You want to swallow my cock? Want me to remind you just how it feels to fulfill your purpose?"

Pushing her jaw open wider, she squirms. I can tell she wants to fight me, but she doesn't dare, even as her eyes fill with tears. I smirk, raising my eyebrows as I wait for her to beg for me to let go.

She doesn't, though. The tears don't fall, even as I thrust my thumb into her mouth, edging at the back of her throat to remind her of what's to come. She just sits there, taking it, and although my cock is growing painfully hard, I frown. I wanted those tears to fall. What a pity.

I let go of her jaw, and she closes her mouth without protest. She is being so obedient, and while I want some of that fire that's dancing in her eyes, just touching her sinful mouth has made my mind foggy. I'd like to tease her more, watching the way she reacts, but my body is already screaming out for her.

It's not a conscious decision as I lean over her, cupping the back of her head this time as I kiss her softly. I twist my fingers in her hair gently, not pulling too hard. Her lips part for me, but I don't delve in.

I withhold it as my other hand moves down her body, cupping her gorgeous breast. My fingers circle just outside her shirt, and I can feel her nipple harden through the fabric. I pinch it, twisting it painful until she whimpers into my mouth.

Releasing, I lean back with a grin, and although she gives me a look that says I hurt her, her thighs are rubbing together. She might protest at the pain,

but we both like it.

"I have so much in store for you," I tell her in a husky whisper, gripping the back of her hair to tilt her head back. She gulps as I dive in, my nose tracing up her neck until I come to the shell of her ear. "Just wait."

I know I told Vanessa I just wanted to get her out of my system but with the excitement thrumming through me, I have a feeling she's not going to bore me as easily as I expected.

Seeing how the food is still untouched, I decide that we are done with dinner. There is no point sitting here when we are both clearly hungry for something else, so I jerk her chair back, and she gasps, pulling a deep rumble of laughter out of me.

I love how responsive Vanessa is. It really gets me going, and I can't wait to see how she reacts under the detailed scrutiny I can provide her with, with no distractions.

There are so many things I want to do to her, and my mind wars over where to start as I lift her out of her chair. She locks her legs around me as I pick her up, her arms coming up to clutch the hair at the back of my neck, and I can feel just how hot her center is pressed against me.

No, Vanessa may act like she doesn't like what I'm doing to her, but her legs quiver as we approach the bed and the way she keeps biting her bottom lip gives her away.

I lay her out on the mattress before me, leaning over her as I trail my nose just above her skin. I don't touch her as I inhale her arousal, knowing that despite her behavior, tonight she is going to break under me.

I offer her a grin as I look up, meeting her eyes. They are guarded, nervous, but the goosebumps covering her skin and her twitching fingers that grip my sheets tell me the only thing she's worried about is being teased again.

This is going to be fun.

VANESSA

I can't understand what Keillon is doing to me. I should hate him. I should hate the way he's grabbing me, the way he threatened me at the table.

Instead it made me soaking wet.

I'm trembling underneath him as he skims his nose along my body, and I want it to be his mouth. I'm dying for him to touch me; I have been since that night at the club even though I'm trying so hard to forget it.

As he dips between my legs, I let out a soft whimper, but he doesn't touch me. He works his way back up, hovering over my breasts, and I want him to grab them, pinch them, *something*. This waiting is actual torture.

His striking gray eyes lock on me, and he gives me that characteristic smirk of his. "I'm not going to touch you," he says, and my whole body clenches. I could almost cry from the anticipation, and the words are already at my lips as he continues. "I'm not going to do anything unless you beg me to."

His hands skate up and down my sides just as they did at the club, grabbing at my ass, my thighs, but never where I want him. He's doing it on purpose!

"You have to beg me, Vanessa," he whispers, bringing his lips tantalizingly close to my skin. The space between his mouth and my stomach is electric. "You have to ask me to ravage you. Plead for me to mark you."

I yelp as he pinches my thigh, and I'm pretty sure I'm seeping through my pants with the built-up anticipation. I tremble with the strength of it, and while I should be terrified of his rough actions and the way he commands my body—and I am—I'm shaking with excitement.

My body is aching, an impossible soreness that makes me want to reach between my legs. I've never been so wet in my entire life, and when Keillon kisses a soft trail along my stomach, I swear I'm going to catch fire.

I'm dripping down my legs, my hips moving of their own violation as he massages the backs of my thighs. It's clear that he knows how to get close enough to where I need him without touching me. He's trying to drive me mad, I swear. He's going to shatter my mind with this kind of treatment.

I moan as he cups my ass, shifting my hips up, but he moves back up my torso, keeping his face out from between my legs. A whimper breaks free of my lips, and he chuckles. He lifts his eyes to mine, and I know he can see the desperation on my face.

When his fingers hook around my waistband, I lift my hips for him, and he slips the fabric free, leaving me bare and soaking on his bed. He trails up the insides of my thighs, sending shudders through my body, and I arch my back, wanting to cry more than ever in my life.

My body is so tense it's painful, and I'm on the edge of trying to drag his face between my legs when finally—*finally*—I feel the rough pad of his fingertips brush against my folds.

"Keillon!" I cry out, and a deep chuckle meets me.

"Yes?"

"Oh, gods, please."

The pressure increases as he slips between my folds, running one finger up to my clit. My thighs try to clench together, but he forces me open, watching me shudder as he draws tight circles around the little bundle.

"Beg for it," he reminds me.

I nod, my head tipped back as rough cries break from me. My throat already feels hoarse, and yet, this is nowhere near enough. I need more, and it's like he can sense it as he slides one finger down to my opening.

"Yes!" I scream as he teases it inside of me.

My body clamps down on him, and he thrusts in a few times before adding another finger. His arm clamps my hips in place as he pushes into me, the pressure so much, but it's not that I don't want it. My body is bucking wildly as he slams up into me.

"Oh, fuck!"

My hands fist the sheets as I try to take it, especially as his thumb circles up to press hard on my clit, and I clench my jaw, panting. I've never felt anything like this, and I realize that I am chanting over and over.

"Keillon, don't stop! Oh, please, don't stop! Please, please, please!"

He keeps thrusting into me with his fingers, and my mind is muddled. My entire body feels like it is on fire, and I'm so out of it, I don't even know what I'm saying. All I know is an intense heat is unfurling in my stomach, wrapping tightly down my spine, and I'm pretty sure I'm about to join the gods. What he is doing is going to be the end of me.

"Keillon!" I shriek, feeling it all barreling down, and just as my back arches and I'm ready to combust right here, he rips his fingers free.

I collapse against the bed, my eyes flying open, and tears do well in my eyes. The ache inside of me is so intense, so extreme, that I feel like screaming and bawling because I need him to soothe it.

I jolt up to look at him as he licks his fingers clean. He holds my gaze as he sucks each one into his mouth, slowly and meticulously cleaning me off of him. I don't know what he's doing, but hope blossoms in my chest. Maybe he's going to give me something else?

He leans over me, placing a soft kiss on my lips that makes me want to melt. I want *more* and he knows it, especially as I taste myself on his lips.

When he pulls back, his eyes are shining, and I wait for him to descend on me. I even reach up to help him out of his clothes, but he only gives me the slightest shakes of his head as he steps back.

I want to beg him. But with that smirk that I know only means trouble, I doubt he'd give in.

"From now on, you will take the initiative to approach me."

And that's all he says. He turns, going to leave the bedroom and into the adjoining room of the suite with me staring after him in disbelief.

He pauses just as he's about to leave and my legs clench, hoping this was just part of his teasing. But he doesn't turn around. He just cocks his head, calling back, "Oh, and Vanessa? Make sure you're up early. We'll be going to my home in the morning."

With that, I'm left staring at the closed door.

I want to scream. My whole body feels too tense from the way he tormented me, I know that he knows what he did. There's no way he's that masterful and doesn't understand that he brought me to the brink and then shoved me back.

A soft whimper breaks free of my throat as I shift on the bed, everything so sensitive and painful—and not in the good way.

I'm certain that Keillon was going to wreck me, and I wanted it, even if I

shouldn't. I mean, what is wrong with me? Why am I still thinking about his mouth and hands on my body, wishing he'd come back?

I groan as I flop back on the bed. He knows damn well I'm not going to sleep tonight after this. I'm fairly certain that I couldn't finish what he started if I tried, and I think that's part of the reason he left me like this.

He knows that I will lie here all night thinking of him, of my punishment for smarting off to him, and never be able to reach what he was going to give me. He thinks that this will put me in line, send me to seek him out.

And what scares me is he's right.

Even now, my limbs twitch as I consider going after him. I'm wondering if I go out there and strip, if I kiss him and grind against him like the night we met, will he give me what I need?

Deep in my core, I already know the answer to that. I doubt Keillon will respond well to more disobedience, so I roll under the blankets, screaming into a pillow.

How did I end up here? I know that I was willing to try anything to save my sister, but I thought I was committing to one night of selling my body—at least that's what I hoped for.

But now, in a matter of days, I've gone from being a housekeeper for an empty home to writhing in a bed that's not mine, hoping for a dark elf's touch. And what's worse is I don't regret a damn thing.

It's not even that I'm glad I was able to save my sister, though that is a part of it. No, the main thing that keeps hitting me is how I'm glad I did this because his touch is something that I never could have imagined. It may not have been at the forefront of my mind when I agreed to this arrangement, but I know it was in my subconscious.

And now I'm plagued with one question, one that I whisper out loud to myself.

"Is he going to destroy me?"

KEILLON

In a matter of a week, I don't even recognize myself.

I thought that it would only take a few days to get Vanessa out of my system. I brought her back to my house, planning to bend and break her until I had my fill. Yet, I think I'm the only one breaking.

At first, it was just fun. My mansion is on the western edge of Liiandor, and it provides so many more opportunities than the tiny hotel room. I've been going to extreme lengths to show Vanessa just how many surfaces could be put to good use throughout the numerous rooms.

I'm not sure when it all changed. I've been intrigued, even possessive of her, since the first night I laid eyes on her. I didn't forget her when I left that club as I would normally forget another woman.

But after the first three days, I realized that my interludes with her were not purely physical.

Those three days, I chased Vanessa around this mansion, splaying her out on surfaces and edging her to just hear her sweet cries. I'd bring her to the edge until that smart mouth would get her in trouble, and then I'd punish her.

My cock jerks just at that thought. I'm starting to think my sweet blossom enjoys choking on my cock as I deny her orgasms. Her eyes glisten with excitement when I force her to her knees before me, and she's all too willing to open her mouth, tongue rolling out, as I remind her to watch her words with me.

I can't pinpoint the moment that it changed, though. I went from edging her along for my own satisfaction, to taking her through a slow, blissful experience, my heart beating in time with her moans like she was what was

keeping me alive.

I swear she knows it. She knows how her every look and touch nearly undoes me in a way I could have never have anticipated. I've seen her lips quirk as she deliberately resists me, trying to push me to anger. I have no doubts that she fights me for the thrill of it, not because she doesn't want me.

And then there are moments where she's incredibly obedient like she can't get enough of me. Her eyes spark as she elicits moans from me, and her body curves when it's her name I'm panting out.

I thought I had purchased her time so that I could cleanse whatever this toxic hold she had on me from my body, but I'm starting to realize that I've only helped it spread.

It's not good, the way she makes my heart flutter and my stomach twist with just a glance. I've never had so little control over myself, and it hit me hard on that fourth day when I realized that I couldn't garner a speck of restraint or control around her. I clearly underestimated how much she affects me.

So, I've resorted to avoiding her, at least until I can understand how to manage these feelings. I've all but hidden myself away, forgetting even my work as I act like I'm an intruder in my own home.

I don't know how long it would have gone on for if my dear cousin hadn't shown up on my doorstep. I want to turn him away, wishing I'd waved away the zagfer that told me of his arrival instead of going downstairs.

But I don't have that luxury anymore. Vanessa heard the door, and she's come bounding downstairs, her clothes too tight for others to see. Her outfits have been curated for me, for *my* enjoyment, and now that he is taking in an eyeful, I think about snapping his neck.

She doesn't even seem to notice—or maybe she's used to being ogled—as his gaze follows her curves, the deep cut of her cleavage, the swell of her hips. I fight back every instinct to attack my relative.

I grit my teeth as I wait for his attention to return, but it doesn't. My fists clench, my arms turning a soft orange as my magic swirls in response to my anger, and I nearly growl as I bark out, "Arcon." His gaze finally leaves Vanessa and the lust there almost sends me into a frenzy. "What are you doing here?"

Not exactly a warm welcome, but I'm not known for those. It's as pleasant as I can manage in this moment.

And it is far warmer than the next words out of my mouth when he avoids

my question.

"Cousin! Why are you hiding such a fine piece of meat?" He shifts ever so slightly toward Vanessa, and fire dances on my fingertips. "It's only right for you to share. You get the best treatment, and it's withheld from the rest of us."

I think I'm going to combust. "I *never* share." My words are dripping with as much threat as the magic now weaving through the room, and Arcon seems to finally notice, especially as Vanessa's expression falls guarded and she positions her body so that I am now between the two of them.

My cousin's gaze flickers from shock to curiosity to confusion as he takes in how protective I am being over this human. I know that it isn't normal. It's not like me to lay claim to anything, but for a dark elf, especially one of my status, to be this possessive over a human... It's sure to draw attention.

Behind me, my magic caresses Vanessa, taking stock of her subconsciously. I can feel how she's trembling, and I almost want to laugh. If it wasn't for Arcon, I would have teased her, asking her where that smart mouth is now?

She amazes me, how she can go from acting like a spitfire to an innocent virgin back to a devilish woman in a matter of a night. I love it, but I've found with my cousin's appearance that the only surprises I want are what kind of woman I'm about to bed, not who is showing up at my doorstep.

"My apologies, Cousin. How rude of me to come in and assume what is yours." He bows his head, but I know it's all for show. He is jealous of what I have, and I don't trust him.

"Then tell me." My rage is thinly veiled in my voice. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes dart to Vanessa but don't linger. "I came to extend you an invitation. I'm attending an exhibit party, and I thought you may like to attend. I know that, at times, you like to sample what's around even if you don't partake in buying." Once again, he glances toward Vanessa. "Though, it seems you do have a slave to show off this time."

Rage, fresh and hot, pours through me, and I just barely manage to contain it before I evaporate a dark elf of higher status that will surely be noticed if he is absent.

I don't want to go. I'm sure he can read that in my stance. The parties are sick, where dark elves show up with their slaves to show off who has the best. The humans are up for claim for the night by anyone, and while I have

gone to some of these parties to save face—and blow off steam—I want Vanessa nowhere near it.

I know that I can't have that, though. He's clearly here because he heard I have a pet now, and if I decline the invitation, I risk my reputation. I'll be the talk of the town, and while I don't care what others think of me, I have to keep a low profile while the King and I are still determining if there are more spies about. Drawing attention to myself will not help with that.

"Send me the details, and I'll see you there."

Arcon's eyebrows raise as he takes in Vanessa again, and then his eyes flick to the fire still weaving between my fingers. He says nothing, though. We both know that I have every right to show off my assets without allowing others to touch her. It's just unc customary.

A sly grin slips on his face, and it's clear that he thinks he's going to get a chance to try her out at the party. I almost growl, wanting to put those ideas to rest, but then Arcon turns around, snapping out, "I'll send a servant over with a formal invitation."

And then he whistles a cheery tune as he flicks my door open with his hand, not waiting for my dismissal. I stare after him as he strolls into the streets until the door swings closed of its own accord.

"Keillon?" Vanessa whispers behind me, and I let my shoulders sag, the magic starting to flicker out now that I'm not so on edge.

I turn to face her, and her eyes paralyze me just as they did the first night I saw her, just like the numiscu blossom that incapacitated me when I was a lesser foot soldier in the Liiandor army. *Oh, my sweet blossom, what are we to do?*

I don't let that out, though. I keep my jaw locked, my eyes hard, even as she takes a step closer and asks me, "Where are you going?"

"We are going to a party. A slave party, if you will, where everyone shows off their pets." I huff, dragging a hand down my face. I expect her to see how annoyed I am at the situation, but her eyes widen and her nostrils flare instead.

"I am not going there!" she snaps, her fire immediately returning.

It sends a flurry in my chest, and I grip her jaw with one hand, squeezing so that her lips are forced to part with a pained gasp. "You aren't in the position to make those kinds of decisions." My grin is malicious, and I almost feel bad about it. "It's time you realize how nice I am to you, Vanessa."

VANESSA

Keillon's grip is bruising on my jaw, and unlike his normally aggressive touch, it's scaring me. Usually the way he handles me, like he needs me so desperately he doesn't care if I break, turns me on, but this, this doesn't feel like that teasing or demanding as he plans to ravage my body.

No, the hard flash of his eyes and the way his fingers dig into my skin tells me that he is being deadly serious right now, and I would be wise to keep my mouth shut. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, hating the way I tremble as I nod.

He drops his hand, and I suck in a deep breath as he brushes past me, striding back to his office. He's barely come out of there, and I've been debating if I should go in there and beg him to take me.

But a part of me can already feel that it won't please him. He'll be annoyed, and not in the way that will earn me a delicious punishment and sexual pleasure. This will just push him farther from my grasp.

So, I turn, dashing up the stairs as my whole body shakes, making it to my room before I crumble.

I don't know where everything went so wrong. I miss Keillon terribly, the feeling of his hands on my body and the way he holds me as he makes me chant his name. There's something about the way his eyes would watch me; his lips would part as I came, like he was breathing me in, like I was giving him life by enjoying him.

That's all gone now, and while I can't deny that my body is crying out for what he can do, my heart misses him, too. I miss the easy conversation, the companionship. I enjoyed being around him. I love his ferocity, his measured

thoughts, the way passion can grip him and take him to new places.

He might not realize it, but I stopped seeing him as a dark elf master in that hotel. Maybe it's foolish of me, but I like the way he is with me. I know he'll never truly hurt me, and the stinging pain that he always erases with care afterwards has brought me more joy than I could ever know.

I know that he's tried to keep distance between us, and it's been heartbreaking to me. I don't know what I did that upset him so, but I have to assume that he didn't just grow bored with me. He would have sent me home if he had.

Though, the idea of him doing that fills me with dread, and not just because I no longer would have a full belly and would need to find a job. I don't want to be away from him. Even in his absence, I feel I've been growing closer to him as I inspect his house, reading the heavily worn books and examining everything on display. It somehow brings me comfort and heartache at the same time.

Sucking in a deep breath, I steel my nerves. Keillon won't let anyone hurt me. I have to believe that. I have to trust him. I should just focus on enjoying the night with him because I will finally get to be by his side again.

It's easy to stay by these convictions alone in my room through the afternoon, but as night approaches and Keillon's servants show up in my room, dread sinks in my stomach. I don't understand what is happening as they scrub me down and slip me into a thin, strappy outfit too reminiscent of what I wore onstage at the club.

It's all made of thick leather that's itchy and unyielding, but the straps that wind around my stomach and barely provide any coverage on my breasts aren't as bad as the collar they lock around my neck.

I could vomit when I turn to look at myself.

How could Keillon do this? I thought, if nothing else, I was his. He stopped my dancing before I was bare at the club. His magic swirled in the air when his cousin looked at me. But now that we are going to a party where everyone is going to be ogling the humans, he wants me in this?

I will never understand this dark elf or his motives.

But I have to trust him if I'm going to get through this night, even if I already have a bad feeling flooding my veins.

The servants tell me that I am ready to go, and I turn on shaking legs to reach for the door. *I have to trust him. I have to trust him. I have to trust him.*

I repeat it over and over as I go down the stairs. Keillon has paid me well,

treated me better than I expected, and ultimately, I've enjoyed my time with him. I have to hope that there is something behind this that I'm not seeing, and it's not just his sadistic side coming out now that I've grown boring.

As I hit the main floor, though, I see him standing by the door, which is wide open. His jaw is set tight, and his shoulders are rigid. He looks tense, and it only makes me more nervous.

He turns as I stop beside him, his eyes running over me, but there is no flicker of lust or excitement like there normally is. I don't know who this is, but this is not the Keillon I know.

"What are you going to do to me?"

I let the question slip out of my lips on a quiet whisper, and when his eyes flash with anger, I fear I have overstepped. I start to shake more violently, and it has nothing to do with the chill in the crisp night.

I don't understand this dark elf before me, staring down at me like I'm an inconvenience and not someone he paid to be here. He threw a fit when I wouldn't share a conversation with him, and now he's tracking my movements like he's going to break me.

And then it hits me. I'm such an idiot.

Because he's staring at me like a dark elf.

I let myself believe Keillon was so different that I seemed to forget that this is how I've been treated my entire life. I'm used to the thinly veiled threats, the harsh treatment, the misuse of my body and skills. Why is it so shocking to me that Keillon is only acting like every other dark elf, as if he could be anything else?

Because I hoped he was something else, something more, something better.

"I'm going to show you the reality of life." His lips stayed in a thin line. "I'm going to teach you what should happen to someone as defiant as you."

His hand lifts like he's thinking about touching me, and my skin tingles in anticipation. Why do I want him so much?

It doesn't matter because he drops it, looking away as a carriage is pulled up at the base of the steps leading up to the house.

"Like I said, I've been good to you," he mumbles gruffly, and then turns to leave. "Maybe it's time to break you in." His eyes flick to me, and his lips curl. "I'm going to have fun doing it, too." I know he wants to come across as cruel, but the words don't meet his eyes.

My heart hammers in my chest. I'm fighting not to cry as I follow after

him, and I'm terrified of what this party will hold for me. Keillon offers me no reassurance, and I want to scream at him. Who is *this*?

I sit quietly as we travel through the streets of Liiandor, pondering the sudden change in Keillon over the last few days. I knew that dark elves could have volatile mood swings, but I thought, after everything, I had a firm grasp on who Keillon is. I didn't think he could have an entire personality change. But he has.

And I know that is not very promising for me as we pull up in front of the palace. I feel sick to my stomach as I take it all in.

Elves are climbing out of carriages all around us, dressed in fine silks carefully tailored to their body. Behind every elf are a number of humans. Most of them look dirty, covered in bruises and cuts. Some are actively bleeding as their masters drag them, bound around the ankles and wrists by chains.

What's worse is the way others jeer at them. The elves laugh as the trip humans, watching as they sprawl out across the grass, fresh cuts gushing blood since not a single human is wearing anything remotely protective, myself included.

It hits me hard now. I knew that Keillon was treating me better than I thought. He gave me bliss and food and he didn't abuse me. But I hadn't thought of him as outright kind. Not until now.

Up until this moment, it has been a transaction, and we were each filling a role. I'm now understanding how much he has given me and just how much I've taken for granted. Maybe I had gotten too comfortable with him, snapping off too much, and he's decided to punish me in the worst way this time.

Maybe I enjoy sucking him off, but I don't want another dark elf near me. And it's crashing over me that he intends to show me just how much he's giving me by forcing me into the very situations I've avoided my entire life.

"Prepare yourself for the real deal," he tells me with another grin that doesn't look right on his face as he pops the door open.

And I'm jerked out into the night of awaiting horrors.

KEILLON

I wipe the concern from my mind as I clamp the chains around Vanessa's limbs. I could send magic through the metal to warm it, but I know they'd glow. The others would see, and I still don't know how I would explain to the King that his fierce general has gone soft.

I spent the afternoon in my study drinking. I should have been looking over a set of new documents that had been left for me this morning from one of the lieutenants, but I couldn't focus on anything but this damn party.

Instead, I'd made it through a decent amount of bottles as I considered what I'd be up against, letting others view Vanessa dressed in her leather lingerie. I knew I'd have to be vigilant to fend off anyone who thought she was up for grabs.

Over the hours, I tried to stop worrying, to stop caring at all about the human woman above me. But I couldn't. I couldn't stop thinking about how I didn't want anyone else near her. Unfortunately, I am incapable of changing the caste system, and with my position, it would be an insult to the King himself if I wasn't here.

Not only do I need to keep a low profile among the rumor mills, but I also can't have others think she's special. It will only guide more attention toward her, and I can't have that.

Between my job, my connection with the King, the expectations of me, the gossips of Liiandor, and the resulting intrigue around Vanessa, all the reasons were piling up. There was no way I was going to get out of this party, and with each bottle of liquor I polished off, I found myself more and more lost in my situation.

By the time night had fallen, I'd managed to at least get a grasp on my emotions. By that, I mean I managed to shut them down. I needed the air of a cocky general, and I could present that.

I could use tonight to set an example for Vanessa, but not because I wanted her spirit broken. She had to know I'd never do anything to harm her. I just wanted to drive her into my arms once she realized the kind of protection and care I could provide...maybe permanently.

I shove the drunken thoughts away, even though I wasn't feeling the effects of the liquor anymore. I still blame the incessant ideas that she is anything more than a girl I bought for a few good romps on the booze.

Before anyone can note my hesitancy, I jerk on Vanessa's chain, pulling her into the palace. Heads turn as I approach, and while I'm used to that, I hate the way that their gazes settle onto Vanessa. Rage boils in me, but I contain it better than I had in front of Arcon. I can't have anyone see me treating her differently.

I keep my head held high as we approach the banquet room. I have to fight the urge to turn around and check on her, reassure her. My posture stays rigid, my muscles tensed as I fight them, and I force myself to the vacant seat at the head table that I know is mine.

Yanking on the chains, I force Vanessa to the ground next to my seat, and I sink into my chair. There are tears in her eyes, and I want to wipe them, to assure her this is for show. While I have a violent side that oftens comes out in the bedroom, I will never truly hurt her. She may bruise, but she will look at them fondly.

I realize too late that others are watching me as I stare down at her. I'm not sure how tender my expression was, so I have to mitigate it. I let just the edges of my lips curl up as I lean closer to her, sneering out loud enough for everyone to hear, "Are you going to cry, sweetheart?"

Her eyes lift to me slowly, but she doesn't glare at me. My cock starts to harden as I think of all the remarks she'd normally throw at me, at how devastating she'd look as she glared at me with tears rushing down her face.

Oh, how I'd love to punish her for it. And I know she'd enjoy it.

But she knows her place here. She doesn't do anything that would require reprimanding, and I'm glad. I know that here in the palace, my punishments wouldn't be enough. Others would demand more of me, to make her bleed and scream for her transgressions, and I'm not sure I could follow through.

It makes my balls tighten as she obediently drops her eyes and shakes her

head. Fuck, she looks good being so submissive. I almost want to push her, to see just how much she will give up to me. I want to see her defiant little mouth pulled down into a frown as she heads my command, not able to lash out. I want to know what it looks like when she relents to me completely.

I know that after all of this, I'm not going to be able to hold back when we get home. I'm already brimming with the need to claim her, take her, make her mine, but I won't do it here.

No, I'll wait until we're home to fuck her like I've been dying to, to reward her for being such a perfect little pet. I can barely stand to wait.

But until then, I'll have to continue to fight off these elves that circle us like worgs. They act as if she's a fresh kill, bleeding, and they're starving. It feels almost animalistic as I have to stake my claim over my prey over and over.

"Cousin!"

I fight back a groan. I already don't have enough patience for this. I'm not at all surprised when I turn to see Arcon and his group around me, their eyes glued to Vanessa's plump ass on full display as she sits on her knees. It's no competition that she is the prettiest one here, and one of the few not covered in grime.

"Arcon."

"You've come!"

I want to roll my eyes. "I have, but surely you have better things to do, cousin, than stand here and state the obvious."

The dismissal in my tone is obvious enough for the group to turn, nodding as they retreat. I don't doubt they'll be back, and as another dark elf starts our way, I lean down to whisper to Vanessa so that he'll think I'm busy.

"Behave," I warn her, though I don't need to. Desperation dances in her eyes as she takes in the human girl across from her.

The dark elf, who is not her master, has shoved her chest onto the table, food smeared on her face as he thrusts up into her. Others around him have humans on their laps, knelt between their knees, or bent before them. The humans are being passed around like a bottle of wine, sampled and pushed onto the next elf.

Her eyes widen as she takes it all in, and it makes me hard. I love seeing her throat work, and while I have no intention of letting anyone touch her, I don't mind her seeing this. It's time she is a bit more appreciative about what I do for her, and maybe it will spark a bit more enthusiasm in her actions.

I know it will for me. Seeing her mostly naked on her knees before me as others envy what I have has given me a raging hard on I cannot suppress.

"Keillon." My smile drops as Arcon reappears behind me, on his own this time. "Surely it's time to unchain your pet." I tilt my head back to look at him with a threatening glare, but it doesn't deter him. Instead, he raises his voice so everyone else can hear him. "You have the finest slave here. Let me try her. You get plenty of use."

Most dark elves don't have to be convinced. It's rare for anyone to care enough about their property to not lend it out, at least for tonight.

But I'm not most dark elves.

I offer him a curt shake of my head. "I don't share."

"You're at an exhibit party," Arcon scoffs.

I lift an eyebrow, not quite meeting his gaze out of fear that I might attack him. "I've come to show her off, not let one of you idiots break her. She's molded to me, pliant in the ways I want. I don't need you ruining what I've so carefully crafted."

It's all a lie, of course, but they don't know that. Vanessa doesn't move, not daring to give away my lies. I'm proud of her for behaving so well, and I just may show her what my gratitude could give her on the way home.

But that fantasy is stopped as a grating voice cuts through the air, having heard mine and Arcon's conversation. "Has the legendary Keillon gone soft?" He barks out an infuriating laugh. "Has this tiny human grabbed hold of your balls? Is she riding you hard enough that you think you should keep her safe from all of us?"

The uproarious laughter undoes me. If they want to see whether or not I've gone soft, whether my human is the one that needs to be protected, I'll show them.

Before anyone can move, I'm across the table. Orange lines weave between the elves, snaring around their skin and burning where it touches as I grab the head of the dark elf – one I don't even know he's so far beneath me – and slam him into my knee.

With the sharp crunch of his nose, the orgy comes to a stop, humans being thrown aside in favor of the violence. If there's one thing that dark elves love more than fucking, it's making others bleed.

I'm determined to be the most detrimental one here tonight.

VANESSA

Keillon lunges. He attacks the dark elf standing in front of him, driving his nails into his neck and barreling him into the floor. He mashes his fist into his face three times until the other dark elf finally kicks him off.

Soon enough, they use magic and fling bolts of energy towards each other's heads. Keillon fights off his cousin and his friends with ease, incapacitating them with his fists and finishing them off with his gold darts of magic.

I watch him, grimacing with each close call. The other dark elves do everything to try and stun him, but it doesn't work. Keillon is masterful with his magic and his fighting technique. He doesn't allow them to gain the upperhand, even though he's fighting by himself.

My legs press together instinctively. I feel the wetness seeping through my panties and onto my skin while I watch him fight. I shouldn't feel this way. It's wrong, barbaric even, to feel aroused while he's gutting these dark elves to pieces, but I can't help it with Keillon.

He pushes me to my boundaries and I love every second of it.

Keillon steals a weapon from one of his enemy's hands. It's a long dagger that glimmers in the light. With one heavy strike, he slices the throat of a dark elf ambushing him from his right side. Blood splatters on him and across the ground, while the dark elf gasps and splutters in his final moments before falling dead.

Around us, the dark elves and their human slaves watch with astonishment as the fight continues. No one tries to intervene. They keep watching, while others keep fucking. Some of them are doing both

simultaneously while Keillon slices through the dark elves causing him trouble.

Are they aroused by this, too? If so, I'm glad I'm not the only one.

These past few days, I have fought the attraction I feel for him. It's electric. I feel it coursing through my veins each time I'm near him.

He sends shivers down my spine. It makes me crave him even more. I want his hands all over my body. I want him to be the only thing I think about.

I blink. Then I'm back in the moment. Keillon is struggling with subduing his cousin. Both of them are drenched with blood. Keillon knees him in the abdomen and in the face, sending him to the ground.

The other dark elves are cheering, even raising glasses in honor of the fight. They're too close to me. Some blood splatters found their way onto my skin, so I scurry my way into the crowd in an attempt to escape the slaughter.

On my way, my foot nearly taps into the decapitated head of a dark elf. His eyes are wide open, with a trickle of blood oozing down his forehead. I stop myself from vomiting by hurrying away, but the image of that lingers with me even as I close my eyes.

This is normal for these dark elves. Sex and violence. That's all that really matters to them.

"Do you think he'll kill them all in the end?" A dark elf points at Keillon. He flings a lavender coin onto the ground in front of his human slave, who stares blankly at the fight ensuing. "I bet an ipia he will."

"Just an ipia? I'll bet five!" Another dark elf offers five more of the same coins, causing them to clatter loudly against the ground. "He's one of the best fighters around. They were fools to try and test him. Now look at them. They're dead!"

"What do you think the Prince will say about this? And the King?"

"Who cares about them? Those smug royal bastards don't even know how to fight!"

I push my way through the crowd. Behind me, I hear a loud scream. Glancing over my shoulder, I see Keillon slashing through the chest of a dark elf. He makes it look as if he's cutting through a slab of meat for dinner. There's so much blood on his hands, face, and chest. The crowd goes wild.

I don't know if I feel safe anymore. The bodies are piling up. Some dark elves who weren't even involved in the first place have joined in trying to fight Keillon. They're trying to prove themselves, but it's not working.

Keillon is powerful. His golden magic stuns them before they even know what's happening, then he finishes them off with a fatal blow to the neck, head, or chest.

He's ruthless.

As I scan my surroundings, I find a human slave cowering at the feet of two other dark elves who are enthralled by the fighting. They're on the edge of their seats, roaring and bumping their fists in the air with each kill Keillon achieves.

She crawls away, covering her head and grimacing. She's trying to escape, but she doesn't know how to.

It's dangerous, but I shoulder my way through the crowd of vicious dark elves and their indifferent slaves to reach the girl. She looks younger than me.

"What's wrong?" I yell out over the crowd. "Are you hurt? Do you need assistance?"

"I need to get out of..." Her words are drowned out by the crowd. I lean in closer to hear her. "I can't breathe. I feel lightheaded. I need to leave."

"Who are you with?"

"He... he died." Her jaw clenches. "Your dark elf killed him."

Keillon continues to drive his dagger into the bellies of the dark elves who cross him.

"Come with me! I can help you!"

"How?" She yelps as there's more blood splattering in all directions. She raises her arm over her face to protect herself. "Just leave me be!"

"No! Come with me! We need to get you out of here!" I take her by the arm and help her to her feet. She struggles to stand by herself, so I have to drag her to the side of the room. "Help me out a little bit!"

"I don't want to live anymore," she whispers, letting her head roll to the side. "Just toss me to your dark elf and let him kill me. I don't have the fight in me anymore."

"Don't say things like that." Using all my strength, I direct her to a dark corner where we're isolated, away from the carnage. "Here. You'll be alright."

The girl sighs, falling to her knees. She's sobbing, covering her face with her hands. When are they going to stop fighting? Keillon doesn't stop. This is going to end badly.

"How are you feeling right now?" I lower myself beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Her body wracks violently with her sobs. "I'm sorry

about what happened to your—”

“Don’t talk about that anymore!”

I flinch, pulling my hand away from her. “I’m sorry. I know that this is a difficult time for you.”

“Why are you even helping me in the first place? Why don’t you go be with your elf? Why don’t you stop him from killing everyone in this room?”

Good questions. I don’t have the strength to stop Keillon right now. He’s lost in the violence and there’s only bloodlust in his eyes.

“I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m not.” She shrugs away from my touch. “So leave me alone.”

“What made you collapse near the fighting over there? Were you hurt? Did anything hit you during the fight? They were flinging magical spells around, so it’s possible that you were hit by one of them.”

“I think I was,” she replies. “One moment, I was standing in the crowd. The next, I’m dazed and on the floor, doing my best to crawl away. I don’t know how it happened. It was too quick!”

“Well, I’m glad I saw you and got you out of there. Too many people died today, humans and dark elves alike.” I don’t even want to look in Keillon’s direction. I’ll see the piles of bodies. The decapitated heads. The bloodied limbs. “I wouldn’t have wanted you in the mix.”

“It should have been me.”

“I disagree. I think you should—”

A sudden ringing strikes my ears and makes me lose my balance, even as I’m sitting down. My world spins for a few seconds. I wait for the ringing to subside since it’s deafening. The girl watches me with a confused expression. Her eyebrows are pulled together.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I... I don’t know what happened to me just there, but I’m alright.” In reality, I’m starting to feel worse. My vision is blackening along the edges and I’m losing my sense of direction. “Please tell me that you’re alright. I hope you weren’t hurt in the crossfire.”

“I thought we already discussed this,” she says. “I don’t know what happened to me there, but someone’s magic must have hit me. It sent me to the ground. I thought I was as good as dead until you arrived. But now you’re—”

Her words are muffled. Everything is turning static around me. I’m trying to focus on her face, but my eyes can’t seem to do it.

“Your eyes are crossed! What’s happening?”

I hear her words but they feel so distant. I’m losing myself. My head pounds and it makes me want to rip my hair out.

“Lay down. Lay down! I need to get you some help or something!”

“No, please. Don’t attract attention to us. Let me rest.”

“Are you sure?”

I don’t answer. Instead, I feel my consciousness drifting away so I lower my head to the ground

“Hey!” A hand slaps my cheek. “Wake up!”

It’s already too late. I’m too far gone.

KEILLON

I could kill them all. I think most of them know that, if not all. Coins clatter around as the spectators observe the last few that dare to try to stand up to me.

As I dispatch the last elf, gripping his throat and letting my magic sear through his skin until it's so thin and malleable that it's easy to rip out with just my nails, I stop, heaving. Looking around, there are grumbles and excited shouts as I either won or lost someone a lot of money.

Either way, I hope that they can all see that I am not a dark elf to fuck with. I thought it was already obvious, but I had to defend my position, being challenged instead of feared. The remaining dark elves don't seem inclined to join the others in Glacies. I know that those here tonight will be going to that icy afterlife instead of to Helias, where I know I will one day rest as a great warrior.

But that night will not be tonight. No, tonight, I will be taking Vanessa home and showing her why this was all worth it to me. I'm going to claim her as I should.

As that smug smile spreads across my face, I turn to where I left her.

Only to see that space empty.

My heart thunders as I turn to look around all the surrounding tables. I don't spot her crouched there, and pure rage fuels me as I think she must have gotten hurt. Red tints my vision as I tear through the room, looking at everybody I come across until I realize that she isn't hurt.

She's just not here.

The anger that rises further in my veins is no match for the worry that

pounds through my chest. I feel sick, and pure terror grips me as I push out into the hallway.

Vanessa isn't out here, either, and I don't see a sign of her. I know that must mean that she's gone elsewhere in the castle, whether to get away from the fight or because someone forced her, I don't know.

All I can think is this isn't a place for her to wander without me. She's in danger without me by her side and I'm confident that she knows that. She wouldn't risk wandering around with so many dark elves clamoring to get ahold of her.

Would she?

I wipe all the fears from my mind. They aren't helping me. In fact, the thoughts are distracting me, keeping me from picking up on anything that may help.

Tearing down the halls of the palace, I look for anyone who may have seen her. I don't spot anyone, the guards having rushed to the room when the fight broke out. Some younger ones were killed by me, but many just started to drag the bodies away.

It seems that I depleted their staff from my mayhem, and there aren't nearly enough guards to station in the halls. I'm sure only entrances and exits and the royals are still protected. Which has left Vanessa completely exposed.

What's worse is that every dark elf in this building is either dead, working, or locked in a room as they fuck. There is seriously no one out here to bear witness?

My magic lashes out of me before I am able to control myself, and I find myself falling into old habits as I whisper to it. "Vanessa," I tell the tendrils snaking through the building. "Find her."

I wait as it scours the building for me, but it doesn't pulse. It doesn't lock into its target and my heart sinks as the tendrils start to dissipate. My tracker is based on a magic trace, and Vanessa has none.

That's when the panic starts to hit me. I've resulted to nearly ripping the walls apart as I search for her. "Where are you?" I scream, praying to every god and goddess that she's hiding and she'll hear me.

I can't stand it. I feel like I'm going mad as I turn breathless. I don't understand the feeling clawing in my chest as I kick a door clean off the hinges after I hear a woman whimper. It's not Vanessa pinned beneath the dark elf so I keep moving.

I know that she wouldn't leave of her own accord. She knows what will

happen to her. I made it clear just how much I was protecting her from at dinner, and I don't think—no, I *know*—she wouldn't chance it just to be spiteful. She'd save it for the carriage ride home.

My lips curve into a sad smile as I think of the carriage ride home. I'd so been looking forward to it, to telling her what a good girl she was and praising her body so that she was teetering on the edge and ready for me when we finally arrived at my manor. I wanted to bring her more pleasure than she could ever imagine.

I wanted her to be ruined for anyone but *me*.

My mouth has gone dry and my throat constricts as I realize someone else may be doing that now. Ruining her. And not in the way she deserves.

My fist goes through the wall at the thought. "No!" I wail.

No one else can touch her!

Why is it that it's not anger that I feel as I think it? It's panic. It's sadness. And I feel that my heart has been ripped clean from my chest as I start to doubt I'll find her. Why do I feel...

Heartbroken?

It's all the more painful as I finally admit to myself what I've been avoiding. It's breaking my heart to lose her, to know someone might hurt her, because I care for Vanessa more than I ever thought possible.

I hit my knees as the words break free, and I can feel them on my lips, jerking tears to fill my eyes.

I love her.

I shake my head, foolish to have hidden it for so long. I love how feisty she is, how she loves so fiercely that she would go through this for her sister. I love how she recovers so easily from things that would break lesser people and how she has never let the world bend her or strip her dignity.

I even love that damn mouth of hers that gets her into the right kind of trouble.

A shaking hand touches my lips, and I have to fight to keep the sobs contained. A small voice tells me that I'm a general, and I should not be on my knees mourning a human.

But I don't care.

I don't care that Vanessa is a human or who or what I am. She is my mate and nothing can change that. Nothing will ever change how fiercely I need her, how much I want her. I was just too stupid to realize it, and I jeopardized her life by trying to force us into roles we weren't meant to fill.

Nothing has ever hurt like this before, and I don't know how to heal it. I'm about to careen into the floor, to let it take my heart because I don't need it if I can't have Vanessa, when I hear footsteps.

I lift my head slowly to see one of my lieutenants and a close confidant of mine, Vanir. "Sir!" he shouts as he skids to a stop before me. "Your pet—"

I'm on my feet in an instant. "Where is she?"

"Prince Rostraf's room."

He barely gets the words out before I'm turning, leaping up to the next floor with the use of my magic. I don't waste time with stairs or even some walls now that I know my destination. I leap from banisters and crash through the building until I've left a mess of my wrath lying in my wake.

My heel slams into the door, sending it flying inward, and with one step, I'm frozen. Vanir hadn't lied when he said that Vanessa was here... But I was not prepared for the scene.

Her beautiful body is pulled tight across the mattress, her limbs straining to accommodate the chains clamped to her wrists and ankles. Her face is screwed up as she tries to fight her restraints, and nausea fills me as I realize her leather straps have been cut away.

Vanessa is naked, spread open wide for the Prince, and there is no denying what his intention was for her. He was going to take what is mine, and for a second, all I can see is red.

Orange flames engulf my arms, and I am considering slamming my fist into the ground and burning this entire cursed building to the ground to pay for his sins when she sees me. Her blue eyes catch mine, and they widen, not with fear or surprise but with relief that makes my legs feel weak.

Her lips part with a soft gasp, and suddenly, I've regained control of my body. I'm no longer vibrating with tense magic as I take her in, pain flooding me at what almost happened to her.

There will be plenty of time to punish Rostraf. I don't care that he's a Prince.

I just have to get her out of here.

But then a figure in the corner takes a step forward, and nothing, not even Vanessa's cries, can stop me from nearly eviscerating the Prince on the spot.

"Keillon!" Vanessa screams as my body is coated in that potent magic again.

And as beautiful as she sounds, I can't take her away until I've gotten rid of this threat.

He must pay.

KEILLON

"Keillon!"

I can barely hear Vanessa's voice over the roaring in my ears. My magic is filling me to the brim, and I swear I am literally on fire. The smell of scorched fabric fills the air as my rage sends flames across the floor.

"Keillon!" Vanessa screams again, and Rostraf chuckles, his eyes alight with amusement at her clear panic.

I can see my mate on the bed out of the corner of my eye, and as desperately as I want to go to her, I know it is better to take out the Prince first. If I unlatch her, she could end up swept away or mixed up in the fight. Even as her begging and crying nearly wrench my heart from my chest, my eyes stay focused on Rostraf.

I want to carve that smile off of his face.

Taking a step closer to him as a deep growl works up my throat, he presses his fist to his mouth, but it does nothing to hide his smile. He's taking great joy by hurting her and angering me, thinking him immune to my wraths because of his title.

Oh, how wrong he is.

Rostraf stops my prowling as he raises his hand, clapping them together slowly as he shakes his head. "Impressive, Keillon. Really impressive."

I grit my teeth, glaring at him. My fingers flex, and I can feel the flames curling up into balls ready to sear his skin. "You are playing a dangerous game, Ro."

He burst out laughing at his nickname. I was always someone that the King's youngest son looked up to, and I remember him as a child, playing

with a dull sword as he learned proper technique. I'd affectionately called him Ro since then.

It seemed that our bond was strong enough to keep him from plunging that sword into my back.

"I truly am impressed! You were so fast, faster than I ever expected. I thought I'd have much more time to..." His eyes flick toward Vanessa as she squirms, her knees jerking as she tries to block herself from his view. "Explore."

"You will not have her!" Flames fly off of me with the words, but Rostraf wipes them from the air with ease. He may have magic, but his skills will never be a match for mine.

"Calm down. I never wanted to keep her. I just wanted a sample, a taste of what is so good that you deny everyone else a try. I mean, she must be incredible, right?"

He chuckles, and just as his head turns to face the bed, I feel my resolve snap. I don't care about my position or that he's a Prince or about what the King will do. All I care about is ripping his fucking throat.

"Do you taste delectable little, pet—"

"Don't you fucking talk to her!" We go flying over the furniture arranged in the sitting area in front of his bed, tumbling over a massive chair that splinters beneath us. "Don't you fucking look at her!"

His magic feels icy as he tries to protect himself from the flames of my rage, and I slam my palms down onto his chest, waiting to see the skin there scorched. Rostraf screams, and now it is me laughing.

I rear back to punch him, when arms grasp me. It seems his useless guards actually do have a purpose as they haul me off of him. I throw my head back as I howl with laughter, and for the first time Rostraf's eyes widen in fear.

Good. They should.

With a deep roar, I let my magic flood through my body, powerful blasts slamming into the chests of the two holding me. Immediately, my hand is on my sword's hilt, always as skilled in combat as I am with magic—if not more.

They are playing a dangerous game as they advance on me, and I can tell they know it. As guards filter in, I dance among them, watching the apprehension flit across their faces as I fell each one with a flick of my wrist. Each decisive blow fills the air with a scream and coats the floor in more blood, making my heart sing. This is what I was born for.

Rostraf climbs to his feet just as I cut through a wave of the soldiers, and I realize he's going for Vanessa. "No!" I scream, throwing a hand out toward him.

My magic wraps around his ankles, causing him to fall face first onto the floor. With another shove forward, I let a shield drop around Vanessa, the magic dissolving the chains so she is still sequestered to the bed but not pinned down. I twist so that she is behind me and I can fight everything coming toward us both.

The amount of guards pouring into the room surprises me, but between my powerful sword arm and my magic, I cut them down. As their numbers grow, more and more land blows against my body, and soon, I find myself on my knees, heaving for a breath as blood drips down my ribs.

Still, I fight. Every time I see Rostraf try to get to his feet, a new rage rushes through me, keeping my magic flowing so that I can send flames skittering across the floor as I twist my sword between guard's ribs or slice their throats.

I don't touch the Prince, though. I'm saving him. He deserves a special kind of death, and once I finish slaughtering all the guards the palace can muster, I will give him his final blow.

I force myself back to my feet as there is a small break of guards attacking me with the use of a ring of fire. It gives me enough time to stabilize myself before the spell is wiped out.

The guards come at me in groups of three or four now, so I have to twist to fend off each attack, leaving a side of me exposed. I use my magic to block as I strike, but I'm starting to draw from the bottom of my well.

The blows are slipping through my defenses, and I gasp as my legs hit the edge of the bed. It serves as a reminder, and I slam my foot into the ground, letting a powerful ripple knock them all back. With clenched teeth, I am struggling to even keep Vanessa's shield in place at this point, but I will not give up.

I will protect my mate until my heart stops beating, and even then I will beg the gods to send me back, to let me finish my mission before claiming my soul.

But then a blast sweeps through the room more powerful than my magic or the guards' or even the Prince's. I hit my knees, my limbs no longer under my command as the few remaining guards fall back.

Making his way through the carnage is King Kres, his head held high and

his eyes ablaze as he takes me in. I know that I should bow before him, that I should submit and grovel and beg him to spare my life for threatening his son.

But I can't. I can't even process the words. My body won't conjure them as my magic flares against his restraint on instinct. No matter what, I have to fight to protect my mate, and it seems my natural convictions are more powerful than the dark elf society I've always struggled against in my soul, or more powerful than that has been constructed. No one can force me to conform to it.

Rostraf must pay. They all must pay for what they did to her. She didn't deserve this, and deep down, I know it is my fault. I never should have left her side, but I had to defend her. I let myself get carried away, and it left too much of an opening for someone to take her.

But the Prince never should have dared. I can't back down even if I wanted to, and as the King looms over me, it takes everything in me to not snarl at him.

"Keillon," the King regards, expecting me to grovel.

The words that come out of me don't even sound like my voice. They are a deep growl, an almost threat. "No one can touch her."

Kres's eyes widen, and I know that our personal history is the only thing that keeps him from slaughtering me on the spot. It is a clear sign of disrespect, and yet, even as the rage covers the shock, I struggle against his hold.

Until I feel a soft hand on my shoulder. I still, realizing much too late that the shield around Vanessa had dropped.

Her hands work over my shoulders, and I start to melt into her embrace as they come around to clasp over my chest. "Keillon," she breathes in my ear, and I'm surprised that the King has stilled, watching the interaction. "Stop this."

I shake my head but it's not with as much conviction as before. "They hurt you. They have to pay for this. I have to make them."

Vanessa strokes my chest, and I can feel everything loosening under her without my command. "I am fine. The only one here that is hurt is you, and I don't want you to make it worse for me."

"Vanessa—" My voice is a desperate plea.

"Keillon, please." It doesn't sound like a request. "Stop this. For me. Please."

The soft edge to her voice plus the feeling of her hands on me breaks down the rest of the King's hold. It makes my magic surge so that I can break free—or maybe he dropped it—and I twist around, never having been more desperate for anything like I am for Vanessa.

I catch her, her arms still around my neck, and I pull her to me, my fingers twining in her hair. I don't care who's watching or what they'll think as I crush her lips to mine in a passionate display.

They need to know she is mine. Not my pet. Not my slave. Not someone to fuck.

But *mine*.

My mate.

VANESSA

I'm not sure if the 'prison' we're placed in for the night is because of Keillon's status or the circumstances involving his son, but the King places us in a guest room on the opposite end of the manor.

To my surprise, I'm locked into the room with Keillon. Guards are stationed outside the room and we're not allowed to leave, but it is still the nicest accommodation I've ever been in. Keillon's mansion rivals it, but there are some luxuries only the royal family can afford.

"You are not to leave here," King Kres says as he stands in the doorway. "If you need something, tell one of the guards. We will discuss your actions tomorrow."

A shiver travels down my spine as his gaze goes from Keillon to me, and then he turns, leaving and the door slams closed. I don't need to ask Keillon to know that there is a magic seal on it, so we couldn't run if we wanted to.

But why would we want to when we've been placed in guest rooms instead of locked in the dungeons that I know are here?

Instantly, his arms are around me, holding me. Keillon turns me around, cupping my face as he traces down my body. Goosebumps break out across my skin that have nothing to do with the temperature, but he doesn't know that.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes scrutinizing every inch of my body with worry in his eyes. I can't reconcile this man with the one from earlier, from the carriage ride over and from dinner. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," I say in a quiet voice. "I told you I'm fine."

He chews on his bottom lip before turning to the wardrobe. I'm surprised

to see robes and spare clothes in them, and he pulls one out, wrapping it around my body. "You must be freezing."

I shake my head, suppressing a laugh as I look at his blood soaked and torn clothes. "I'm in much better shape than you."

Keillon finally looks down at his body, grabbing the shredded fabric and ripping it away from his torso. "I'll be fine," he grunts, waving a hand over his wounds. I'm surprised to see that most are already healed and as his glowing palm passes over them, the cuts and gashes close up.

"Here." I take his hand, pulling him into the adjoining bathroom. I point to the bathtub, not even caring if this makes him angry. "Sit."

He raises his eyebrows but does as I say. He perches on the lip of the tub, and I turn to gather soap and water to clean his grimy skin. As I gather what I need, I ask softly, "Why did the King put us in here? Why not in the dungeons?"

Keillon snorts. "Because his son started it. You are rightfully mine, and even a Prince can't just take you from me."

I nod, crouching in front of him as I start to work the warm water down his front. "Is that why you came after me? To prove a point?"

His hand catches my chin, and I freeze. He has been trying to teach me about my place, and I clearly haven't learned anything from tonight. I'm still letting my mouth get me in trouble.

But when our eyes lock, I don't see anger there. They aren't soft or gentle; he never is, but I wouldn't have fallen for him if he was anything else. I see that concern that tells me Keillon actually does care about what happens to me.

Just his gaze makes it hit that much harder. As if this entire night, the fear I felt and the realizations that washed over me and the relief—and desire—I felt as he fought everyone who tried to get near me, I can't deny how hard I've fallen for this guy.

I never thought I could love a dark elf, but where Keillon is fierce and rough and dangerous, he isn't cruel. He doesn't do things unnecessarily, and I can see how passionate he is. How could I not want him?

Especially knowing what that mouth can do...

But can I hope for more? Isn't it foolish to think that just because he was determined to keep me as *his* means he wants more out of me than my body? He's been avoiding me for days before dragging me to this party, and I don't know what to make of him.

How can I be so hopelessly in love with this guy when I can't figure out what I am to him?

Keillon licks his lips, sending a throbbing heat through me, especially with my hand still on his chest making small circles, and it seems to take an extreme effort to whisper, "No."

My eyebrows knit together, having forgotten my own question. "No?"

He shakes his head. "No. No, I was not trying to prove a point. No, I didn't bring you here because I wanted to show you off or scare you. No, I did not risk my position and reputation by slaughtering everyone in the palace because one person went against me. No."

"Then, why?" I'm trembling, terrified of what he is going to say. "Why go through all of that? Why kiss me in front of the King?"

While I know that dark elves have no problem fucking in front of each other, there was something about this kiss, something like he was claiming me. It was so desperate, so earnest, and it felt like not only did he need me, but he wanted everyone else to know it, too.

His face pinches together. I wouldn't call this expression kind, but I can tell he is overcome with emotions. His feelings don't typically come out, besides amusement and anger, of course, but I've started to be able to pick up on the traces that slip through the cracks.

"Because I love you."

My heart stops, and I would have fallen back on my ass if he was still holding my jaw in his hand. The cloth in my hand drops to the floor, and his knees pinch together to support me as my entire body turns to jelly.

"Keillon—"

He shakes his head. "Vanessa, I have been so fascinated with you since I first laid eyes on you. I was in the club on business, not even interested in the girls, and you took my breath away. I've never felt like I do when I'm with you, and, and..."

He blows out a frustrated breath, and I know this has to be hard for him. I lean up on my knees, sliding my hand over his shoulder to loop behind his neck.

"And?"

"And I let others' expectations put you in a dangerous situation. I never should have brought you here, and maybe a small part of me did want to show you off. You are so incredibly beautiful, and—" A smile tugs at his lips. "You looked so damn good sitting there being obedient, like a good girl."

Fuck. Why does he have to say things like that that undo me? I'm dripping down my legs as he says it, knowing damn well that I was thinking the same thing at dinner.

"I thought you liked my smart mouth," I whisper, testing him.

He clucks his tongue. "I punish you for that smart mouth. But I will reward you for being so good tonight."

I want to melt into him, but I need to tell him the truth first. I can't let him think that this was all on him because as terrified as I was to come here tonight, I'd do anything he says. I love how tough Keillon is, how he punishes and pleasures me, and how fiercely protective he is.

And gods know that I was soaking wet watching him rip apart anyone who looked at me.

How could I not think that's hot?

"Keillon," I whisper, pressing my chest to his so that our faces are only inches apart as he continues to lean over me from his perch. "I love you, too."

His breath catches in his throat, and his whole body goes rigid. I press hard into him, grabbing his hair.

"I know you are good to me, and I know that you will do everything in your power to protect me. You've given me so much, and...I can't lie. I like the way you take control over me, trying to make me submit and punishing me when I don't. I know that you'll never go too far with me, and you are the first person that I've been able to just trust, to give myself over to."

I lean in, our noses brushing. "I love who I am when I'm with you, and I love you."

Keillon stays frozen for a beat longer, and just as I am about to pull back, thinking that maybe this was all some cruel joke, he cups the back of my head and our lips crash together.

He kisses me the same way he did in the Prince's room, like he is so desperate for me that he might die without this kiss. He holds me like he can't let me go, and although he fists my hair and his hand digs into my hip, I know that none of that is the brutal behavior of a dark elf.

I never realized how much fun this dominating personality could be, but I meant every word I said, even parts I hadn't admitted to myself. I like not having to worry or overthink anything. I know that he won't hurt me, and that has let me reveal some parts of myself I thought were long gone.

As he bites my lip, I let out a soft moan, and a grin works up his lips.

He's also taught me parts of myself that I didn't even know about. Like

how I need a little pain with my pleasure.
With Keillon, I am a different person.
And I like her.

KEILLON

My heart thunders with Vanessa's admission. I think I've known the entire time how I felt about her, but to hear that she cares for me, too, makes my whole body feel weightless. I didn't know if she could ever see past my violent nature. I'll never be as soft as a human.

But as she moans against my mouth with each tug of her hair and nip of her lip, I can tell that's what she loves about me. I can give her more than a simple human male could.

As if to prove that to both of us, I grip her hips, slamming her against me as I rise. Her legs lock around my waist, but as I start toward the bedroom, she pulls back to look at me, her nose wrinkling a little.

My heart nearly stops. It hits me all at once that she might not want me. After all this build up, I had assumed that her body craved me. Maybe she had just been abiding by our deal this entire time, where my motives were more carnally driven.

But her lips are curled up into an adorable smile, and she undoes the knot in my chest with a soft giggle. "You're really bloody," she whispers, and I can't help but chuckle.

Of course that's what it is. I'm smeared in gore and blood, something I'm all too used to, all over my mate. How could I think that she would want that? My girl may be dirty, but not in that sense.

I nod, pulling her back to me with a tug of her hair while my other hand kneads her ass. I wait until she is grinding against me, her voice tilting up in soft whimpers before dropping her to the floor.

Vanessa throws me a glare, even as I make sure she doesn't fall, and I

catch her in a bruising grip that I know makes her unbelievably wet. With a tsk, I reprimand her. "You know better than to act like that."

Her gaze softens a touch, especially as I run my thumb over her bottom lip roughly enough that it makes my cock jerk with anticipation. The tiny whimper she gives me quickly turns into a moan as I thrust my thumb into her mouth. Like a good girl, Vanessa sucks on it furiously.

"Yes," I whisper, and her eyes light up. "That's it."

I pull my hand free of her mouth, taking in her swollen lip and flushed face, and it takes everything in me to turn around. I make it to the shower, flicking it on, and the water is instantly warm.

Turning, I cock an eyebrow as I grip the waistband of my pants. "Come shower with me." I rip the blood soaked clothes from my form, keeping my body angled away so that she doesn't see my erection. I nearly laugh as I see her gaze drop, and disappointment flickers across her gaze as I keep myself hidden.

I disappear under the water with a chuckle, and almost immediately, I feel the slender arms of Vanessa twining around my waist. One hand glides up my chest while the other grabs my shaft, working up the length as the warm water coats us.

"I thought you were going to reward me," she whispers against my back, and I grin.

"Is that what you want, my blossom?" I groan as she flicks the edge of my head. "You want me to make you come?"

Vanessa groans as she presses her forehead to my back. "*Please.*"

I smirk. Without a response, I turn around, catching her around her hips. A yelp dies in her throat as I hoist her up against the wall until her core is even with my face. "Keillon," she cries out, and I can hear that edge of desperation.

It makes my ball clench how much she trusts with her body. She lets me handle her in any way, being so obedient because she knows that I will never hurt her.

Fuck, I love her.

"Is this why you were being such a good girl tonight, pet?"

I skim my nose along the inside of her thigh, keeping my hands gripping her hips as I nudge her legs over my shoulders. Her hands slip into my long hair, pulling at it hard as I keep her pressed up against the wall.

Vanessa whimpers as I pass over her dripping center to kiss along her

other thigh. "Keillon," she whimpers out, trying to buck against my hold. She's not even worried about falling even though she's precariously perched.

"You didn't answer my question, little blossom."

"Yes!" she gasps out. "Yes, I was being good so I'd be rewarded."

"And do you think you deserve that reward?" My head's now between her legs as I work my tongue up the outside of her folds.

"Yes!" She's a writhing mess of need as she cries out. "Yes. I *need* it."

That desperation undoes me. She really was so good tonight, and I need to taste her. After almost losing her, I need to feel Vanessa everywhere. I need to mark her as mine, to truly claim her, before I lose that chance.

I bury my face against her core, lapping at her center until she screams. I let her guide my head up to her clit, working slow, tight circles around it until Vanessa starts to curse under her breath.

That's her sign, I've learned. That's when the teasing is starting to hit her limit, and she's going to smart off to me just to get *something*.

I decide to give her what she wants tonight, sucking her clit into my mouth so hard that she thrashes against me. Shifting her slightly, I curl my right arm around her thigh so that my hand continues to work over her pearl as I thrust my tongue deep into her.

"Oh, fuck!" she screams, her thighs tightening on my head, and I don't care if I suffocate here. I can't get enough of this woman as I drink her in, my fingers bringing her so close to the edge of her orgasm that she's trembling.

"Keillon!" Vanessa is bent forward, crying out through clenched teeth, and it is taking immense strength to stay balanced with her wild movements. I won't ask her to contain herself, especially not as she says my favorite words. "Oh, gods, I'm going to come!"

I pinch her clit, using my tongue to rub her walls, and they squeeze me tight as she climaxes. I keep lapping at her, enjoying her sweet taste until she eases back with deep, heaving breaths.

Lifting my head, I give her a smile. "Was it worth it?"

Vanessa nods, her eyes still rolled back in her head. "It was worth it."

Sliding her legs over my shoulders, I ease her back down so that she rests against my hips, her full ass cupped in my hands. Her hands fly up around my neck and she pulls me down for a sweet, slow kiss that makes my cock ache.

"Now, it's your turn."

She tries to wiggle out of my arms, but I shake my head. "Not this time, sweet blossom." I lean in, kissing the tip of her nose, her jaw, her throat. "Not

this time." I trail kisses up the other side until I can press my forehead to hers. "Vanessa, I want you, all of you, if you are ready."

She grinds her hips against me as she bites her lower lip. "I've been ready since our first night together. There's no one I'd rather have than you, Keillon."

Just the sound of my name on her lips makes me want to bury myself into her, but I know I have to take it slow. I may be rough, but I am not insensitive or cruel. I won't hurt her more than necessary.

I pull Vanessa's lips to mine, kissing her slowly as I work my length between her lips, grinding up against her until she is dripping. She gasps softly every time I hit her clit, and as I start a slow descent down her neck, biting her favorite spots, I ease the tip of my cock against her opening.

She is so painfully tight that her body clenches against the intrusion, but as I bite her skin, her pussy flutters, letting me ease in a little more. By the time I make it to her collar bone, I've pushed the entire head in.

"Oh, Keillon," she moans, her head tipped back against the wall. "I want more of you." I nip the skin on her chest. "I *need* more."

I chuckle softly, but I know that it is only to distract myself from how hard it is for me to hold back. I start up a slow motion, working into her as gently as possible with long strokes. It's painful, for both of us, and by the time I'm fully in her, we're both painting.

I press my head against her shoulder, afraid to move as her body squeezes around me, and I let out a soft mutter. "Fuck, Vanessa."

She tightens around me more. "What?" Her voice sounds so soft and insecure that I have to lift my head.

"You feel even more incredible than I expected."

Her blue eyes light up, and she shifts, trying to grind along me. "Really?"

"Oh, sweet blossom, I'm afraid I'm going to blow if I move."

Her hands grip at the base of my skull, pulling my hair tightly. "I want it, though." Fuck, the way she whimpers it out is going to be my undoing. "I want to feel you in me for days after. I want you to destroy me for anyone else. And I want you to come deep in me so that it cannot be denied that I am yours."

This woman... Fucking Glacies, this woman, with her innocent eyes and sinful body. She is going to break me with her soft touches and that dirty fucking mouth.

"I promised you a reward," I tell her, sliding out slowly. "And I'll give it

to you."

My hands dig into her hips to hold her as I slam up into her with a deep groan, and she lets out a scream that I'm sure the guards could hear. Good. Let them.

I keep her pinned with my shoulder driven against hers and my hands pinching her hips as I rut into her, giving her everything. I want to claim her, to make sure she knows that no one could ever make her come like I do, and when her body clenches so tightly around me that I know I won't make it out, I drive deep into her, filling her with my release just like she asked.

Vanessa grips my face as our orgasms claim us and presses a hard kiss to my mouth. "I love you," she gasps out before swallowing me again.

Holy Maws do I love her.

And I will never let her go.

VANESSA

When I wake up, a jerking start floods through me. I've never woken up in the bed with anyone except my sister, and to feel thick arms around me and bare skin pressed against my back, panic sends me trying to escape.

But then I hear the sweetest voice. "Mine," Keillon rumbles in my ear as he drags me back against his body. "My blossom." He presses a kiss on top of my head, and I'm not entirely sure he's even awake.

I don't mind it, though, as I snuggle against him, soaking in his scent. There's only one person I want to hold me like this, and I can't help the soft giggle that filters out of me at my excitement to wake up next to him.

"Something funny, sweet girl?"

I roll my hips out of reflex. His voice is so sexy in the morning, and I love it. I'm shocked to notice how hard he already is. His hand slides down my body, grasping my hip and pressing me to him as he grinds against me.

"Didn't get enough last night?" He nips at my ear.

Gods, I am sore after last night. Not only did Keillon finally—*fucking finally*—take me, but he made love to me all over this room until I was so exhausted he had to carry me to bed.

That's not to say I couldn't keep up after the few hours of rest I got.

"Last night...was incredible." I shake my head, glad he can't see my massive smile and how my skin flushes. "But do we have time for more?"

Immediately, I'm flipped under him, his body hovering over me, and with one look at his uncovered upper half and his gorgeous face, I know we can make time. Keillon dips down to kiss me, long and slow, and I groan as I

spread my legs for him.

"I'll find the time for you, sweet blossom."

"Keillon..." I drag my hands down his back, feeling the way his muscles flex under my hand, and his mouth starts down my throat. My back arches up to meet him, and just as I gasp out, feeling his cock pressing at my entrance, the door bursts open.

Immediately, Keillon is between me and the door, his magic coating his skin, and he's jerked the blanket up over my shoulders before I've even drawn a breath.

Why does it turn me on so much that he's this protective over me?

Before Keillon can get out more than a growl, the guard barks out, "Your presence is required."

The orange magic flares around him, and the guard behind that one adds, much more gently, "By the King."

The door slams shut, and the magic falls, as does Keillon's head. He droops, and I shift up on my knees to wrap my arms around his waist. I plant a kiss between his shoulder blades, and he finally grasps my hands and squeezes them.

"We can face this," I tell him. "Together."

We get ready quickly, Keillon finding me some makeshift clothes in the wardrobe. As we exit the room, the guards follow us even after Keillon's insistence that he knows this palace better than them and can get to the King's hall himself.

As soon as we enter the throne room, the guards fall back, pulling the doors closed. Keillon comes to the edge of the dais, dropping to his knees as he bows his head. I hit the ground next to him, waiting to follow his lead.

"I should send you to your death," the King starts with no greeting. "That's the punishment for attacking a royal."

Panic strikes deep in my heart, but I hear the King sigh. "Keillon, get up."

Beside me, the dark elf rises, and I don't move until Keillon nudges me. He looks up at the King, who is staring down at his general with an exasperated look. "You really fucked this one up, you know that?"

I blinked, surprised at the lack of formality between the King and Keillon. Then again, they must have worked closely together with Keillon being so high ranking. They must have a different kind of bond than everyone else normally has with the King.

"Sir, I can explain—"

King Kres waves him off with his hand. "This you cannot explain away, Keillon. You can't tell me how important the mission was or how the outcome makes up for the carnage you left behind. You attacked a member of the royal family. This isn't like all those other times."

The silence is thick, and I feel suffocated by the air as we watch the King drag his hand down his face. "You're being demoted." Keillon's shoulders stiffen but it's the only indication that this news bothers him. "Since you've done so much for your country, you may keep your life as a lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir," he breathes, and I have to suppress a sigh of relief.

But it's clear that I've felt it too early as the King's gaze sweeps to the guards on the back wall. "Take the human to the execution grounds. We'll settle this problem easily, and then maybe." His eyes flick to Keillon. "You can keep your head on straight?"

Pure terror grips me, but without reason, as Keillon's magic flickers along his arms. He tucks me in close, throwing a vicious glance at the guards approaching. They already look wary of him.

"No one is taking her as long as I still breathe," he snarls, and King Kres's eyebrows shoot up.

All I can wonder is what will happen to my sister. Will Keillon take care of her in my absence? If I'm sentenced to death, will the Doctor continue to care for her indefinitely? I have to hope so, because my other option is letting Keillon sacrifice himself for me, and I can't keep letting that happen.

I send up a silent prayer that someone will look after Sandy when I'm gone.

My hand grips Keillon's bicep, and his magic flickers out as he turns to look at me, not allowing the flames to get near my skin. "You can't win every fight against me," I tell him.

He shakes his head, throwing a hand out toward the guards so that skitter back a few steps. "I *will* fight anyone who thinks they can threaten you."

Tears prick at my eyes, and I bite down on my trembling lower lip. "I'm going to go with them," I tell him, my voice thick. "Please look after Sandy for me. Please don't let anything happen to her."

I take one step back, and he wrenches my arm forward so forcefully I nearly tumble against his chest. "You will look after her yourself. You're not going anywhere."

I can't fight the tears as they break free. They glide down my cheeks, turning the skin hot and blotchy. Tentatively, I reach up to touch his face,

stroking along his rough jaw.

"I love you." It feels like I'm cutting out a piece of my heart as I gasp the words out. I've spent so long being sheltered, and now that I found someone who treats me like Keillon does, I have to give him up. I have to give everything up.

But I don't regret doing so for him.

"Vanessa—"

"Let me go!" My tone is weaker than I intended, but the words are still powerful.

Anguish swirls in his eyes. His eyes flicker between me and the oncoming guards, and to my surprise, his magic doesn't flow across the floor. I swear I can see his heart breaking in his eyes, and when he speaks, his voice is rough and hoarse. "I can't."

He whips around, the desperation clear in every movement of his body as he stares up at the King. His shoulders are slumped forward, and his hands tremble. His jaw works, and I realize that it's not because he can't figure out the words; there are tears glistening in his eyes that he's trying not to shed.

"I'll relinquish my territory." Keillon's voice sounds unlike himself. His words come out thick and broken. "I'll give up my title. I don't even need to be a lieutenant. I will sacrifice myself for her life."

For the first time, I see something flicker across the King's face that is more than tired annoyance. His eyebrows lift, and his gaze actually lands on me. I can't decide if I like the attention or not, but Keillon sweeps me in front of him, caging me in his arms as he practically begs his King.

"Sir, tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it. You just can't take her. I know that I fucked up. I can admit that. But this was not on her."

King Kres lets out a low whistle, and, to my surprise, a smirk spreads across his face. He's staring straight at me as he says, "You must be a sorcerer. I have never heard Keillon admit that he—" The King chuckles softly. "That he fucked up. It's always some reason or another."

Then, his eyes flick behind me. "Take her."

"No!" Keillon crumples me against his body. "Sir, *please*."

Kres's eyes are hard as they land on the formal general. "Give me one good reason to spare her."

My heart thunders in my chest, and I am shaking against Keillon's body, even as he tries to hold me together. I can't take it, and I'm so afraid that this is going to cost him his life. I nearly cry out that there is no reason to protect

me when he says softly, "She is my mate."

The King's eyebrow arches. "Your what?"

Keillon stiffens, drawing himself up behind me as he levels his gaze at the King. In a deep and authoritative voice, he says, "Vanessa is my true mate."

I swear to the gods below that my heart stops in that moment.

VANESSA

I don't know what to make of Keillon right now. Is he saying all of this just to protect me? Would he really lie to the King and give up everything just for me? I know that he said he loves me, but I guess I don't understand this kind of love.

Or maybe I just didn't think dark elves were capable of it.

But it must be true, right? A mate is something that dark elves don't lie about. It's forever, and they know what kind of commitment that is. It's more than marriage. He's giving himself to me for the entirety of his life no matter what happens.

I gulp, ready to protest. He's just swept up in the moment and after a week, he'll have forgotten about me.

But then Keillon grips my shoulders, spinning me around. His gray eyes search mine, and I can see the intensity in them. They burn with a passion I've never seen in a dark elf's eyes, especially not when they looked at me before.

His thumbs stroke my shoulders gently, and I have to fight a shiver at just the feeling of his skin on mine. There's so much electricity between us that it's impossible to ignore. There's no way that he could have this with anyone else, right?

I already know that I won't. I'll spend my life comparing everyone to him, missing him, wishing that I had him. I love him so much it hurts.

So, why do I think he couldn't feel the same?

"Vanessa," he says so softly that I'm sure no one else can hear it. His hands curl around my upper arms, and I start to tremble. Tears collect in my

eyes, and I'm so afraid of shattering this moment that I hold my breath. "Will you be my mate?"

I reach up tentatively to touch his cheek, and he turns into my hand. The previous night flashes in my mind, but it's not the wild sex or even his confession that floods behind my eye lids. It's the way he kissed me in front of the King, the way that he didn't care if anyone saw us because he just had to have me in that moment.

And with that image dancing through my mind, I smile at him. "Yes."

He blinks, his jaw going slack just a little. "Really?"

I nod, letting out a soft laugh. "Yes. Yes! Of course."

I throw my arms around him, and Keillon's arms slide down to wrap around my waist as he presses me to his chest. When one of his hands cups the back of my head, tugging at my hair lightly, I lean back, eager for his lips on mine.

Only for us to remember that we aren't alone as the King speaks. "Well, this is...intriguing."

Jolting apart, we turn to face King Kres, and I let my hand intertwine with Keillon's, not ready to let him go, yet.

I expect Keillon to stiffen or shout at the King for calling our love intriguing, but to my surprise, he only nods. "A human and a dark elf," he says with a soft smile.

"You once called that a fool's concept of mating."

"I was a fool then."

King Kress purses his lips as he looks between Keillon and I, and as he leans back, his body relaxing, he gives a small nod. "For a true mate, almost any crime is forgivable. If you are willing to commit to each other now, before me, I can spare her. No one would touch her once she's mated, and we will avoid another unfortunate incident such as this one."

Now? My body stills. It's one thing for Keillon to call me his mate. It's another to expect him to commit to me now. It's too much, and I turn to tell him that he doesn't have to do this for me. It's social suicide—not to mention his career—to be mated to a human woman.

But when I look at him, he's already watching me with excitement in his eyes. "I know it's not perfect, but I'm ready to claim you as mine." He squeezes my hand. "I have been yours since that first night, and I should have said it before. This was never just about our arrangement."

My throat was thick with tears as I nodded. "I wouldn't want anyone

else."

He turns toward me, taking my other hand in his. Squeezing them, he sends another vote of confidence down to me. Keillon's not just doing this to protect me or keep me in the arrangement. He truly loves me, wants me, and while our love may be wild and intense, it is also beautiful.

And I never want to let him go.

"Let's do this," I whisper.

My handsome elf beams, and without taking his eyes off me, he raises his voice for the King to hear. "We are more than ready, sir."

I swear I see the ghost of a smile coast over King Kres's face as he takes us in, but he says nothing about his feelings on our pairing. "As the King of Lliandor, I invoke the gods below to observe this union and the promises that come with it."

I know nothing of getting married, not as a human or an elf, but when Keillon's mouth quirks at the edges, I know he'll guide me through it just as he has guided me through everything else.

"Vanessa," he says clearly enough for everyone to hear in the room. "When I met you, I knew instantly that you were unlike any woman I have ever met. You have changed me, and now, I can't look at the world the same. I wouldn't know what to do without you by my side."

Tears slip from my eyes, and he momentarily pauses to wipe them away. I turn to kiss his palm, and his breathing shudders. I'm shocked to see his eyes shining when I lift my head up.

"I can't imagine a life without you, and so, I promise to do everything I can for you. I will work every day to make you happy, to provide for you, to be the mate you deserve. I want my life to be a gift to you, a way for me to care for you the way you should have always been taken care of."

When he finishes, looking at me expectantly, I realize that my throat is burning too much with unshed tears for me to speak. I try to clear my throat, but it only forces a sob upward, and Keillon's smile turns sad.

"Is this not what you want?"

I shake my head, reaching up to touch his cheek as I forget entirely where we are. "It is. That's not why I'm crying."

"Then what is it?" There's a slight tremble to his voice, and I realize that he's growing nervous.

Biting my lip, I manage to force out the first few words without breaking down. "Because I can't believe how lucky I am." I take a shuddering breath,

not bothering to even think through the words that spill out of my mouth. I don't want to hold back, and it's time for Keillon to know the full extent of how I feel about him.

"Since the day I met you, I never could believe how lucky I am. You are such an incredibly handsome, brave, generous elf. You've shown me a side to you that I know you keep hidden, and that trust means more to me than I could put into words. You've defended me when no one else would, and you've opened up your playful side as you chased me around your manor. You've shown me so much, not just about you but about life."

Keillon's eyes flash bright with surprise and affection, and I keep going, not letting anything make me doubt what I am about to say. "I know that you are not as harsh as you've come across, and I love your roughness. You have a kind heart beneath it all, but I don't love you in spite of your harsh exterior. I love you more because of it. I love you for every snarky remark, every teasing glance, and every soft touch that speaks volumes, and I promise to spend the rest of my life and beyond that trying to show you just how much I love it all."

Now, Keillon looks choked up, and I don't even bother to hide my smug smile. Like I expected, he snaps out a smart comment. "It wasn't a competition, you know." His voice is too strangled for me to believe that he's doing anything but trying to cover up how much my words affected him.

"If it was, I won," I whisper, squeezing his hands.

"There is no doubt in my mind that you are true mates," King Kres announces, and I nearly jolt out of my skin. I had forgotten about him. "If the gods below will it, your union will be finalized!"

We all pause, and I don't know what I am waiting for. But then I see the reflections of the mirrors and even some windows flicker with a greenish flame that flows across the surface, heating it up until the surfaces seem to glow.

King Kres leans forward, his eyes growing wide, and Keillon's lips part in amazement. He laughs, recovering before the King as he shouts, "I think we've been blessed!"

That snaps the King out of his mind, and he nods. "Yes, I think the gods are very pleased," he says, and I almost want to ask him what would have happened if he had killed me instead as a small reminder. I leave the words out of my mouth as he tells us, "You may kiss, completing your union."

Keillon takes my face in his hands, dipping his head down low. Just

before his lips brush mine, he whispers, "I'm sorry that this is how we had to be mated. I wish I could have given you more."

I twine my arms around his neck. "I am happy as long as I have you."

I pull him against me, savoring his taste, and just as I start to get lost in him, I hear the King behind us. "Not to interrupt, but I believe what is about to happen should not occur in my throne room."

We break apart, my skin turning a furious red, and Keillon dips his head to the King. Kres waves him off with a smile. "You are both free to go, and I think it's best if you leave the palace for a while."

I chuckle as Keillon eagerly tugs me from the throne room. He catches me in the hallway, lifting me up into his arms as he kisses me, and when we break apart breathless, I whisper, "Take me home."

KEILLON

I don't think I'm going to make it to the carriage before I rip these clothes off of Vanessa's body. Last night was wonderful, but there is a new desperate edge to our kisses, a need to claim each other as new mates.

I don't care who sees us as I walk through the palace with Vanessa in my arms, her legs locked around my hips and my face buried against her neck. I know these halls well enough that I don't even need to look up as I navigate to the front door. Instead, I keep all of my attention on her body, nipping along her tender skin until she's gasping.

"Kiellon!" Vanessa's hands grip my hair, tugging hard at the strands until my scalp burns, and it only makes my throbbing erection worse. No wonder she likes when I punish her. The pain and pleasure mixing is too delicious.

"Yes, my sweet blossom?" My voice is a soft purr against her skin, and it makes her jolt against me.

"You are driving me mad! Can you not wait until we get home?"

She says it again. *Home*. Not your manor. Not your home. She calls it her home, and that only pushes my need to make her come apart beneath me to unimaginable levels.

"No," I growl as I push open the front doors with my foot. My carriage awaits at the bottom of the steps, and I use my magic to descend the steps so I don't have to worry about where my feet land. "I need you now."

The door wrenches open with a flick of my rest and I lay Vanessa out on the tufted bench, clamoring up inside the cabin. As soon as the door behind me shuts, my driver takes off.

I waste no time, grabbing the front of Vanessa's shirt and jerking up. The

fabric rips easily, and a soft sigh falls from her lips. I know that she likes when I am this desperate for her, so I don't hold back.

"I won't have any clothes when we get back!" she protests.

My cock jerks as I grip her face, pulling her to look at me as I give her a narrowed gaze. "Are you arguing with my decisions?"

Her tongue peaks out as she swipes it along her bottom lip. Just the sight has my balls clenching. But what makes all the blood rust to my erection is the way her teeth sink into that lip as she shakes her head.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers out. "Don't punish me."

Fuck. She knows what she's doing, but the pitiful look on her face is going to drive me mad. Especially as she helps wiggle out of her pants as I pull them down with one hand, never letting go of her jaw or breaking eye contact.

My fingers trace up the insides of her legs, and she shudders as I skim past her slick folds to go down the other thigh and back up again. Her hips jerk, and I can tell that she would be bucking up against me if she didn't think I'd continue to tease her for it.

"Do you deserve a release?" I ask her.

"Yes," she cries out, opening her legs wider.

My eyes drop between them, and she is dripping onto my seats. If I were a lesser man, I'd lose all my self control right now. Instead, I let my fingers make a lazy circle just outside of her folds, barely avoiding her clit and aching center.

"You've been a good girl," I coo. "So good before the King. Maybe you do deserve something in return."

"Please!" That desperate edge to her voice makes my hand move without my conscious decision. "Oh, fuck!" she cries out as I delve two fingers inside of her, curling them so that I can stretch her and rub her walls at the same time.

"That's it, my love," I tell her as I release her jaw, skimming my hand down to her breast. I pinch her nipple, twisting it as the thumb on my other hand reaches up toward her clit.

Her walls flutter around my fingers as I keep pumping, rubbing the delicate pearl with the motion, and a bead of moisture leaks out of my cock as I watch Vanessa's back arch with pleasure. She takes everything I give her, greedily drinking it up, and it makes me want to rip my fingers out of her and fill her up with my cock instead.

But she was willing to sacrifice her life for me, so I can handle a few more minutes of stiffness to bring her to an orgasm.

"I...I..." Her words keep getting lost in her madness, and I grin.

"Use your words, sweet girl."

"Your mouth!"

I pull hard on her nipple, releasing it and watching her breast bounce back. "What about my mouth?"

"I want it!" She's nearly screaming as she forces the words out between pants. "I want your mouth on my clit!"

I cluck my tongue though it sends a rush of heat between my legs. "So demanding with that smart mouth." I smack her clit, and she inhales sharply. "You'll pay for that."

"Please, Keillon," Vanessa whimpers, and I bring my mouth to her stomach.

Working slowly down her body, I nip at the soft flesh until her body is trembling. By the time I reach the spot between her legs, she's nearly vibrating.

I move my thumb out of the way, shifting my wrist as I press another finger inside of her. I keep pumping with slow, measured movements, and I bring my lips to her clit. Gently, I blow on it, watching the goosebumps break out across her skin with a chuckle.

"Ke— Oh!"

I suck her clit into her mouth hard, picking up the pace with my fingers, and I know that she is close. Her fingers scratch the seat as she searches for purchases, her body bowing under me, and I keep going harder until her breathing hitches and then bursts out of her chest on a sharp scream.

Easing off her clit, I keep going with my fingers, slowing down until her back hits the seat again. I pull my hand out with a satisfying pop, and give her a soft smirk as her eyes flutter.

"Is that what you wanted, sweet girl?"

"Yes," she murmurs.

The carriage jolts to a stop, and I rip my shirt off, pulling Vanessa up into my arms. I tug the shirt over her head so that her body is covered by the large expanse of fabric, and carry her out of the carriage and up to my room.

She stays curled up in my arms, and when I sink to my knees at the edge of the mattress, her arms reach up to grip me. "Don't put me down."

"You need rest," I murmur as I press a kiss to her temple. Her eyes

haven't opened since her orgasm, and it hits me just how much she's been through in the last day.

"I need you." Her blue eyes slowly lift to look at me, and I feel my breath catch in my throat like it always does when she pins me with her sharp gaze. A soft smile tugs at her lips. "I haven't been taken by my mate, yet."

A sharp growl rips through me at that, and I toss her back onto the bed. She throws my shirt onto the ground as I kick out of my pants. Where the carriage ride had been a slow and delicate tease, the frenzy we are in right now is a passionate and rushed affair.

Vanessa pulls me over her as I crawl onto the bed, her heels digging into my ass. I pause as she tries to draw my hips between her legs. "I don't want to rush this with you."

She pushes my hair out of my eyes. "You have your entire life to tease me into oblivion. Just for tonight, please gods, fuck my brains out."

I swear I've died and gone to Helias to have a mate like her. With a swift rock of my hips, I push between her folds, and her body sucks me in.

Vanessa lets out a strangled cry as she lifts her hips to meet my thrust, and I keep one hand next to her head so I don't crush her. With the other, I dig my fingers into her hip, holding her still as I push open her knee with elbow. Her body opens to accept me deeper and I pound into her.

Her nails rake down my back, only edging me on as I slam against her hips. I've never been so forceful with her, but she's right. I want to fuck her hard, to take everything for myself. This is my first time with my mate, and while I usually like the game of chase, to tease and edge, tonight, I want to be engulfed in her.

"Fuck, Keillon!" She screams loudly, and yet, even though the entire manor could hear it, it isn't enough for me.

I rock back on my heels, grabbing her knees and pushing them up to her chest as I thrust deeper into her. She squirms beneath me, her stomach bulging as I drive deep into her and I hold her in place.

"It's so deep!" she pants out. "Keillon, I... I can't... I'm going to—" Her words are broken off with a sharp cry as I slam deep into her, her body trembling around me, and if I wasn't already on the edge of coming, her orgasm would have made me.

Vanessa tightens around me unlike she ever has before, and it's almost painful as she clamps down on my cock. Her body shakes around me, pulling out all of my release, and when I fall forward, cupping her head, she trails her

fingers down my chest.

I kiss the top of her head, rolling to my side while we're still joined, and she throws a leg over my hip. Looking down into those soft blue eyes, she whispers, "I love you."

"And I love you, my sweet blossom," I tell her, pressing her closer to my body.

And I always will.

But I don't have to tell her that.

VANESSA

I'm more nervous than I expected, bringing Keillon to meet my sister. Keillon and Sandy are the two people I love most in this world, but I wonder if they'll... get along.

Keillon's perspective on humans has certainly changed, but it's just been me and him for a while.

Will he like Sandy?

Will Sandy like *him*?

I'm trying not to get too... overly concerned. Keillon has done more than enough to prove his devotion to me, so I should trust him. Trust that he will be gentle with Sandy.

"Are you ready?" I ask Keillon. We're standing outside the door of my former home with Sandy. I've been visiting her there, telling her about Keillon, wanting to ease her into my new relationship.

It was quite the shock for my little sister that I was dating a dark elf. I didn't go into too many details about how Keillon and I came to be together, but I told her that he loved me and was the reason why I was able to take care of her recently.

"I think so," Keillon responds to my question. I rest my hands on his chest and look into his eyes. The cool gray helps calm me down, and I take a deep breath.

"I think so, too," I whisper. Keillon leans down to kiss my forehead before we enter my old shack.

Sandy is waiting with the Doctor. He is the one who's been watching her while I get her ready to move into our new home.

At first, she was apprehensive about the move. This shack is the only home she's ever known, but the more I described the beauty of the gardens that surround the mansion, and the different rooms she'll be able to play in.

I even promised to let her pick whichever room she wanted to be hers (and thankfully Keillon agreed to that request afterwards).

So, today is meant to be the day we take Sandy with us. My visits have included some packing. Because we had so little money, we didn't accumulate much, but I wanted to make sure Sandy has everything she needs when she leaves.

I walk in front of Keillon as we approach Sandy.

I kneel down, and Sandy rushes into my arms for a hug. I hold her tightly, thanking the gods that she's doing so well.

I feel Sandy's face shift, and her mouth comes close to my ear.

"Is he the elf?" Sandy has been referring to Keillon as "the elf." She seems spooked to say his name. I suspect it's from years of being told not to even look the dark elves in the eyes.

It's a big step that she's referring to Keillon at all.

I pull my head back, so I can look Sandy in the eye. Her blue eyes match mine, and they are wide with curiosity.

"Yes. Keillon is my mate," I whisper back. "Do you want to say hi?" Sandy's eyes move past me to look at Keillon. I follow her gaze. She isn't looking directly into his face, instead resting her gaze around his chest.

I feel her little hand squeeze my arm. I look up at Keillon and nod, letting him know he can come closer.

As he leans down beside me, Sandy leans into me. I rub her back to reassure her.

"Hello," Keillon starts. "Your name is Sandy?"

Sandy looks to me for permission, and I smile to let her know it's okay to speak. She looks back at Keillon before nodding and then hiding her face in my arm.

I had a feeling Sandy would be shy around Keillon because he's a dark elf, but she's doing a good job so far.

Keillon's hand goes into his pocket, and I hear crinkling. The noise catches Sandy's attention, and she pokes her head out, her eyes zeroing in on the candy between Keillon's fingers.

"Your sister told me you like sweet things?" Before coming to the house, Keillon had stopped by a confectionery store. I helped him pick out

something I knew Sandy would like.

“Would you like one?” Sandy starts to reach out her hand but then quickly pulls away. Keillon smiles and opens up the candy. He pops it in his mouth.

“It’s pretty good,” he comments. He pulls another one out of his pocket and holds it out. This time, Sandy is quicker to take the candy from Keillon.

Keillon and I watch Sandy as she looks down and slowly unwraps the candy. She rolls it into between her fingers for a few seconds. Candy isn’t something we typically had because of how expensive it can be.

After admiring the treat, Sandy places it in her mouth. She smiles as she sucks on it.

“Did I tell the truth?” Keillon asks.

“You did!” Sandy mumbles around her candy. I laugh at her sudden enthusiasm.

We move from the floor and take a seat. I hold Sandy in my lap while Keillon sits next to us. Sandy is opening up a little more, not so tense anymore. She swings her feet back and forth while Keillon asks her all kinds of questions.

He asks about what she likes, the games she plays, the things she is interested in. I smile because I’ve already told Keillon a lot of this information because I wanted to catch him up to speed on everything Sandy.

But here Keillon is engaging with Sandy just because he wants to talk with her. Connect with her.

Keillon has come such a long way. The attitude he had towards humans when we first met, that we are mere slaves, is gone. If I hadn’t been there to witness it, Keillon’s evolution would have seemed impossible.

It makes me wonder if there is hope for a better Liiandor. Maybe it’s a lofty dream and a little naive of me, but witnessing Keillon’s change gives me hope.

I look over at the Doctor who watches the three of us with interest. I kiss Sandy on the side of her head and tell her to keep talking with Keillon while I talk to the Doctor.

“Hi, Doctor,” I whisper. I cross my arms over my chest, feeling a little self conscious.

“Hi, Vanessa. It’s good to see you.”

“Thank you for taking care of Sandy.”

“Of course,” he smiles. We both watch Keillon and Sandy talk. “Are you

happy?”

The Doctor’s question surprises me a little bit, but it makes sense. He’s always looked after me, worried about my and Sandy’s safety.

I nod at the Doctor’s question.

“Yes, I am.” The Doctor doesn’t seem convinced, looking over at Keillon.

“And he loves you? You love him?”

“We do. Keillon asked me to be his mate in front of the King,” I reveal. The Doctor’s eyes go wide at my admission. I had kept that to myself, but I want to show that Keillon has a true devotion to me that goes beyond the passing interest more dark elves show in humans.

The Doctor sighs.

“I can’t say I approve of or even fully understand what is happening, but I trust that you know what you are doing, and I know that you would never do anything to hurt Sandy.”

If I didn’t believe in Keillon, I wouldn’t introduce him to Sandy or have her come live with us. I do think he is a changed man who will give me and my sister a much better life.

One with love.

“You deserve all the happiness in the world, Vanessa, and I hope you get it,” the Doctor finishes. On the verge of tears, I give him a hug.

“Thank you,” I breathe. “Thank you for everything.” The Doctor says a heartfelt goodbye to Sandy before leaving. I had wondered if there was anything I could do to thank him for all he has done for me and Sandy, but when I had brought it up, he told me not to worry.

He’s a true angel in the lowtowns, and I know whoever’s life he touches will be made better.

Keillon, Sandy, and I gather the remainder of Sandy’s things in preparation to head back to our new home.

“Can we have a minute?” I ask.

“Of course,” Keillon nods, exiting the house. I take Sandy’s hand and we walk through the few rooms in the shack. It’s not a long walk, but it holds a lot of weight. We say goodbye to the walls that had been our shelter for the past few years.

It wasn’t grand or magnificent, but it was where I had raised my beloved sister, and there were good memories. One we had made together.

“How are you feeling, Sandy?”

“I’m okay,” she answers. This is the end of a chapter in our lives, but I know what is coming next will be much better. For the both of us.

We join Keillon outside where he is waiting for us. He turns around as we approach him.

“Are you ready?” he asks. I take a deep breath, exhaling a past that I had spent so much time holding onto. I grab Keillon’s hand, so I hold him on one side and my sister on the other.

“I think so,” I answer.

“I think so too, blossom,” he smiles.

KEILLON

"There's one part of the house we haven't really explored," I tell Vanessa as I lead her upstairs.

I hadn't told Vanessa I had commissioned a house to be built for the three of us. I just didn't feel like my manor so close to the palace and other dangerous parts of Liiandor was good for them. Instead, I tried to think of everything Vanessa and her sister could want or need and have it in the new house just in time for us to get back.

I gave her and Sandy a grand tour of the first floor, but after I showed Sandy her own room, which is bigger than Vanessa's old house, we lost her sister.

I chuckled as I watched Sandy throw open the wardrobe and rip through the drawers in excitement. She's never had so much, and I was happy to provide for her, even if Vanessa seemed a little embarrassed. I'd led my mate away after that to let her sister explore more in peace.

And maybe I wasn't so used to having to keep my hands off of her.

"You really outdid yourself," she tells me.

I shake my head. "No, this house is just a small gift to you." I catch her around the waist, twisting her around to kiss me. "It's nothing compared to what you've done for me."

Vanessa rolls her eyes as she pulls away from me, but the tinge to her skin tells me how much that means to her. That's what I love about my little blossom; she's equal parts fierce and sweet.

I throw open the door to the master suite and gesture for her to enter. Her eyes widen as she steps inside, and her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

I had modeled it after the palace room where I first confessed my love. The bathroom is identical, having found that it was perfectly designed for pleasuring my mate, and while I added some personal touches to the bedroom, it is clear that she can see the similarities.

"Keillon," she murmurs, touching her lips as if she wasn't sure what to say. "Oh, wow."

"Do you like it?" I ask tentatively.

Vanessa whirls around, stopping in the middle of the room to stare up at me. Her blue eyes search mine, and then she leaps toward me. I catch her, pulling her up against me, and her legs lock around my hips.

I cup her ass, and her body molds against me like she was made for me. I am almost certain that she was.

Her hands stroke my cheeks, and she stops me as I duck my head to kiss her. I pause, lifting my eyebrows. "Did I do something wrong?"

She shakes her head, her gaze trained on my mouth. I can tell she wants me as bad as I want her right now. We haven't kept our hands off each other this long since we met, and this room is bringing back a rush of memories.

"No, I just didn't want to ruin the tour." Her eyes flick over my shoulder for a brief moment, and I realize what she's thinking. "Is that the bathroom?"

I nod, gulping as I knead her ass. "It is, and I think you are in need of a shower. You're filthy."

She smirks at me, and we both know she isn't. I just want to get her out of these clothes and under the hot water.

Vanessa plays along. "I think so, too." She lets go of my face, grabbing the hem of her shirt. "Your filthy girl," she purrs as she rips it over her head, and holy Maws, I've never been harder.

I carry her into the adjoining bathroom as she pulls off my tunic, and when I drop her to her feet to turn on the water, she rips off my pants. Her fingers grasp my erection, and I groan before whipping around to lift her again.

I tear the pants off of her body and shoulder my way under the water just as I capture her mouth. Vanessa sighs against me, and I bite her bottom lip. It's tender from all her worrying over Sandy, but she doesn't protest as I pull on it.

When I press her back against the cool tile, she starts squirm, and I grab her hair, jerking her head back so that she has to stare up at me. "Is my little blossom getting too feisty? Does she need a reminder of who is in charge?"

Her eyes flash with excitement, and heat wraps around my core as she hisses out, "Yes."

I chuckle as I drop her, and Vanessa drops to her knees immediately. She tips her head back, jaw open wide, and waits for me to ram my cock down her throat. I realize a beat too late that this was her plan. She knew I'd tell her to do this as punishment.

"Such a *filthy* girl," I coo as I palm the back of her head. "You wanted this cock, didn't you?"

She nods, her eyes on me as I stroke myself. I smack the tip against her bottom lip, and she lets out a soft whimper. "Say it," I command her, and fuck if she isn't a vision as her legs squeeze together from my tone. I keep thinking I couldn't love this girl more, but every day I find a new reason to never let her go.

"I want your cock," she tells me in that soft, innocent voice that I know is a damn lie.

"Show me what you can do."

Vanessa eagerly dives forward, grabbing the base of my shaft with one hand and cupping my balls with another. She swirls her tongue around the head, sucking softly before suddenly plunging down on it.

"Fuck!" I grind out, my hand flying to the back of her head.

I don't have to pump my hips, though. She's already working my length with her lips, pushing me down into her throat over and over until I swear I'm going to finish in record time.

She keeps going, and when my balls jerk, her hands fly up to my hips and she buries me deep into her throat. She hums softly, and I can feel my orgasm start to slam down my spine.

I grab her head, jerking her back, and a flicker of disappointment goes across her face. It's so beautiful that I almost do bury myself back in her throat.

"On your feet," I tell her.

She scrambles up, and I flip her around so that her hands are on the wall. She pushes up on her toes, waving her ass in the air, and I run my hand over her plump backside.

"Did you not like it?" she asks softly, and I can hear the tint of insecurity in her voice.

I press a kiss in between her shoulder blades. "Oh, sweet girl." I trail the kisses down the base of her spine before lining up behind her. "I was about to

come down your throat." With a shift forward, I push deep into her, and she whimpers. "But the first time I fill you in this house, I want it to be here." I thrust deeper for emphasis. "I want to claim you first."

"Oh," she pants out, and that's all she manages as she tries to stay upright with my thrusts.

Her legs start to tremble as I slam into her, and I wrap an arm around her waist, hauling her up so that her back presses against my chest. I grip the back of one of her thighs with the other hand, draping it over my arm so I can support her weight and get a better angle.

"Keillon!" she cries out as I drive up into her and I smirk.

"Yes, my sweet blossom?"

"Fuck, that feels good."

I give another experimental thrust upward and she cries out again. I was worried it would be too deep, but it seems my mate can't get enough of me.

"Are you going to come for me, sweet girl?" I ask her.

"I'm..." Her teeth are clenched as she pants with each thrust. "I'm so close."

"You can touch yourself," I encourage. Normally, my girl doesn't need to do so, but her damn throat has brought me too close to my edge.

"I want you," she whimpers out, and I lean down, bringing my lips to her throat.

I nip up the skin, biting her earlobe as I shift my arm pinning her against me downward. My fingers brush just above her clit as I whisper, "Anything you want."

I pinch her clit, and she jerks forward, nearly falling out of my arms. I chuckle softly before I start rubbing hard circles around her sensitive pearl. Planting my feet, I pick up my pace, pushing deep into her.

I know when Vanessa is going to come before she does. I can read her body, and she can't even tell me before she's screaming, clamping down on my cock and forcing out the release I've been holding back.

Dropping her leg, I push her down on me so that I fill her up as deep as possible. She lets out the sweetest whimpers as rolls her hips, edging out both of our releases with her movements.

I press a kiss to her temple, waiting for her to come down, and when she throws her head back to meet my lips, I slide out of her. Vanessa gives me one of her breathtaking smiles and says teasingly, "Now, I really do need a shower."

I grab the soap, raising my eyebrows with a suggestive grin. "Let me help."

She nods, and I sink to my knees before her, massaging her body as I cleanse her, and it takes us nearly an hour to finish that shower because of all the...bathing.

VANESSA

I didn't expect to spend our anniversary like this.

To be honest, I didn't give much thought to how Keillon and I would spend our first anniversary together. I had never been delusional enough to think that I would ever be married or mated to have those kinds of fantasies, but with my gorgeous mate, I've just been soaking it up.

He was the one that brought it up, which would have surprised me a year ago. I've learned since then that he is the more thoughtful one between the two of us.

I have always been a considerate person, but he is the kind of elf who remembers how much Sandy loved that one pastry at the market last month and makes sure he takes a detour home to purchase half the merchant's supply. And he never says anything. He just leaves for her in her sitting room as if it appeared mysteriously.

He's the type of mate to draw me a bath when it's cold outside because he's noticed that I prefer long showers and bubble baths over curling up under the blankets even though I've never said it.

Keillon is observant, and he takes everything I do to heart.

Which made me feel so much worse when he asked me what I wanted to do for our anniversary. It's not that I forgot. I just hadn't thought to even plan anything, and when I blurted out that I had a surprise for him, I knew within a second I had made a mistake.

There is no way I could live up to anything Keillon would plan. In fact, I'm sure he's still planning something. If I arrange a picnic at sunset by the pond, he'll have our room covered in my favorite flowers with a bath drawn

and gorgeous floating lights casting a glow over the room ready for when we get back.

How am I supposed to compete with him?

"Vanessa?"

My head jerks up and I realize that Doctor Rey is staring at me. She was the best human doctor I could find on this side of Liiandor, and even though I know that Keillon can afford healers—I'm pretty sure there are some on call at our house—I wanted to see a human doctor.

"Sorry?"

She grins. "A lot of people are a little out of it when they come in here, too. I said that I ran your tests."

I nod. When I came in to talk to her about my symptoms, she told me she'd need a urine and blood sample to really determine what was going on. Doctor Rey is one of the rare doctors with enough access to medicine to run tests, though I don't understand what they are exactly.

"Do you want to know what I found?" she prods.

I push myself up, forcing myself to focus. "Yes, please."

"You're pregnant."

My eyes widen and my jaw drops open as I stare at her. It's not that the possibility hadn't occurred to me, but it's still surprising either way. Then, a warmth spreads through my body, and I'm off the table and running toward the door.

"Thank you, Doc!" I shout as I rush out into the bustling streets of Liiandor.

I wrap my arms around my stomach, beaming down at my body. Excitement skitters through my body, and I realize that I have so much to do before tonight.

"You've outdone yourself," Keillon tells me as I pull him to the top of the hill that looks out across all of Liiandor. It's gorgeous as the sun sets, and I settle onto the blanket where our picnic is.

"I don't feel I've done enough," I admit to him.

He takes my face in his hands as he sinks to his knees. "Your presence is all I needed. Everything else is just too much." He presses a kiss to my

forehead, the tip of my nose, then my lips.

I can't help but smile at him when he says things like that. Sometimes I think it's funny how different the two sides of Keillon are. Sometimes he can be so rough and at other times, he's nothing but sweet.

He's going to be such a good father.

"No elven wine?" he asks as he looks in the basket.

I have to work hard to avoid grinning. "I guess I forgot to put that on the list."

He waves it off and pulls out a bottle of sparkling water instead. "Oh, well. We didn't need it."

"Do you want to do presents before or after dinner?" I ask him, trying not to seem overly eager.

Keillon's eyes glitter as he takes me in. "I'm going to say before because you look like you are about to burst."

I giggle. I can't help it. I'm nervous. "Guilty! What did you get me?"

"You're hard to shop for," he grumbles as he pulls a box out of his pocket and offers it to me. "But I heard about a little human tradition..."

I pop open the box to find a gorgeous ring sitting in the center. It's a thick, black ring that glitters when the light hits it and in the middle, a nice sized diamond has been set.

"Keillon..." Tears well up in my eyes as I realize what he's referencing. I, too, have heard that some humans use rings to symbolize their love, placing it on the left hand where there is a vein that leads back to the heart. "It's beautiful."

"Let me see it on you, my sweet blossom."

I hold my hand out to him, and he slides it on my finger. It's a perfect fit, and I gasp softly. "It looks even better on my hand."

He lifts my fingers to his mouth, pressing a light kiss to each knuckle. "That it does."

"My turn!" I squeal, pulling free of him, and his eyebrows raise.

"Do you think you've outdone me?"

I hold out a flat, square box. "Maybe so."

Keillon chuckles as he takes it and flips the box open. For a moment, he just stares at the contents, and then slowly, he lifts up the first item. It's a little, knit hat with gold and green stripes, the colors of his family emblem.

"Vanessa?" He looks between me and the hat. "I don't think this will fit me, my love."

I grin wider. "Keep going."

He pulls out the small, matching blanket. Flipping it over, he spots the family crest in the corner, and he sucks in a shuddering breath. I'm sure he figured it out as soon as he opened the box, but I'm waiting for him to process.

"Vanessa..." His gray eyes lift to mine, and they swirl with a torrid of emotion. "Am I... Are you..." He shakes his head. "I need to hear it."

I push up on my knees, crawling over to settle into his lap. I take one hand, press it on my stomach, and whisper, "I'm pregnant."

I never really worried about Keillon's reaction, but the way he lights up fills me with joy. He stares down at my belly and our joined hands, and suddenly, he exclaims, "Holy Helias! I'm going to be a father!"

I giggle, shaking my head. "What is 'Helias?'"

He pauses, staring at me. "You've lived on Liiandor all your life, and you don't know what Helias is? The blessings of the gods in the afterlife? The sunny and sinful place to live out eternity if we pleased them?"

"Heaven," I say, though I'm doubting myself. "Humans say Heaven a lot."

He scrunches his nose. "What in the Glacies is Heaven?"

"I think it's the same thing." I purse my lips. I spent all of my life around humans, avoiding the dark elves, and many humans in the lowtown still practice old religions in secret. I guess that's where I've heard it. I've avoided dark elves so much I've never heard anything beyond the basics of their Thirteen, and even that other servants told me.

Keillon shakes his head. "Helias is for the strongest dark elves and their mates. It can't be the same. An honorable dark elf goes to Helias and a self-righteous, thoughtless coward goes to Glacies to be tormented. Heaven makes no sense. What does that even mean?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Just because you haven't heard of Heaven before doesn't make it not real. I've heard dark elves reference Hell before. It's the human equivalent of Glacies."

My mate stares at me. "We must educate you on the Thirteen more thoroughly before our little one is here."

"And if I want to teach him or her other things?"

"He will be a warrior. He must bring honor to the Thirteen."

I slap his chest. "I thought you had moved past your 'stubborn and always right' phase."

He catches my hand. "I can't help that I am right."

Keillon snags my other hand out of the air before I land another blow. "You can be so insufferable."

"And yet, you are carrying my offspring."

"Maybe it's not yours," I tease, just to get under his skin. I don't care what he calls the afterlife as long as I am with him, but I do hate when he's a know-it-all and I want our anniversary to be focused on more important things. "You are gone an awful lot."

Just as I expected, Keillon's temper flares. He flips me, slamming my back into the ground as he hovers over me. "What did you say?" he growls.

I push up to nip at his lower lip. "I was kidding. I would let no other man between my legs."

"That's a dangerous game you and your smart mouth are playing."

"Maybe that's because it's been a while since I've been properly punished." Heat floods between my legs as I say it. "You might have to remind me who is in charge."

My mate bares his teeth and it sends a thrill through me. "Gladly."

KEILLON

I'm not necessarily surprised to get called to the King's study. I used to be here weekly, but that was when I was a general.

I've been stripped of that title and it doesn't bother me. Not when it gave me Vanessa.

I don't bother to knock outside of King Kres's door. He's expecting me, and despite what happened with his son, who I know he doesn't even like that much, that hasn't destroyed the relationship we've built.

Pushing open the door, I see the King seated behind his desk. He doesn't look up, not that I expect him to, so I stroll around to the chair in front of him, which I've probably spent more time in than anyone else, and collapse in it.

I'm used to Kres getting so lost in his work he doesn't even notice me, so I stretch out, waiting for him to finally look up. But there is something off about him. He's tense, his shoulders too tight, and his jaw is clenched hard.

I lean forward, uncertain if I should say something when his eyes dart up to meet mine. "We have a problem."

I blink, confused. "Isn't that something you should discuss with your new general?"

He waves me off. "Now that you have claimed your mate, all can be forgiven. Besides, I know better than to expect you to be a lieutenant. You'd slaughter anyone standing in your way, and I'd just be down men."

I'd smirk if I thought he was joking, but I can see the deadly seriousness in his eyes. We both know that what he says is true, but it's not just that. There is something truly wrong.

"Sir?"

"Things are changing in Liiandor." He leans back, sighing beneath his breath. "I wanted to ignore the signs but now, I cannot any longer. There is no way to quiet the unrest. Too many people know."

My eyebrows furrow. I've been so wrapped up in my mate and new family that I don't know what he is talking about. Are there rumors causing an uprising?

"What is being said?"

Kres works his jaw, the muscle feathering with how hard he's clenching it. I've never seen him like this. "A pale creature has been spotted." At my confused silence he adds, "An ancient being with wings. The only thing that could cause unrest among dark elves."

Now, I'm not sure what has gotten into the King. He is usually a rational man, but now he sounds insane.

"Sir, there is nothing we can't handle. I can start tracking now. Just tell me where this...this creature was last spotted, and I will hunt it down so that we may get answers."

Kres is usually quick with a plan, but he just stares at me with blank eyes. Is he scared? Resigned? I can't tell, but his expression is not one of a King.

He hasn't shown a side like this, even to me, before.

"It was a vrakken."

For one second I am stunned, but as soon as the word processes through my head, working a memory free, I burst out laughing. I don't intend to, but he seems so on edge, so upset, and over what? A myth? A children's scary story.

I shake my head. "Sir, you can't be serious. Everyone is worked up over a myth? It was probably one of those humans. Maybe Nielmor made himself a new freak." The circus master is known for such activities.

"Nielmor is dead," he spits. "Probably at the hands of that freak, which is no myth, no children's story."

"Maybe they once walked this planet, but—" I spread my hands wide. "Where have they been? I've never seen one and I've been all across Protheka."

Kres pushes up from his chair, pacing toward the windows on the far wall. I turn in the chair, my eyes tracking him, and I fear he's become unhinged. There's nothing in his movements that tell me he's lost his mind, but his words...

They can't be real, can they?

"The vrakken are the oldest species on this planet. Some say they are even older than dark elves, that we were created to drive the beasts from a planet that did not belong to them." His eyes are on the sky, and his nose wrinkles as he says, "We failed. The fowl creatures were stronger than we thought, and although they were not suited to our way of life with their weakness to the sun, they held their own in the war."

His eyes cut to me, and the emotion blazing in them holds me in place. "We don't know what truly drove them away, but they fled underground. They tunneled below the surface, and we could only hope that they encountered the Thirteen so that they would be wiped from existence."

"But they weren't?" My tone drips with skepticism.

"If one was spotted, then no. They must not have been. They must have been beneath the surface, recovering and regrouping." He takes a few steps toward me, and I find myself tensing. "I fear they are coming for war."

"What do we do?" I breathe.

I'm not sure I believe him. I'm going to have to do my own research besides listening to the ramblings of a King already under immense pressure. Between the spy and the constant inter-fighting, Liiandor is tense enough as it is.

If there is a creature that so few know about landing here and killing higher dark elves, we are in trouble. I have no idea how to fight an ancient creature, and if we already barely came out on top of a war once, then I'm not sure I'm ready to face another.

But I will always fight for my country.

And my family.

Kres's jaw clenches again as he continues to stare out the window. "We drove them underground once. We'll do it again."

I'm not sure what to say to him. It's clear to me that if an opponent is willing to come back, then we are not as strong as Kres is trying to say. We have plenty of struggles to face on the surface, and now we are being attacked from below, too.

"Sir." I push out of my chair to face him. "Do you know how many they have?"

He shakes his head. "Vrakken multiply easily, and they don't die. They can't. They can be reduced to nothing, but they will continue to live, to heal, so their numbers have only grown. It's not likely they have as large of an

army as we do, though."

I grit my teeth. "Permission to speak freely?"

He raises his eyebrows at me. "When have you ever bitten your tongue?"

I don't tell him that I have been this entire conversation. I just stare at him expectantly until he nods.

"If this is a threat, we need to start pulling resources. We need more information, more men trained. Should we reach out to the Kingdoms on Oshta? Surely, with the help of the other nations, we can overpower this threat before they take us over."

He snorts. "Oshta only has weak dark elves. They drink themselves into stupors and lose themselves in humans." He could be describing Liiandor, but I don't say that, either. "No, I will plan something before these bastards pose a real threat to our lands. We'll defeat them ourselves, showing how our kingdom is the greatest of Protheka."

I stand, unable to move as I process what he's saying. He'd rather fall as a nation than call in reinforcements. Surely, he can't be serious.

But there is nothing to indicate that he is joking with me. Kres has truly lost his mind. Maybe I was foolish to even believe what he said about the vrakken. Maybe I should resign from the army itself if this is the kind of battle he is preparing us for.

There are too many thoughts swarming my mind, so I stand still until he looks at me. "I thought you should know what we are up against. I will call on you when I have more information. You are dismissed."

I've never been so eager to get out of this palace. I need to know if what he says is true or if he has been poisoned and bewitched.

I'm practically sprinting toward the door, ready to tear through the market as I search for information when the King's voice stops me in my tracks. "Oh, and Keillon? I hear that congratulations are in order. A family is a precious thing. Be sure to protect them well."

Turning slowly, my blood starts to turn cold. Kres's face is hard, almost threatening. "How did you know? We've made no announcement."

He crosses the study to sink back into his chair. "I have my ways," he says, and then drops his eyes down to his desk, expecting me to leave.

I move numbly, trying to figure out who has been tailing me. Who could have known that information when we've kept the secret so close to us? My stomach is in knots as I race out of the palace. I have to get home to Vanessa. I don't know what Kres is up to, and for the first time, that scares me.

What's worse is I don't know what to believe. There's too many uncertainties when it comes to this situation, and as a general, that does not bode well. I have much work to do, for my family, if nothing else.

First, I need to lose whatever spy Kres has on me.

And then, I have to answer the questions that are starting to sweep across Liiandor.

Who are the vrakken?

And why are they resurfacing?

The End

To read more about Protheka or see how Keillon and Vanessa get along join my newsletter at: <https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>

PREVIEW OF THE NAGA'S MATE

The Worlds of Protheke is a vast and growing world. Check out the standalone series starter, The Naga's Mate

The Naga's Mate
By Celeste King

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JEMMA

I run through the woods, trying desperately to find anything that might give us any advantage as the orcs chase us down. But there are no sufficiently sharpened sticks, no properly club-like branches, or conveniently dropped swords just lying around. So, I keep running, hoping something will change because we can't outrun these orcs forever.

But some of us are going to falter sooner than others. The old or the young. They'll be the first to be captured again. We were all kept in a pen together, about twenty of us who were all snatched up when the orcs raided the low towns of the dark elf city of Liiandor. Well, twenty at the start, but that number dropped daily whenever the orcs got hungry.

Then one of the guards got drunk and passed out. We managed to reach his keys and unlock the cage. I told everyone to just run. But Ryan, one of the young men with us who'd always argued with me about everything, said we deserved revenge. I understand the impulse.

The orcs made us watch as they ate the others or butchered them to turn them into jerky. The lucky ones were dead before the orcs started. There were very few lucky ones.

I'd have loved to see these orcs choke on their own blood, but my priority was to get everyone out safely. Ryan wanted to stab someone. So, he took the guard's dagger and tried to cut his throat. But it didn't work.

Orc hide can only be pierced with weapons made of mithril. The guard was only watching over humans, so it must have been regular iron or something because all it did was wake the guard up. To his credit, Ryan did his best to slow the orc down. Paying with his life to buy the eight of us a few

seconds was the best he could do for costing us the minutes we could have had otherwise.

I've been a survivor all my life, but I've also never been good at watching others suffer. I turn and see Sasha, only thirteen years old, lagging.

I turn to Mary and Joshua. They're twenty. Adults. Capable. They might make it fine on their own, but the others I worry about. I could keep running, let the others falter, and the orcs stop to gather them. I could be free. But I couldn't live with myself knowing I didn't at least try to save the others.

"Everyone, scatter. Make them divide up or pick a target," I say, hopefully, loud enough for everyone to hear but not loud enough for the orcs to find out what I'm doing.

Though this is part of my plan, I keep to myself. I slow down and fall in beside Sasha. Mary and Joshua look back at me. I wave them off. "Just go!"

Then I turn to the girl and point left. "Go that way. Hide if you can. Live."

I hope she makes it, but I can't waste any more time, not if I'm going to try to save the others. I turn and run. Not right for the orcs, but veering off to the right and back, putting me much closer to them than any of the others.

And then I scream. I'm terrified. Anyone with a lick of sense would be. But I lay it on thick. I need them to follow me. When I turn to look behind me, I think it worked. I don't know if they all are coming for me, but from the crashing sounds and roared curses hurled in my general direction, I'm sure I have at least a handful after me.

Next step: don't die.

I've been pretty good about sticking to that plan my whole life. I've survived thirty-one years, always trying to stay just one step ahead of death. I lost my parents young, growing up on the streets. And I did my best to keep the other street kids alive and out of the clutches of the dark elves who would use them for their twisted pleasures.

Sometimes I was more successful than others. I remembered each of the ones I failed. I keep it as a list in my head. Our three weeks in captivity made the list so much longer. And that's why I'm doing this. If I can save the rest of them, it'll be worth it.

But as noble as self-sacrifice may be, I'm not looking to become orc food. I want to survive, too. So even as I scream my lungs out, I run.

The sounds of breaking branches and stomping feet are getting closer. I turn just in time to see a machete coming at me. I dodge. Then there's another one to my right, and I manage to duck under that strike as well. I think I

count five. That must mean most of them came for me.

I hope the others make it.

If I had a proper weapon, I might be able to take on one orc, but even that would be a challenge. Most of my fighting has been against other humans on the street, trying to harass other suffering humans.

But I don't have a weapon, and there are five of them, all trying to cut me in two. I fling a handful of dirt into an orc's face and make a scrambling run. There's a small ridge. If I can get to the top of that, I'd have a better vantage point to pick out where to run next.

My lungs are already burning, and my legs feel like they're on fire, but I push past the pain and run. I skid to a halt when I see that on the other side of the ridge is about twenty feet of empty sky, followed by treetops.

I don't know how far it is to the ground. The canopy is too thick. But I'm sure it's more than enough to kill me.

I turn, and the orcs have cut off my chance of escape. They know they have me cornered, and they advance slowly. Not out of caution. No, they like the taste of fear in their meat. But I don't plan on giving them the satisfaction.

But my options here are limited. I can't fight them. I can't outrun them. But I can jump.

I had a good run. There were a lot of things I never got to do. Like, learn to read. Fall in love. Get drunk. Have kids. Raise a family. But maybe me dying here means Sasha can live to go to do those things for me. Maybe it means Mary and Joshua can figure out they're crazy for each other. Maybe it means all the others get to be free.

I feel the tears on my cheeks. At first, I hate myself for crying, for being weak, but then I realize I'm not sad. I'm happy. It's a good death.

The orcs advance towards me. The leader, an orc who's half a head taller than the rest with a big scar on his nose, says, "There's nowhere left to run, little girl. Why don't you come here before you fall? You gave a good chase. But it's over."

"Fuck. You."

As far as final words go, they are not the most eloquent, but I never learned to read, so I haven't had the chance to study up on famous last words. Oh, well.

I fling myself off the cliff, hoping that the impact is enough to kill me instantly. I deserve that, at least—a quick, painless death.

When I smash into the first branch, I realize that's not going to be what I'll

get. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and I crash into more and more branches. I think for a second, I don't have to die, but I can't get a hold on anything able to support my weight and continue to fall.

The last ten feet is an unobstructed path straight to the ground. Every part of my body hurts. I'm sure I'm dead. It'll just be slow and painful. Darkness starts to creep in at the edges of my vision, and just before everything goes black, I hear a subtle hiss.

UZHA

"They befoul the land with their presences and must be destroyed," Kazhir shouts, full of fury. He's an excellent general, though the display isn't needed. I already agree with him. I don't like the way the orcs have harried our borders. While they haven't killed any naga in their most recent attacks, it's only a matter of time before they do.

Where Kazhir and I disagree is on the strategy of how to eliminate them.

"Yes," I say, gliding around my desk towards him. "They're pushing more into our territory every day and threatening our people. But if you attack from the east, you'll approach them from a disadvantage. It's quite literally an uphill battle."

"Then what would you suggest we do?" he asks with an exasperated hiss.

He and I have rarely seen eye-to-eye on strategy, but I find the ways we disagree have often been helpful in shaping my battle plans. While our discussions can sometimes appear rather antagonistic, I value his efforts in tearing my plans to pieces. He sees flaws and holes in my strategies I never considered.

Every leader needs a Kazhir at their side. I just happen to be lucky to have the only one.

"We attack them from the north," I say.

I do love getting him to pause like this as he tries to figure out my strategy and already pokes holes in it.

"But we need our troops in the east to defend the border, or they will sweep in and take prime grazing territory for our animals."

"Oh, I wasn't planning to leave the east completely unguarded. We

position troops to the east as though we are preparing to attack, but we'll have sent an advance army across the river," I say, pointing to the map.

He looks at the map and shakes his head.

"That spreads our numbers too thin."

"No thinner than if we send all our troops charging up that hill. Just because we don't fear them, nor fear death to protect our honor or our homeland, doesn't mean we need to throw troops away needlessly."

"Either plan is a risk, but I'll carry out whatever strategy you believe is best."

"And I can trust you to carry it out in exacting detail as always."

That is one of my general's many admirable qualities. He and I might butt heads when strategizing, but once I choose a course of action, he is very good at following orders.

"You've yet to steer us wrong. It's why the borderlands troops support you so loyally."

"I don't ask them to do anything I wouldn't do myself."

"I think the men appreciate someone of noble blood who has seen real war like they have," he says.

My people are proud warriors, but not everyone has the same dedication to it. I've been a fighter all my life. I've always been ready to put my life on the line for my people. It's what I have been trained to do since I was a child.

There hasn't been time for much else. Even my family and I are distant. I've spent more time training with the generals they sent me off to than with them. While I'm loyal to them, it's because it's my duty to be.

I will defend my family, my people, and my homeland with everything I have.

My duty is to my people, so I've never taken the time to find a mate.

Though it's never felt like much of a sacrifice.

"Uzha?" Kazhir raises an eyebrow at me.

"Yes," I say, snapping back to the present and noticing another naga, one of the soldiers, has entered and is now looking concerned.

"Never mind. I think you need some sleep."

I rub my eyes.

The lack of sleep has been a sacrifice. Even the strongest can only battle against unconsciousness for so long. It's been days since I've slept properly.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead. What is it?"

The soldier bows his head and says, "We found something while out on

patrol, at the bottom of the cliffs."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. That's the problem." I can't tell if the soldier's concern is about the thing he just found or how I didn't even notice he came in because I'm so tired.

"Show me," I say, following him out the door.

Soldiers' tents are scattered around the central building, and he leads me to one with the flap drawn open. There are perhaps two dozen naga gathered around, trying to peer inside.

"Soldiers!" I shout, and they all snap to attention. "I'm sure you all have duties you should be attending to. If not, I can find you something to do that is more productive than standing around."

The bow and slink away. The first soldier motions for me to enter the tent, and I see several more naga gathered around a bed.

"Is your presence here required?" I ask.

They all turn to look at me before leaving the tent.

When I see what is lying there, I understand the commotion. It's a human woman. Humans are a rarity in Nagaland. Very few have seen them. I've only seen a handful when other nobles have decided they wanted to keep one as a pet. I have to admit, they do look fascinating, and she's the most fascinating example I've seen.

Humans share some similarities to naga but are also very different.

Her arms are more delicate but the same basic shape. No scales, though. Just tan-colored skin. But I've seen humans with different colors of skin. They may even have as much variation as we nagas do for our scale color.

No proud hood, but they have hair like dark elves and orcs. Hers is long and black, and it feels soft when I run my fingers through it. While I've seen humans, I've never had the chance to touch one or examine them up close. I pry an eye open, and she stares blankly into space. Round irises. So different from the gold of mine with the vertical slit.

But perhaps the most fascinating things are her legs. Hers are long and lean and flawless, noticeably lacking scales and a tail. I carefully reach out and touch them. Her skin is smooth and warm. And soft, but I can feel the harder muscle underneath. She must be strong.

She may be a human, but she's far more beautiful than the ones I've seen. The other humans were forgettable, never speaking or looking at me. I have the sudden urge to wake her as I realize I've never heard a human. I want to

talk to her and hear what she sounds like.

My blood thrums violently as I survey her, and it hits me all at once. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on her, but I'm only now beginning to understand this feeling she's awakened in me.

Yes, there's curiosity, but I want her. I feel like she should be mine. Yes. I will keep her. I'm sure I can find other uses for her than just staring at her, though that alone is something I feel I could do for a long time.

She really is beautiful. A treasure.

"Is that..." I hear Kazhir's voice behind me as he enters the tent.

"Yes, general. A human."

He draws closer, but I hold my arm out, stopping his advance.

She's mine. He doesn't know it yet, so I'll forgive the impertinence.

"I don't want curiosity to become a distraction. Let our people know that we've found a human. I'll be taking care of it. If she was found at the bottom of the cliffs, perhaps she has seen the orcs near there and might have useful information."

"Yes, sir."

Talking to her seems like a reasonable place to start, but my mind is already at work thinking of what else I might do with her. There are so many possibilities for such a fascinating and alluring creature such as this.

JEMMA

I startle awake, and the sudden movement makes me wince. I feel everywhere that I hit a branch on the way to the ground. I'm stiff and sore, but I appear whole as I look over my body. And I've been given some form of treatment for my wounds.

There are some bandages on my arm. I lift the edge to peek under them and see they're holding some sort of salve or something against a rough series of scrapes, but it appears to be healing.

I'm guessing if I'm injured, I haven't moved onto some form of afterlife. Perhaps in some sort of torment maybe, but the wound doesn't hurt at all. Maybe whatever has been put on them has some sort of numbing quality.

But this bed I'm lying in, that might be some form of heavenly reward. I've spent years sleeping on the streets, but even when I've been able to beg, borrow, or steal a bed, nothing has ever felt this good.

The linens are smooth, maybe silk. But that's only a word I've heard. I've heard things described as smooth as silk, but I've never actually touched the material. So, it could be something else entirely. And the mattress is firm but pliant and not a lumpy mess. I don't know what it is stuffed with, but there aren't uncomfortable bits of straw poking out, making me itch.

I could lay here forever and just enjoy the sensation of this bed. Maybe this is my reward for a life well-lived. But my insistent need to know is getting in the way of my ability to just enjoy laying here. There's the nagging sense that I could also still be in danger.

Just because something feels good doesn't mean it is good. Dark elves are painfully beautiful creatures, and every single one of them is an evil,

manipulative bastard that would skin you alive just because they felt like it. So, even though I'm more comfortable now than I have ever been, I need to get up and find out where I am.

I finally sit up and take a good look around the room. The room is simple and sparse but still elegant. There are large glass windows overlooking a balcony. Perhaps a peek outside will help me figure out where this place is. I slide to the edge of the bed, enjoying how the material feels against my skin. It's almost enough to make me want to discard my rags just to feel what this is like against my bare flesh.

But getting completely naked in a strange environment seems like a poor choice.

When I try to stand up from the bed, a sharp pain in my left ankle makes me stumble back, landing on the soft mattress. Okay, if I fell from a cliff and the worst I have is a sprained ankle, I'll count myself lucky.

It must have taken a miracle for me to survive. As I was falling, hitting all those branches didn't feel good, but it must have been enough to slow my fall. The temporary pain is worth not going splat at the bottom.

Being a bit more careful this time, I use the wall, so I don't put too much weight on my left foot. I make my way to the balcony, each step making it so I need the wall less and less.

When I get to the edge of the balcony, I stumble back again. This time it has nothing to do with my ankle, but instead, with the sudden dizziness I felt looking over another cliff. Before it felt like the world was tilting sideways, the trees had looked similar as well. The air doesn't taste any different here, either. So, I couldn't have gone far.

I hobble back into the room. There's one more door that must lead out into the rest of whatever building I'm in. I start to limp towards it. I've figured out I haven't gone far, but I'm obviously no longer in orc territory, and the architecture here doesn't carry with it the opulence most dark elf buildings have.

That leaves some options, but I can't help but feel a secret hope that this could be some kind of human settlement. There are stories of free humans living and thriving on Protheka, but it's always "somewhere," and it's never certain how many.

As I near the door, though, I get a cold sense of dread when I hear hissing and the sound of something large gliding against the stone floor. I look back to the balcony. There's no way I'd be able to climb out of it to see if there's

anywhere else to go. Not with my ankle, all messed up.

And I don't want to test my luck by hurling myself over a cliff edge again. I think I'm limited to one miracle per way to die.

I ball my hands into fists, holding them at my side, ready to start swinging if anything hostile comes through that door. Had I woken up in chains or something that looked closer to a cage, I might have had my fist raised.

But you wouldn't bandage up someone and set them up on a cushy bed just so you could feed them to your giant pet snake, right?

When the door opens, I realize it's not a pet snake I was hearing, but some kind of snake man. Then my mind summons a word I'd started to think was just a myth. Naga. I'd heard of them in stories others had told in hushed tones about the snake people of Nagaland.

A cold weight settles into the pit of my stomach. In all the stories I heard of the naga, they were described as cold-blooded people whose cruelty rivaled that of the dark elves. Even surpassed it, depending on the storyteller. More than once, I'd heard that they feasted on human flesh. It was like taking the worst aspects of dark elves and orcs and pouring them into one serpentine container.

But if that's the case, why heal me? Why put me here and not in a cage with the other humans they bred for food? Maybe they enjoy playing with their food a bit first.

A chill runs down my spine, but I suppress the shiver. I set my jaw and keep my stare hardened. Just because I'm scared out of my wits doesn't mean I have to let him see my fear.

At least I think it's a him. I don't know what would differentiate a naga man or a naga woman. I'm pretty sure it's a him. He just feels masculine.

The naga stares at me, and at first, I feel very uncomfortable. I've had men undress me with their eyes before, and some are capable of making me feel like I need a shower after. Whatever this guy is looking for feels like that but more intense. And I can't tell if it's better or worse. It doesn't feel like he's stripping away my clothes but my secrets.

I want to turn away. To run and hide. But I'm locked in his gaze, staring right back into his golden eyes. And the longer we look at each other, even though it feels more invasive, I find myself minding it less and less.

And then he speaks.

"I'm the Duke of this territory. You may call me Uzha."

His voice moves through me, igniting passions I didn't know I had. Is it really possible to get this turned on just by hearing someone talk? It's never happened to me before. Perhaps it's some strange ability his people have. Maybe that was what his gazing into my eyes was about. Some kind of spell.

Because this can't be happening. I can't feel weak in the knees over the half-snake man.

UZHA

The woman's eyes are round and her breaths short. She's a prey animal in distress, to be eaten or discarded at will. Any other naga would throw her in the ocean to drown or feed her to the beasts, like one would discard any other vermin. Few would request to keep her as a pet to do even worse to her.

I'm not sure why, then, I desire so strongly to nudge her cheek with mine. I don't only want to claim her, but to *comfort* her, and the idea of it alone should be as repulsive as cuddling a *maqhat*, the spindly insect that builds its home out of dung and multiplies by the thousands.

Nagaland is organized into strict castes, and the strong rule the weak, which is as it should be. Humans are the lowest of the low. They have no magic, and no strength to make up for it. They are useless at fighting anyone except each other, and they cannot survive on their own.

They don't understand how to survive on only themselves, like the proud Naga. We don't interact with any others, finding no need to leave our homes except to defend it. Unlike the Minotaurs, we do not engage in trade with others, treating them as our equals. That's because there are no equals to us.

Especially not humans.

The fact they exist at all is some sort of joke.

So why do I feel inclined to give her anything she could ever want or need when she should be less than the stone beneath me?

"What are you called?"

Her face does a curious thing as she stares at me. I can smell her fear, but her face smooths to reveal none of it. I had thought a human would grovel at

my feet, but she holds herself together with a brittle, patched-together pride. Her chin trembles, but she holds it as high as any queen.

She does not answer. If she were anyone else, this is where my patience would end. And yet my fangs remain at bay, unwilling to harm her.

There is something monstrously wrong with me. It is as though I've been bewitched, and all of my sense and judgment has been taken from me.

"Do you have magic?" I ask. I've never heard of humans with the gift, but there must be some explanation for this strange compulsion to protect her. She looks at me with eyes so wide her pupils look like tiny dots.

"Magic?" She shakes her head. "Do you think I would be sitting here if I had *magic*?"

She's right, it's impossible. Still. Perhaps she had an understanding with an elf, or some other creature. "Have you been charmed?"

"Charmed." Her lips twitch at this. "No. No, I can't say that I've had a charmed day in my entire life."

Her voice is like music.

Icy horror spreads in my stomach. I've heard tales of this. I've seen this, haven't I, when a friend loses his head over a female? As soon as I saw her, it was as though I'd found a part of *myself*. It was as though my entire world had recentered around her.

Is it even possible to have a human mate?

I recoil at the thought. Nagas mate within our tribes. To think of mating with any outsider, much less a *human*, is impossible.

There must be something else at work here. She might have been charmed without her knowledge, and sent like some sort of sweet trap. I will keep her close until I discover what's happening to me. If there is any charm at work here, it will reveal itself in time.

"And your name?"

Names have power for those with magic, but she hands hers to me freely. "Jemma."

"Jemma." I like how it tastes on my lips. My forked tongue flicks across my mouth, and she startles back. I want to soothe her, to stroke her hair, but I keep my hands fisted at my sides instead. "Why are you here?"

"Orcs." Her teeth nibble on the nail of her pinky, and her knees fold against her chest.

"Isn't it always?" That earns me a faint smile, and I chastise myself for the pleasure I take in it. She's a *human*. If I can't discard her, then I should at

least treat her as the inferior creature she is. I clear my throat and force my voice to remain stern. “I tire of this conversation. Why are you *here*, specifically?”

“I don’t even know where this is.” She continues to bite her nails. It should disgust me. I can’t stop staring at her lips. “The orcs kidnapped my friends and I from Liiandor. We tried to escape. We failed.”

“You aren’t captured by orcs any longer. I wouldn’t call that a failure.”

Her laugh holds no humor. “Everyone I was in charge of died. I jumped off a cliff because I thought that was better than being eaten alive by angry orcs.” She looks at me as though I am more terrifying than any orc could ever be, and I look away. “Where are we? I’ve only heard of your kind in old stories.”

“Kario.”

“Right.” She tucks her chin over her knee. She must have injured her left ankle, because she rubs it with a wince. “Kario.”

Our conversation dies down. I have no more in common with a human than I would the meat I eat, and so I observe her instead, trying to puzzle out my strong reaction to her existence.

She’s beautiful, and not just for a human, although that might be my addled wits talking. Her hair is as dark as the night sky, and it serves to enhance the intensity of her blue eyes. She should look strange with such soft, tan skin and hair instead of scales, but she looks enticing, instead. My fingertips itch to discover just how soft her skin might be beneath the rags she wears.

A loud growl interrupts my wild thoughts. Her stomach growls again, and her cheeks redden.

I’m grateful for the interruption.

“Guards!” A guard posted outside stands at attention. “The prisoner will eat now.”

“As you desire, sir.” The guard keeps his head down, submissive, but hesitates. “Ah, what, exactly, does the prisoner eat?”

What *do* humans eat? I could ask her, but it would diminish my standing to take requests from any prisoner, much less a human. I think of all I know about humans, which isn’t much. I know they scavenge for food in the forests whenever they are found in the wild. Elves surely feed them, but my visits with elves and other creatures are thankfully rare.

“Meat. Cooked.”

The guard's shoulders freeze at the last order. Most naga eat raw meat. Food touched by fire is a delicacy only allowed to royals such as myself.

My own shoulders stiffen in turn, and my tail slithers a warning. My orders are not to be questioned.

"And bring clothes. Her rags disgust me." I shut the door. "You will have food soon."

"Thank you." Her fingers twist against the bed. "You said I'm in Kario. Are we in elvish territory, then?"

"Elvish." My tongue lashes the word out of my mouth like a bad taste. "Never. This is Nagaland. It is not for the feet of any other creature to defile."

She lifts her head and looks at me in the eyes. I force myself to keep her gaze. "Does that mean you'll let me go?"

"Let you go? You invaded my land."

"I didn't even know this place existed until now! Invaded? I fell down a cliff!" Her flash of temper should enrage me. Instead, I find myself enraptured by her passionate glare. My heartbeat kicks up a notch, and I must consciously slow my breathing.

"Onto my land." The thought of her leaving makes something claw desperately at my throat. "You will not leave it."

It is better that she knows her place now, but I still don't like how her eyes dim at my announcement. Even when the food arrives, she pokes at it with her finger and then stares at the wall.

"Would you rather be eaten by orcs, then?" My voice is sharp. It is bad enough this woman has beguiled my senses somehow. I will not suffer her ungratefulness. "Or rot at the bottom of a cliff? You are here, and you are alive, and you will eat."

To be continued. To read more click [here](#)!