

BLADED MATES OF PROTHEKA

A dark elf with long, flowing white hair is seated on an ornate, golden throne. He is shirtless, wearing dark, textured arm guards and boots. He holds a glowing, silver sword horizontally in front of his face, with the blade pointing to the right. The background is a dark, blue, ethereal space with glowing particles and faint architectural structures.

KISS OF THE
DARK ELF'S
BLADE

CELESTE KING

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BLADED MATES OF PROTHEKA

CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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CONTENTS

Books in The World of Protheka

The World of Protheka

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

Preview of Dark Elf's Secret Baby.

Layla

Kerym

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

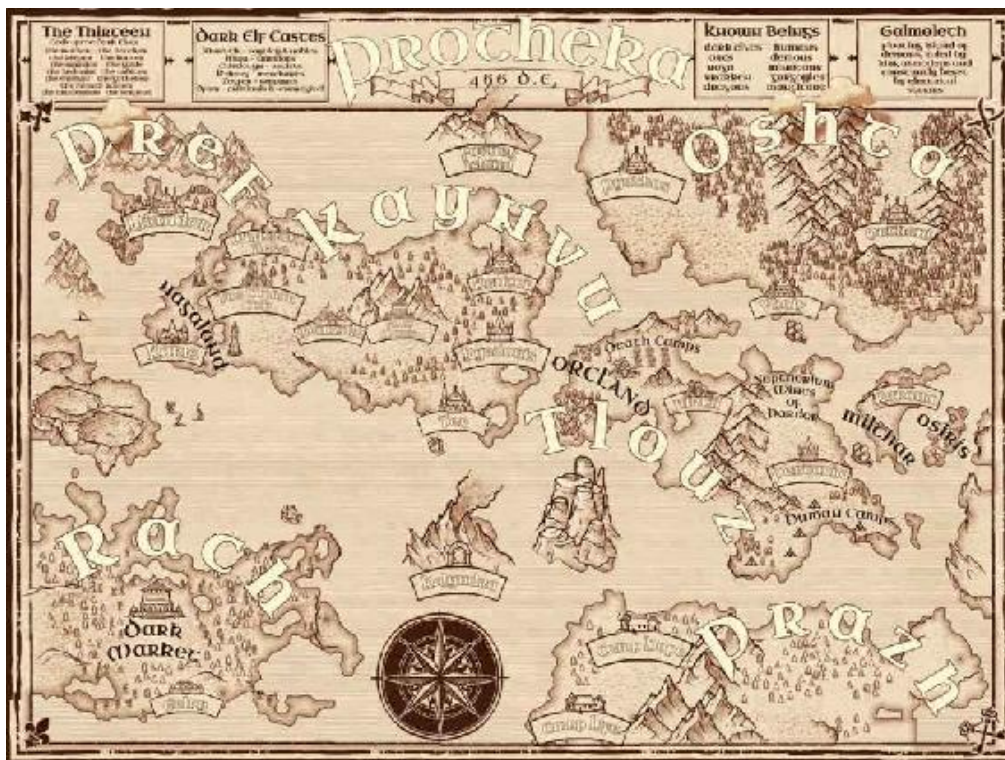
Minotaur's of Protheke Series

Demon's of Protheke Series

Vampires of Protheke

Gargoyles of Protheke

THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



BRIELLE

S *hould have brought a torch*, I think to myself as I walk down the main street of Lowtown. It's dark this time of day. In the distance, smoke rises from the mills and factories that keep Pyrthos running.

I can't quite make out the smoke through the dim light of pre-dawn, but I know it's there. There hasn't been one day that I've lived in Lowtown that smoke hasn't risen from those buildings.

It might be a dark, frigid, early morning, but every human in Lowtown is already up and awake.

Many of them are preparing to start their shifts at the mills and factories, but many of them are also coming home from the night shift. Someone must keep the fires burning to produce smoke at all hours of the day and night.

"Brielle!" a voice calls behind me, and I turn to see one of my neighbors calling my name and waving excitedly.

"Sarah," I reply with a wan smile as she comes running up to me.

"We've got new humans moving into those abandoned houses at the end of the street," Sarah tells me. Her animated face is red from the cold, and clouds form whenever she speaks.

"Well, I'm sure you can deal with the welcome party," I tell her tiredly.

Yesterday was a hard day. I spent my time doing backbreaking work at the factory I work in. The owner of the factory isn't one of those dark elves who treats their human 'employees' nicely.

Employees? That's a nice word for a glorified slave. I snort to myself as I turn away from Sarah and continue to walk down the street.

Another one of my neighbors, Colson, who I work with and actually like talking to, waves me down, and I pause to talk to him.

He doesn't bother to greet me and speaks impatiently. "Those humans that Sarah was telling you about! They're nothing more than children. They must be fifteen or sixteen years old. The owner of the silk mill bought them and let them make their way here on their own."

My blood goes cold in my body, and my throat goes dry. I haven't bothered to really consider who those humans were that Sarah was talking about – we're all slaves here.

How could they do this to literal children? My rage is quiet and unseeming. Colson nods as a flurry of emotions crosses my face.

I close my eyes and inhale deeply. But my hands are already balled into fists, and blood is welling up from the cuts on my palms.

"I hate them," I whisper furiously.

Colson nods again sagely and sighs.

"We all do. I don't know how much longer any of us can go on. Katherine, from the next street, lost her baby after a beating from the dark elves. Jennifer was raped so many times by her owner that she's lost all feeling in her lower body."

I leave Colson then, sick to my stomach and unable to hear more bad news. I am so, so exhausted, and I know that feeling more rage will only tire me out further.

But as I walk down the street towards the back of the Lowtown settlement, I hear the same sentiments over and over

again.

More and more of the humans in Lowtown are tired of their treatment by dark elves. More horror stories crop up every day as the dark elves become more merciless.

They own us in every way, shape, and form now. We are no longer autonomous beings.

We have lost all of our agency, and it seems that there is nothing we can do about it except wait for the next whipping.

You're lucky that you haven't been hurt too much yet, I think to myself and uncurl my hands when they finally start to ache more than I can bear. But I know that I have only been lucky so far. I also know that the time will come when it is my turn to be hurt.

I suppose the only thing that has saved me so far is that I make far too easy of a target. I am too thin, too bony, too unattractive to torture.

I have noticed a trend among the dark elves who own us and who own the factories and mills. They pick on the beautiful women first and then work their way through the rest of the population.

I hear the flutter of wings then, and I become unsteady when my messenger bird, Skye, takes a heavy seat on my shoulder. I reach up to pet her, and she crows softly as she sways from side to side as I walk.

I turn down the street, which is nothing more than a dirt road, onto another dirt road that widens and curves downwards. It leads to the forests behind Lowtown. The sun is rising, and the sky is a milky pink that could almost be pretty.

But nothing is pretty any longer.

I used to find things beautiful when I was younger. But that ability to see the beauty in things vanished after my first six months in the factories.

The sun might be rising, but it is still dark in the forests of Pyrthos. I struggle through the undergrowth and get snagged

on several bushes and low-hanging tree branches as I make my way to the center of the forest.

Skye takes flight, only because she doesn't want to get snagged on anything herself, but when I get to a small clearing, she settles on the ground next to me.

I forage for whatever vegetables and fruit I can find. We mostly grow our own things, but we have just come through a long winter, and the gardens are still bare.

Skye crows and coos then, and hops up and down on the spot before she starts to root around on the ground. I see what she has spotted quickly. A glimpse of silver shimmers at me from the ground.

I stoop to pick it up and groan slightly as cold pain sparks up my spine from moving heavy boxes yesterday.

The necklace is beautiful, though it is plain. It is silver and thin and looks as though it would fit nicely around my neck.

I have never had jewelry in my life. I can remember very little of my parents, who died when I was five, but I do remember my mother having a beautiful gold ring. I loved that ring. I idolized its beauty, and I idolized my mother's beauty.

But my parents had to sell it for food just before they both died.

I cough softly as the cold morning air seeps into my lungs and swallow the phlegm that builds in my throat almost every morning.

The faint, pink sunlight has not reached this deep place in the forest. It is dark, gloomy, and I know here the trees become sapient beings.

No other human in Lowtown would believe me if I said that I have heard the trees talking. They'd call me crazy. But we have all seen the dark elves performing magic, and no one questions that.

I don't pretend to myself that I have any magic abilities, but I am quite sure that the trees do. I listen to them whisper

and gossip, though that could just be the wind, as I examine the necklace.

I do not know why I am so enamored by it when it is so plain.

“How did this even get here?” I ask Skye, who is hopping around and picking at the ground.

Skye takes care of herself fairly well – I have never had to provide food for her – and I know she must have spotted a small yillese.

Someone must have walked through the forest, and it must have fallen off. Maybe a dark elf? No human would have kept this when they could have sold it.

A sudden sense of forbidden pleasure overtakes me as I realize that I am probably holding an item belonging to a dark elf.

“I shouldn’t do this,” I mutter to myself, and Skye crows in agreement as she struggles to pull the yillese from its nest.

But then I put the necklace on.

Who could have left this here? Is my first thought when the necklace lightly touches the skin on my neck.

Suddenly, the weak morning sunlight manages to penetrate the thick, tightly intertwined tree branches above my head. The sunlight reaches downwards as if reaching for the necklace, like pale yellow fingers fighting through the branches.

I step away from the sunlight, and shudder with sudden anxiety as I really start to think about how this necklace got here.

“Does this really belong to a dark elf? Won’t I make a target of myself if I continue wearing it?”

My voice sounds almost frantic as I consider taking the necklace off.

I shiver again and again as the sunlight still reaches for the necklace, the light as alive as the trees that whisper more and

more loudly.

Wearing the necklace gives me a sense of pleasure. But it also feels very, very wrong.

“I foraged here yesterday morning and last night,” I speak to myself so that I can think this through. “So it must have been dropped here this morning.”

I stiffen as I listen to the forest, sorting through the sounds of the whispering trees and the needy, creaking sunlight to find signs that anyone is in the forest with me.

But there is no sign of anyone.

I am alone.

I think.

THALI

I leave the center of Pyrthos after midnight, covered in blood.

My dark clothes are wet with the viscous liquid that just recently spurted from the body of my latest target. “Fuck, I need to invest in enchanted clothes,” I mutter.

I grimace as I walk through the dark streets. The only people awake are the humans who run the factories and the patrons of the clubs in the Red District.

My preferred method of killing is usually a bow and arrow, and while I am as skilled with a dagger as I am with a bow and arrow, I am quite fond of not getting too close to the targets I am killing.

Not because I don’t like killing. I do very much. It is a great method of relieving stress.

But I hate getting myself dirty.

However, this particular job took place in close quarters, and I had no choice but to use a dagger. Or three.

What made it messier was the fact that my targets decided to fight back.

The sun is nowhere near close to rising when I reach the Lowtown of Pyrthos. The blood on my clothes has begun to congeal, and every time I inhale, all I smell is the salty, metallic smell of dark elf blood.

The human community is awake already, and smoke rises from the factories and mills in the distance. I don't walk down the main street, even though I am quite sure I could go completely unnoticed if I did, even covered with blood.

That is a skill I learned a long time ago, at the very start of my career.

Instead, I walk down a side street, which is little more than a dirt road, and head for one house in particular.

I grin to myself. "Good morning," I whisper to her, knowing I won't be revealed yet.

If I know her, she is already awake.

And she is. There is a light on in her tiny, ramshackle, yet neat house. The morning air is cold, and the sky is still dark, and I am not sure that the slowly rising sunlight can compete with the lingering dark of night.

I don't wait for her. I know where she is going, and I want to be there before she gets there. I move quickly when I hear the creak and rattle of an old makeshift door swinging open. I am in the forest behind the houses in Lowtown before she even stepped outside her house.

She won't come here immediately. She'll stop to talk to her friends and listen to the news of the morning.

Then she'll come to forage in the forest for root vegetables and seeds that can be planted in the little garden outside her house.

"Brielle," I whisper. "Brielle. My Brielle."

I like saying her name. Every time I say her name, I know that I own her a little bit more.

My Brielle.

I have been following her for weeks now. Following Brielle, staying just out of sight, slipping in and out of the darkness, is the most satisfying thing in my life now.

I haven't even taken on a job outside of Pyrthos because I don't want to leave her too long.

Most of the jobs I have done lately have revolved around the nobles closely related to the King. Killing them has been quick and easy. And while it has been boring – nothing can top the elegance and drama of the last job I did in Vhoig – it is a living.

I scale a tree trunk when Brielle comes to a stop in the clearing of the forest.

It takes her a while to spot the necklace, and in fact, the annoying little bird sees it first.

But I am patient. She is the only one I am patient with.

My Brielle.

A warm sense of pride washes over me as she examines the necklace slowly and looks around curiously.

She is smart. I wouldn't be this obsessed with a stupid woman.

I know that I cannot spend all day in the woods. The sun is rising, and I need to meet a client for a job at noon.

I move slightly to lean forward to see Brielle better, and I must make some noise because her pet bird looks up at the trees. I freeze in place where I am leaning against a thick branch and hope that my clothes are dark enough to blend in with the deep, dark greenery of the treetops.

I hope the bird doesn't smell all this fucking blood and alert her to it. To me.

I grimace when the bird looks away, and I do not dare shift again while I watch Brielle.

She hesitates quickly, quietly, but then she eventually puts the necklace on around her neck.

It is cold, and she is wearing a thick, threadbare coat, but she pulls down the collar of the coat to look down at the necklace around her neck. And that gives me an excellent view of the delicate silver piece of jewelry laying flat against her collarbones.

Brielle is quite slender, unhealthily so, and I know this comes from a life of hard physical work and not eating enough food. Now, her pale collar bones jut out, and her bony wrists look almost brittle as she pulls down the collar of the coat.

I could snap her in two if I wanted to, I think musingly to myself.

The thought is disturbing, but all my thoughts are disturbing.

I cannot help but grin happily as Brielle smiles as she fingers the necklace with her thin, small hands.

You've reached the first hurdle. She is wearing the necklace. This is the start of it all.

And it is the end of it all.

That necklace is the start and end of something, and everything is falling into place now that Brielle has decided to wear it.

And you didn't even have to coerce her into wearing it. She put it on of her own volition.

A sense of triumph washes over me as Brielle and her pet bird start to forage through the forest.

I continue to watch her in a slightly distracted manner, and soon my vision of her has become a blend of my current reality and remembered images. As I watch her forage, all I really see is the first time I saw her.

So much has changed since then. In fact, I think everything has changed since then.

I was on a job when I first saw her. The dark elf owner of one of the nearby factories had pissed off too many of the khuzuth investors, who had been waiting for financial payouts for nearly three years. It was clear to me that he had embezzled their money, and it was obvious that the dark elf in question knew that his number was up.

He had stopped going home and had shipped his family off to Orthani for safety.

But I found him. Sleeping, hiding, in one of his factories right near Lowtown.

He knew that they would send someone for him. He had employed several miou soldiers to protect him.

But I got through them. I hated to do it because it expended more energy than I had been willing to.

He had his back up against the proverbial wall when I finally found him. I almost had him when he escaped through a hole in the wall of his factory. I was tracking him through the forests that backed up onto the factories, and that was when I saw her.

She has been mine ever since then.

Even if she doesn't know it.

She intrigued me so much that I almost lost track of my target.

I killed him eventually and took his head to my clients. But I have been returning to the forests every day since then.

I cannot help it. Something about Brielle fascinates me, compels me, and I don't know what it is. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I have seen and been with many beautiful women.

Brielle has awakened something in me that I didn't know existed.

It is something primal and hot and glaring. It is a beast, a living thing inside of me, inhaling and exhaling when I do. It has a heartbeat, thumping furiously against the walls of its ribcage. It is animalistic and base. Feral.

It is willing to kill for her. It is willing to be savage for her. It is willing to protect her at all costs.

I became used to it quickly, this thing inside me that was summoned to the surface by Brielle's mere existence in my life.

It is familiar, not unlike the thing inside me that drives me to kill. It is not unlike the thing inside me that enjoys killing.

I am dragged, almost violently, into the present, when I watch Brielle, whose coat pockets are filled with the meager amount of root vegetables that she managed to find, preparing to leave.

The bird looks up at the trees in my direction again before it hops up onto her shoulder.

I should follow her. I shouldn't let her go. Not without me.

But that would be an act of sheer folly. I cannot reveal myself yet.

Even though I hate the sight of her back to me as she walks away from me.

First, before I reveal myself to her, I need to know more about her. Because the truth is, I only know her name and her schedule. I don't really know who she is, and I cannot continue living for much longer without knowing.

I also need to know why I am so drawn to her. I need to know why she makes me feel things that no other person ever has before.

“Brielle, I'm coming for you.”

BRIELLE

“Good morning to me,” I mutter grimly.

Things aren't getting better for the humans in the lowtowns of Pyrthos.

More and more factories and mills have popped up, being built with intense speed as the demand for goods increases across all of Protheke.

I have never been outside of Pyrthos throughout my entire life, but several of the humans in lowtowns have been shipped here from Vhoig, Orthani, and even Prazh and Rach.

They speak of continents ruled by savage dark elves who demand luxuries that can only be found in Oshta.

And so the factories spin on, faster and faster, at almost deathly speeds, and so the humans in lowtowns of Pyrthos, and Vhoig, and Orthani, have to work.

At deathly speeds.

Another group of children, and a group of older people, have arrived at our settlement this week. They are all clearly traumatized, although I don't know why. Their lives couldn't have been much better wherever they were before they got here.

I mean. We're humans, for pity's sake.

We don't have good lives.

We have less worth than livestock.

Nonetheless, I have done my best to help everyone in the settlement and make them feel comfortable.

There is a crumbling barn at the end of the settlement where we used to keep a taura and a couple of thistles. But the dark elves came and took them, citing that we needed permission to have livestock.

We applied for this permission. Of course, we did. We've been waiting for an answer for three years.

Anyway, we have refitted the barn as best we could with what little we have to house all the new additions to our settlement.

"I hate this," Sandy, one of my other neighbors, grumbles. We're handing out breakfasts to everyone new to Lowtown. Sandy has just had a baby, and she is still nursing, but she is off to work today because she doesn't have a choice.

"What do you hate?" I ask her almost absentmindedly.

Despite all the negative changes in my life, I have been feeling strangely disconnected from it all.

I have never been one to show too much emotion – I keep my rage and sadness well in check – but even so. I have been feeling a lot less despondent than before.

I haven't been feeling particularly happy.

I have just been feeling...

Nothing.

My hand goes to my neck, but I force myself to put my hand down and focus on the task in front of me.

I am still wearing the necklace, and every time I need some kind of reassurance, I reach for it almost automatically.

"I hate that we work for those bastards, and we don't get paid enough to live on. And they say that they give us a free place to stay here." Sandy gestures at our neighborhood, if it can be called that, which is looking worse and worse each day. "But we spend all our money fixing leaky ceilings and cleaning up shit."

“I know what you mean.” I sigh. I give a bowl of food, which is little more than gruel covered with warm dripping fat, to a child who cannot be older than twelve. “Things are getting worse and worse every day.”

Today is my day off, a day that only comes around once a month. Once I finish the shared village chores, I go back to my home and pull on a pair of beat-up boots, and a thick coat and head for the forest.

I forage every morning, but I only have a little time during those hours. Today, I’ll have a good twelve hours to make a clean sweep of the forest.

The sun is rising earlier every day, and the light is finally penetrating the thick tree cover.

That is a good thing. Because the sunlight, coupled with the morning dew and the sporadic rainy days, means that the seeds, nuts, and bulbs left behind by forgetful animals are springing into life.

If I’m lucky, I’ll have a good, fruitful day, where I find enough vegetables and maybe even some fruit to keep our pots going for a few days.

And I might even find some seeds and bulbs to plant in my own garden and share with Sandy, who is stubbornly dedicated to cultivating the best vegetable garden in all of Lowtown.

The walk through the forest does me good. The air is no longer too cold to inhale, and the sky is warmer because it is close to noon.

I start at the sparsest part of the forest, and my heart leaps in my chest when I find several patches of clean sweetgrass and burgona bulbs that are so big that I can see the heavy, round shapes coming out of the ground.

I stop halfway through my trek through the forest when I come across a trail of blood. My stomach turns when I see animal entrails close by.

I am almost afraid to push through a small thicket of trees, but I move forward, too curious to let it go.

What I find is a dead, fully-grown female capra.

I examine the animal carefully, looking for signs of disease. But all I find are wounds, which were probably made by wild worgs.

I am not sure where the capra would have come from, but I'll have to tell the men to come and fetch the beast because there is quite a lot of meat left.

Then I continue my sweep of the forest until I reach the place where I found the necklace.

The familiar sound of fluttering wings alerts me to Skye's presence. Though it must be afternoon now, and the sun should be high in the sky, the closer I get to the little clearing where I found the necklace, the darker the forest gets.

My pockets and my large hessian bag suddenly feel heavy with everything I have collected. I breathe faster, more erratically, and for a second, the necklace feels hot and heavy against my skin.

Skye crows and squawks softly and lands on the ground before hopping around almost frantically.

I'm not sure if I came to this particular clearing with any expectations. I haven't been back here since I found the necklace. And for some reason, this part of the forest feels different. Darker. Magical. Thick with expectation.

Skye continues hopping. I set down my bag, and Skye calms down to inspect it.

I know she won't eat anything I found, and I'll give her a treat later.

For now, I just want to spend time in this clearing. The clearing that has been haunting me.

The necklace is burning my skin, but I cannot bring myself to pull it off.

That is when I see it. Another shiny thing. This time it is not on the ground, covered by forest undergrowth as if carelessly thrown there. This time, the shiny thing, a bracelet, is stuck to a tree trunk, obvious for anyone to see.

But I am the only one who comes to this part of the forest.

No one else in Lowtown ventures this far.

“Does someone know that? Is someone...watching me? Did someone leave this for me?”

I shake my head at the absurdity of my thoughts. No one knows me. I do not exist to anyone who could afford a bracelet like this.

Despite the sense of foreboding, which screams so loudly in my ears that it is deafening, I lift the bracelet from the tree trunk.

It is pretty and quite big. Too big to really fit around my wrists.

“Don’t put it on. This is probably a nasty dark elf trick,” I whisper to myself.

Skye caws in agreement.

But I do put it on.

And then, as if the bracelet felt my thoughts, the large piece of jewelry shrinks to fit perfectly, tightly, around my wrist.

I let out a steady exhale as my heart thumps uncontrollably.

Where did this come from? This cannot be a coincidence. Someone must be leaving this here.

“Maybe,” I say this thought out loud. “Maybe someone is leaving gifts for someone else, and I just keep intercepting them.”

The clearing grows even darker then. And the trees, like when I found the necklace, begin to sway and whisper.

They are crotchety as they gossip, and I have the distinct feeling that the trees are talking about me. The sunlight, like before when I found the necklace, struggles to reach through the thick, stubborn tree cover.

What little sunlight manages to reach through is weak and creaking, and the light is blown to shreds by an invisible wind before it reaches the ground.

I cannot help but admire the bracelet on my wrist. It fits perfectly, and it is quite beautiful.

And I know that I will never take it off. And I will never take the necklace off.

My curiosity about the mystery of the jewelry is inflamed, even as I know that the jewelry owns me now.

I look down at Skye.

“What do you think?” I don’t bother to whisper. I do not care if the nosy trees hear me. I do not care who they tell.

“Do you think I’m going crazy?” I ask Skye, my voice louder.

And then I burst into a fit of giggles, and my chest tightens with anxiety as I realize that I have no control over the laughter that pours from me.

The whispering of the trees grows louder, the darkness becomes more creeping, and the sunlight loses the war against the tree cover.

And all I can do is wonder about the necklace and the bracelet and the hold they have on me.

“I wonder what I’ll find next.”

BRIELLE

Lines of tents beckon me from the forest, the remainder of Oshta overlooking my field of vision.

Skye trails behind me, leaping around the dirt and grass and pecking at loose crumbs. I caress the bright green and blue zanthenite bound in the golden bracelet, unable to tear my eyes away from it. A nearby brook babbles. I sidestep Colson, who is carrying a large log toward Oshta with one weaker-looking man I don't recognize.

"Why aren't you back at the factory?" Colson asks nonchalantly as he struggles against the weight of the lumber. He's heading down an incline now, and he looks up at me as he tries to plant himself against the natural trajectory of the slope.

Nearby, I see the twigs and debris we use to build our own little fire, around which several people are gathered, rubbing their hands together. The dormitories are frigid. Sometimes, the only way to stay warm is to gather down here, in our own little community area.

"They gave me the day off," I reply.

He looks suspiciously down at the chain necklace around my neck, a single diamond hanging near my chest. But as he disappears down the hill, he says nothing else.

I move over to the fire and chat to pass the time, the smell of ash filling my nostrils as the flames feel like they're burning my face. Everyone around the fire has elaborate and terrifying stories about their first encounters with the dark elves. They all

speaking about the first time they came to hate them and swore to free themselves of their rule.

But I'm second generation. I don't remember my first encounter with the dark elves. They've just always been in my life.

So while Zion, Brantley, and Declan talk, all I can do is nod my head while Skye balances on my shoulder, cawing at nothing in particular.

"Swear by the Thirteen, Bri," Zion says, annoyed at the constant chatter, "if we ever run out of food, I'm eating that bird."

Brantley laughs. Declan casts him a disapproving side glance.

I know he's joking, but I still huddle away, putting a hand on Skye and petting her. I try to maintain the conversation, but it's awkward. I can never tell whether they pick on me because I'm an easy target or because they want to toughen me up.

I stand up, walk away from the campfire, and immediately feel the chill. It's getting dark, and our mandated curfew is coming up. Soon, I'll be returning home to my frigid bed, to hopefully get at least a little bit of sleep before my next day of work first thing in the morning.

"What by the gods are you wearing?" a familiar voice inquires.

I look up from the ground to see Riya, still as pale and freckled as ever. I smile somewhat sheepishly before clutching my necklace and feeling the texture of the metal in my hand.

"You're not going to believe it, but I just found these," I say.

I can tell that she doesn't believe it. She's going to tell me to return them and find out who they belong to. She's going to ask me if I'm insane for even humoring the idea that –

"Nice," she says, the light of her smile not quite meeting her eyes.

"Nice?"

She is stone-faced. Outwardly, she is happy for me. I never know what she's thinking, though.

"Where'd you find them?" she asks. She's resumed walking now, and I know that we're walking back toward the dormitories. I gesture to Skye to follow, clicking my tongue against my teeth, and she jumps atop my shoulder.

Behind me, they're extinguishing the fire, pouring nearly frozen water from the brook over it. The steam rises as Zion complains about another day of work, and Declan tells him to suck it up and keep perspective.

"I found them in the forest," I say, looking toward the growing buildings of Lowtown.

I must have blanked it out, but here, in the comfort of Riya's presence, I realize that my feet are throbbing in my sandals – the only disadvantage of walking the grounds of the forest rather than the hard factory floor. They pound in the chilly air.

"Watch it!" Riya says suddenly. I narrowly avoid a pile of equu droppings.

The dark elves don't stop by often, but when they do, they really don't bother to clean up after their animals.

"Wow, something's really rattled you," Riya says, eyes facing forward as I collect myself.

"I'm fine," I say, grinning, with my head cast downward to avoid future incidents. But something still prods at my thoughts.

"So you just found a beautiful, life-salary-costing necklace and bracelet in the middle of the forest," she asks. "That's a bit strange, isn't it?"

I nod.

"You think I should return it."

"I think you're losing your mind," she says. "Absolutely don't do that."

I stop walking. She stops walking. I look at her, my brow furrowed as she turns around.

“But it belongs to somebody,” I say. “Somebody’s probably looking for it. And if I keep it –”

“No,” she tries to interject. But I speak louder over her.

“If I keep it, they could execute me for stealing.”

She smiles at me, taking a seat on the front steps of her dormitory.

We’ve arrived in Lowtown proper. Her hand rests on the stone pavement, near where a long root of vegetation creeps out, having cracked the rock’s surface. No parts of this area have been unaffected by the slow crawl of the nearby forest, and a lack of maintenance or order by the dark elves has left Lowtown in shambles.

Her eyes have wisdom in them. At times, they seem calm or concerned. Right now, they bore through me, peering into another world.

“This jewelry,” she asks me. “Was it just lying on the ground for you to pick up? Did it look like somebody *dropped* it?”

I shake my head.

“Right,” she says. “Because knowing you, if it was, you wouldn’t have taken it.”

“The first one I wouldn’t have seen if Skye hadn’t pointed it out,” I say. “The second was pinned to a tree trunk.”

She nods.

“Still,” she says. “It is a little odd that there were two of them. That makes it all the more likely they were left intentionally.”

“What do you mean?”

Zion, Declan, Colson, and Brantley all walk past us. They seemed to have been enjoying a lively conversation before they noticed us, talking on the stone steps of Riya’s dormitory.

“What’s this then?” Declan asks, looking between the two of us.

“None of your business,” Riya says, a little coldly.

Declan nods. Zion, Colson, and Brantley seem uncomfortable in their own skin and would rather look at anything than either of us.

“Remember, ladies,” Declan says. “Watch what you say.”

He doesn’t explain himself, because explaining himself would defeat the purpose of secrecy. But lately, members of our group have been disappearing. Declan suspects that the dark elves might be listening to our little home in Lowtown, quashing any signs of dissent before they can materialize into real problems. The people who disappeared all made very open, very public threats against the elves before they vanished.

Riya and I think he’s skipping his portions.

“Keep walking, Declan,” Riya says.

He looks agitated, as though he wants to say something to counter her, but just shakes his head instead. He picks up his feet and walks to a dormitory across from us, along with Zion, Colson, and Brantley.

I know that our curfew is fast approaching and can feel my nerves prickling.

“Take my word for it,” Riya says. “If it was just the necklace, or just the bracelet, then sure. It’s perfectly plausible somebody could have dropped it.”

I look from the empty streets back toward Riya, who is engaged in deep thought and pursing her lips.

“But two pieces of priceless jewelry, just left out in the open for you? That’s too much of a coincidence.”

“I have been going into the forests a lot lately,” I reply.

“So maybe what you’re looking at is a very deep-pocketed secret admirer,” Riya says. “Are there any guys who’ve had their eyes on you?”

I think a bit before shaking my head.

“If there was, I’m sure you’d know about it,” I say.

Riya nods.

“But when I picked up the jewelry, I did get an odd feeling I was being watched,” I say. “It made me feel a bit uncomfortable...”

“He’s probably just shy,” Riya says. “I’m sure as long as you wear the jewelry, he’s bound to notice and say something eventually.”

Beneath all my contemplation is a quiet, escalating feeling of giddiness. So many questions still fill my mind, and I’m not completely convinced I didn’t just steal somebody’s jewelry, which would be very bad.

But if Riya’s right and these *were* left for me, as my gut says, that means there’s someone, probably a guy in Lowtown, who sacrificed a great deal to get them for me. It means that while I’m carrying about my days just trying to survive this grind, I’m occupying somebody’s spare thoughts.

I run through who could possibly be leaving me these gifts, and still, I come to no good answers.

Skye chatters and caws next to me anxiously, bored from remaining still for so long.

“We should probably be getting to bed, don’t you think?” I ask.

Riya chuckles a little.

“Oh, I suppose,” she says before launching into a poor imitation of Declan. “You never know who’s watching.”

I laugh, walking over to my own dormitory.

“I’m sorry, Skye,” I say, gesturing toward the cage outside. “I don’t want to keep putting you in a cage, but you know you can’t be in the dormitories, and you *know* what happened last time.”

Skye shuffles sadly into her cage as I hold the door open, before quietly shutting the cage door. I’ve considered putting a

lock on it, but I feel like I can trust her to not try to escape.

I walk into the door, past the empty, dilapidated corridors, and into my own untidy bedroom, where I dream of an approaching fire building toward Lowtown. But as I watch its approach, I am not worried. In fact, I feel extremely calm and relaxed, if not a bit gleeful.

THALI

The churning of gears fills my ear, the sounds of metal spinning against metal, motivated by the constant hum of magic. The noises of metal clattering, dropping, and crashing are distant, and they are close, coming from beyond the golden doors of the factory. They are accompanied by the constant emission of steam, from within the factory and from without, blowing out of the long, brass pipes at the top of the building.

Any moment now, I think to myself. As strangers in crude, tattered clothing, mostly human, glance at me as they walk past, both into and out of the factory and all of the adjacent metal buildings, I make sure to scowl at them in return.

I never noticed the crude metal symbols, engraved between the protrusions and pipes in the door, but I translate the old Elven runes for myself to pass the time.

Labor is life, flowing from blood to flesh to muscle. It ripples in and it vibrates out, guiding the child, growing the infant. Labor does not judge or discriminate. Fear not the honesty of labor, which molds the unskilled and shapes the untalented.

Adding to the noise, I hear the chiming of a distant bell, reverberating through the district. Realizing that I have very little time to get out of view, I raise my hood and shimmy to the side of the factory, cutting between passersby. My footsteps barely echo as they run over the stone pavement.

These workers are far too engaged in conversation to notice me anyway.

“Have you *seen* the prices of fortisia lately?”

“She just collapsed on the floor in front of me. I didn’t know what to say.”

I climb the side of the building, leaping between bulges and grooves in the factory’s metal walls before reaching an overlooking platform, part of the right arch that details the building’s facade.

Below me, the noises of conversation have reached their peak as the metal doors creak open and a large outpouring of workers exit the building. A sudden whistling, produced by the pipe’s emission of steam on my left, startles me, and I nearly lose my footing. Whirling about, my eyes fall upon Brielle’s familiar brown curls, and I give chase.

I drop from the metal overlook, pushing my legs against one of the competing pillars on the sides of the factory, then touching the other pillar with my hands. I push off and flip myself upside down, propelling myself about twenty feet downward before catching a large lug nut on the way down.

I brush myself off, looking around to see if I was noticed before realizing that I hold the power. But for my own gratification, it seems like nobody was aware of my acrobatics.

“What in the Thirteen Hungry Maws are you doing here?”

A deep, baritone voice behind me rattles me, and I spin around to see Kaisax. He might be taller than me, but I’ve inherited the fighting genes.

“Obviously, I’m staking out a target,” I mumble. “Stop blowing my cover.”

“Taura shit you are,” Kaisax says.

If the crowd wasn’t aware of me earlier, they certainly are now. Traffic through the district has stopped to stare at us. To many of them, this is the only source of entertainment they’ll ever enjoy. We’re scripted theater – the gods themselves picking a fight in the middle of the street.

I look ahead of me, but it's hard to see the front of the building from here.

I've lost her.

I ball my fists up in frustration but try my best to mask my rage.

"The lower gates are open to all, brother," I say, attempting to peer around him as he crowds me with his immense form. He's started growing a beard, but the stubble fails to conceal his stubborn double chin.

If I can end this dialogue quickly, perhaps I can still catch up to Brielle.

Her life is my theater.

"It seems like you take great joy in opening 'the lower gates' then," Kaisax spits.

I raise my neck to look into his cold, gray eyes. I maintain a look of indifference and stoicism.

"What do you mean, dear brother?"

"You can save the act for your clients and targets," Kaisax says. "I saw you in Lowtown. And I don't believe you were on a job."

I puff my chest up and flex my muscles. I might be no match for his brute force, but I will not be intimidated. Nor will I be told where I can and cannot venture.

"Even if I wasn't on a job," I say, feigning a cheerful demeanor. "Area scouting takes many forms. You can never be too prepared for the jobs you might be tasked with. You never know where you might be asked to strike."

Kaisax shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm not buying it. Do you really expect me to believe that you're scouting Lowtown?"

"What's so strange about that?" I ask.

He chuckles malevolently and heartily.

“I’ll tell you what,” he says. “I’ve heard Jearineau is having trouble with one of his taura. Why don’t I get you to assassinate one of them, too, while you’re at it?”

“Are you equating the humans in Lowtown to cattle?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “I am.”

I sneer at him.

“You know, it’s funny you mention that,” I reply. “Seems a friend of mine’s gotten a lot of orders for Lowtown. One of them, what was it?”

I pause to recall, mostly for dramatic effect.

“Old, grizzled fellow? Walked with a cane. Seems he’d gotten a bit too loud about his dissent toward our kind.”

Kaisax’s skin has gone paler than usual, and he seems to be unable to come up with a retort.

“I heard he begged for his life, actually. Most of them do. Barely put up any fight at all.”

Kaisax utters one word in response.

“Ah.”

“Are you a coward, brother? Because it seems like you’d have no trouble taking care of a taura, but you still brought in hired help to deal with these *cattle*.”

“The humans are *mine*.” He growls, his upper lip curling to expose his teeth to me.

“Pardon?”

“I said that the humans in Lowtown are *mine*,” he yells, not concerned about all the humans from Lowtown watching him. “Stay away from them!”

I smile, maintaining my composure but folding my arms in response.

“That’s a fascinating take,” I say, pretending to be unaffected by his tantrum. “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

“You’re a smug one, little brother,” Kaisax replies, still in an ill temper. “Watch that that doesn’t get you killed.”

“And what does *that* mean?” I ask.

“You’re in a dangerous line of work,” he says dismissively. “You’ve gone through a lot to get where you are. Mother and Father are *so* proud of you.”

He chuckles.

“We all want you to stay safe,” he adds. “But if you keep getting close to Lowtown, you might just cause a revolt. And those can be *very* dangerous. A lot can happen in that confusion.”

I nod, smiling. I can’t be too certain, but I think my brother just conspired to kill me for almost no reason... not that this is a new development.

“I’m very sorry, brother,” I say. He seems surprised, almost unnerved, by the pleasant tone. “This conversation has been wonderful, but I do have other business to attend to.”

I extend my hand as a gesture. He takes it in his and tries to crush it.

“Stay safe, Thali,” he says.

At this point, the crowd has already moved on. It was a bold move, stopping the flow of traffic to watch my brother like that. He once had a human executed for looking at him the wrong way.

It seems he takes his job of maintaining peace and order extremely seriously.

I watch him walk away from me, and I spit on the ground where he stood.

There was a time before his injury when we actually got along. Sometimes, that feels like eons ago.

I laugh before remembering why I was actually here. I make sure that I’m not being watched before moving swiftly through the crowds, weaving in and around them to try to find Brielle’s familiar locks and garb.

I've often thought about the ways in which I wish to defile her – how much I want her to beg for me. Part of me resents her for it.

I bump into an elderly woman on the way forward, and she gives me a questioning, almost hateful, glance. I say nothing and continue walking.

I am not my brother, willing to kill at the slightest inconvenience. There is an art and a place for killing, and he lacks any knowledge of the nuance of it.

Running my hand over the dagger hilt in my holster, I imagine driving it inches from Brielle's neck, forcing her to watch its silver sheen as I move in to kiss her supple red lips. I imagine tearing her clothing free from her body with its blade and leaving cuts in her flesh where I most want to lick her.

I move to the edge of the gate, looking out at Lowtown, the sky growing dark.

Brielle is nowhere to be seen, and it's all *his* fault.

I consider approaching Lowtown anyway but shake my head.

I've attracted enough of my brother's ire for today, I think.

I clench my fists. My day is once again ruined by the prying and insecure attention of my brother.

For a moment, I wonder what my life would have been like had he never been birthed, before remembering that there was a time when I cherished his presence.

I swallow my crushing disappointment.

Tomorrow will be a better day.

I can feel anticipation building within me, thinking of all the plans I have for the girl. All the traps and trinkets I still plan to leave for her.

I turn back around to head toward my townhome, unable to count all the schemes that now fill my head.

A wicked smile crosses my face, followed by a wry chuckle.

BRIELLE

A giant rock hive stands ahead of me, lingering under the bright forest sky. I stand at the bottom of a deep, forested ravine, several patches of white weeds intercut into a crystalline meadow thirty feet away.

I've been tasked with finding fylvek grass and bringing it back to Lowtown. Our stock has run out, and an increasing number of burn victims are showing up, the unfortunate recipients of fire spells which have mysteriously gone haywire.

Since I've somehow been granted another day off, I volunteered to make this trek.

I'm starting to think maybe I imagined it all. It's been several days since I found the jewelry, tucked strangely into the forest for me to find. Since then, it has been quiet.

"Can you just give me a sign?" I mutter to nobody in particular – or perhaps to somebody.

I look around me to see nothing, save for the rock-like cracking of the creatures in the hive which are responsible for this meadow.

Taking the chain bracelet in my hand, I run my fingers over the intersecting and interlocking metal then touch the jewels in its sockets, which mirror the emerald forest around me and the pristine and vacant blue sky above me. I wonder if I dreamed of finding these. I wonder if it was an elaborate fantasy I conjured up to entertain my imagination.

Or perhaps I wandered into the effects of an elven spell, gone awry? I've heard of spells that could distort the mind and even create memories of events that never happened.

I sigh, stepping forward into the meadow and nearly trampling on a patch of crystallized tagetes.

My heart leaps, and I stand motionless, stray grass crushing gently under my feet. I can still hear the crashing and cracking of the creatures inside the hive. The abrasive noises together form a chorus that resembles the buzzing of apis.

I have to move before they convert this grass, too.

I crawl one step, then another, all the while monitoring the large rock hive ahead of me. I can see the fylvek grass just ahead, and I haven't yet alerted these creatures to my presence.

Reaching out, my eyes never leaving the hive, I tug on the medicinal weeds ahead of me, retrieving them individually. They pull out of the ground with a satisfying crunch.

Eventually, as I pull one clump, then another, I ponder why these creatures were ever a source of concern. They must be sleeping.

After retrieving as much as I can carry and placing the grass in a satchel, I trample out of the meadow with a little less cautiousness.

And my foot crushes something.

The sound is very loud, and it feels like glass underfoot.

Looking beneath me, I see the remnants of the crystallized tagetes I avoided earlier.

I pause, hoping that maybe they didn't hear the cracking of their prized crystalline flowers.

Briefly, I entertain that hope.

Until it's denied to me, and their buzzing, rocklike and unified, grows louder behind me.

I sprint.

When I was told to go down into the ravine to find fylvek grass, I was not informed that these large insectoid beings would be down here. I don't dare turn around to look at them, lest I be petrified like the plants in their meadow.

Their buzzing gets louder, and I'm faced with an inevitability – soon, they will catch up to me, tearing into me, or converting me, or whatever these creatures I've only heard stories about *do* to their prey.

I can see the rope ladder ahead, but I know that I'm not going to reach it. They can fly. I can hear their laden wings beating into the wind, their very existence a slight against nature.

Resigning myself to my fate, I grab onto the rope ladder. I don't have the motivation to climb. I know that there's no point.

Then I hear several crashes behind me, accompanied by a sudden ringing noise and a blinding light. I am stricken momentarily deaf and blind.

It's silent.

I wait for the insectoid, rocklike buzzing to continue, but it does not.

I can see my breath and realize that I'm very cold.

Turning around, I see the corpses of the creatures, covered in ice crystals, with one arrow planted into the soil among them. The grass is suddenly brittle as I move forward, picking up the arrow and inspecting it.

It just seems like an ordinary arrow. It is light in my hand, and the tip is cracked slightly. I roll it around on my palm, finding nothing at all unusual.

Coming to my senses, I have a profound realization.

Somebody saved me, I think.

I look at the rope ladder and pull on it. It's partially frozen now, and it might not hold my weight, but I would bet that it's still sturdy enough to climb.

But something calls me back to the ravine grove. I feel incredibly stupid as I march shakily forward, taking care to not slip on the ground, which is covered in ice.

“What are you doing?” I ask myself aloud. “Climb the ladder and get out of here, or you’re probably going to die.”

I should not spit on my good fortune. I should be thankful that I’m allowed to live today and head back to Lowtown.

As I’m about to round the corner, I sigh, hoping that the fylvek grass hasn’t also been frozen.

But I don’t dare check. Not yet. My curiosity is leading me onward.

Somehow, I hope that I’ll be able to learn the identity of my savior.

What if it’s the same man?

The thought is preposterous to me, and I scoff at it.

On the other hand, somebody must have been following me in some form.

Rounding the corner, I see the destroyed remains of the meadow. The hive is covered in ice and broken in, the crystals all violently shattered.

Yet there are no signs of who could have done this, save for one.

In the middle of the shattered flowers, where I had previously plucked the fylvek grass, is a small metal device. I pick it up, and as soon as my hand caresses its smooth surface, it emits a white light that dances around me.

Curiously, I remove my hand from the device then touch it again, and the light recedes back into the device.

It’s him!

I pocket the device without a thought. It was meant for me, after all. Then I inspect the contents of my satchel. The grass is all still intact. It should still work medicinally.

I heave a sigh of relief. I want to call out to him, to thank him and ask him his name, but I'm not so emboldened. My heart is still thumping aggressively.

Instead, I meander forward, taking the metallic device back out and touching it. The light spirals out, and I touch it again, the light returning to the device.

I realize with a smile that I could use this to light my home. The light follows me as I walk, seemingly even moving wherever I think it should go. My heart fills with immense gratitude.

I wish he'd come out and reveal himself so that I could thank him properly.

I tug on the rope ladder and start to climb before noticing something shimmering on the ground that wasn't there before. Looking down, I see seven corked vials, filled with pink, shimmering liquid.

Shrugging and adding them to my satchel, I begin to climb up the ladder. It holds my weight about as well as it did before.

The walk back to Lowtown is uneventful, and I thankfully make it before sundown. On the way, I check the usual location in the forest, expecting to find something there, but there is nothing.

He's really spoiling me.

Of course, today I don't have Skye to accompany me, and she was the only reason I found the first gift.

I hand the grass to Declan without saying anything. The hive has been taken care of, anyway. Any danger the distant threat might have posed to us has been eliminated.

Walking over to Riya's dormitory, I knock on the door.

Her eyes widen when she sees me. Before I can react, she's hugging me tightly in her arms.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she says.

She must have legitimately been worried for some reason. Did she know those creatures were there?

“Good to see you, too,” I say, smiling. “It was barely an inconvenience.”

I thank her for taking care of Skye. We sit down in her dormitory, which is in much better shape than mine, as Skye caws appreciatively outside.

I recount everything that happened. Her response is stoic and unmotivated.

“Did you know?” I ask.

“I had a feeling,” she says. “That’s why I told you not to do it. The last few women who went searching for fylvek grass never came back.”

I gulp. That’s why she was insistent that at the very least, I leave Skye behind.

“You’re really scaring me lately with how reckless you’re becoming,” she says.

I produce the metal device from my pocket, but my gut tells me not to show her the vials.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” I ask her. “Bunch of guys in the village get brutally burnt –”

“Not that,” she interrupts.

I tap the metal device, and the light comes out, dancing around the room and swirling around her head.

“I mean, you’re not the least bit worried about whoever’s following you?”

I stare at her, expressionless, clutching my satchel defensively.

“You said it was a good thing,” I tell her. “You said it must have been a secret admirer in Lowtown.”

“Yeah, I thought that,” she admits. “But then nobody came forward. And now you’re telling me some fantastical story about a man who shoots ice arrows and destroys monsters. That doesn’t sound like anybody in our village. That sounds like –”

“Don’t say it,” I command her.

She falls silent.

“Thank you for keeping an eye on Skye for me,” I say, tapping the device one more time. The light returns to its metallic confines. “But I’m fine.”

She nods in response. She doesn’t show it, still wearing that vacant stare, but I know she’s concerned. And I don’t feel like she has any right to be.

Standing outside her dormitory, I pick up Skye’s cage before impulsively producing one of the vials.

I stare at its contents, contemplating for a moment.

And I drink it.

It has a bitter, chalky taste, and it doesn’t go down easy.

I can still hear her voice in my head.

What are you doing? That could be poison for all you know!

But as its effects take hold of me, I realize that it’s very much not poison.

I can feel myself burning.

I reach down and lightly caress my pussy through my dress.

Whatever is in these vials, it’s a powerful aphrodisiac. I can feel myself thinking about my suitor, whoever he is, and I can’t stop touching myself. I’m incredibly wet, out of nowhere, and I need to relieve my urges.

I rush back to my dormitory, setting Skye at the entrance, and slam the door.

BRIELLE

At the end of one of the conveyor belts, there's a small gap before the next one picks up again. Every item has to be picked up from the first belt, turned upside down, and then placed on the next one.

That's my job. That's the entirety of my job. I'm sure there's a spell or a machine that could do it just as well, but they've decided that it's cheaper to have me do it.

The items, which will eventually be digging machines, aren't very heavy to lift at first, but by the fiftieth one you carry across the same gap and turn upside down, they might as well be boulders.

If the work weren't dreary enough, the atmosphere makes it worse. There's a blue fire orb hanging from the ceiling to light the factory every ten feet or so. It's just bright enough that you can see, but everything's still left in a tiresome blue dimness. The belt constantly crackles with the magical lightning that makes it run. You get used to getting little shocks, and I've heard that some people have had worse.

There's also very little room to move. The whole factory is laid out as one long hall, and if you need to get past someone, you have to squeeze by them.

But the worst is the noise. Every wheel under the belt constantly turning and sparking and clattering together. Every time I enter the factory floor, I have to cover my ears for a few seconds to get used to the din. You have to shout to talk to

anyone older than forty who works on this floor, and I know that'll be me soon enough.

The volume isn't the part that gets me, though. It's the regularity. Always the same sounds over and over and over. Chug chug clatter. Chug chug clatter. It's like a constant reminder that while I'm here, I'm just part of a machine. I don't matter. I'd be a belt if things didn't have to get turned upside down. Just keep on working. Chug chug clatter.

But today, I have a secret. There is someone who cares about me. Someone who loves me enough to leave me gifts.

To someone out there, I'm not just another cog in a huge turning machine. I'm a person. A special person.

Obviously, I've tucked the necklace and the bracelet underneath my uniform. But I can still feel them. They feel warm and special against my skin, and I try to picture the gift-giver. It's a silly thing to daydream about, but you need something to fill your time.

There is one positive thing about the noise of the factory floor. It means that as long as one of the overseers isn't right behind you, you can usually get away with talking to whoever's next to you. For me, that's Riya, who tightens the last bolt on the machines before I carry them to the next belt.

"You're looking cheerful," Riya says as I pick up my next one.

"You're not," I reply. She certainly isn't. She looks like she's biting her tongue about something that's really upsetting her. Normally, that would worry me, too. When Riya gets upset about something, she's usually right. But I'm still thinking about my mysterious lover in the woods.

I wonder what it is he sees in me. Does he just think I'm pretty? Or is there something else about me? But what? I'm just a human, aren't I?

She doesn't say anything. She focuses on her work harder, as if she's trying to tune me out.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

“You know what I’m worried about.”

She looks pointedly at the slight bulge in my sleeve where the bracelet is. That surprises me. I knew that Riya didn’t quite trust the gifts I was receiving, but I had no idea that she was taking it that seriously. After all, they’re just gifts, right?

But even as I think about it, I realize it’s not true. The gifts are important. They’re important to me, and I don’t know what I’d do if I found out they weren’t important to whoever’s been giving them. No, I agree with Riya that there’s more here than gifts. The difference is, the uncertainty excites me while it scares her.

“You’re really that worried about some gifts?” I instinctively check for the overseer. He’s about six stations down and not facing us. “It’s fine. Besides, it’s my business, not yours.”

“I know it’s your business,” Riya says. “I just worry about you.”

The concern in her voice is so genuine I can’t even pretend to be mad at her. I wish she weren’t worried about me, but she’s just trying to be a good friend.

“It’s not like he’s done anything to hurt me,” I tell her. “Why do you have to assume that just because someone cares about me, there’s something wrong with him?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Riya protests and stops short. It takes me a moment to realize that the overseer has turned around and is walking too close to us for comfort.

I know that’s not what Riya was saying. She’s my friend, and that was just me being defensive. But the fact is, I don’t want to have this conversation. I care about Riya, but whoever has been leaving me gifts fascinates me.

The hardest part is, I don’t know if I can explain what it is that I find so compelling about him, while I’m sure that Riya could make lots of reasonable points about why I should be careful and stay away from the forest.

The fact is, I don’t want to be persuaded that this stranger might be dangerous. Even if he is, I don’t care. It’s not a

matter of logic. It's a matter of the heart.

“Well, you don't have to worry,” I tell her as soon as the overseer has gone far enough in the other direction. “I haven't gotten any more gifts from him. Not since the last one I told you about.”

She looks surprised. “You haven't?”

“And not for lack of trying,” I continue. “I've gone into the forest every evening. But there hasn't been anything there. Or anyone. I guess he decided to leave off.”

“Well, that's a surprise.” She thinks for a moment. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don't know. Sad, I guess. Apparently, he didn't love me as much as I thought he did.”

“That is the way it often goes with people who make big gestures out of nowhere like that,” Riya explains, taking on her mothering voice. “They see another girl or they just think of a more fun game and off they go.”

“Yeah. That makes sense.”

It doesn't feel good to lie to my best friend. But then again, maybe it's for the best. Riya won't understand what's happening to me. Heck, I don't understand it, not really. Easier to just tell her what she expects to hear and get on with it.

“Are you still going out into the forest?” she asks suddenly.

“Yeah,” I admit.

She briefly looks up from her workstation. Her gaze is serious and just a little suspicious. Is she wondering whether I'm hiding something from her, or does she just think I'm still stuck on this guy even though he's disappeared?

“Just be very careful. You never know what you might meet out there.”

“You're absolutely right,” I reply. “That's what makes it so exciting.”

There's another lull as the ugly clanging sounds of the factory take over. Chug chug clatter. Chug chug clatter.

"What are you going to do about the things you already have?" she asks suddenly. "You know, you could get a few ducats selling them. Maybe more."

I glare at her. "I'm not selling them. They're mine."

"Why not?" Riya returns. "As you said, he didn't love you as much as you thought he did."

"You don't understand love," I snap.

The overseer starts to walk back, and already I feel bad for saying something so mean.

But there is something very special happening between me and the man in the forest. In some ways, I think I'm beginning to understand him. He's a man of contradictions. He buys expensive gifts but doesn't demand anything for them. He wants to own and control me, but that has to do with the free part of me, the part that wanders out into the forest to spend time with the animals. He's bold but cautious, a man who's used to shadows and quiet places.

"I'm sorry," I whisper back to her once we can finally talk again. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you shouldn't," Riya replies. "But I understand why you did."

After that, we lapse into silence. I go back to thinking about my strange man in the woods and the warmth of the gaze that I'm sure I've felt on my back while I've been in the clearings, surrounded by hiding spots.

As for Riya, she's probably thinking about him and me, too. I hope that at the end of all this, I'll be proven right. That it will make sense for me to trust in a man who's so fear-inspiring and strange. Right now, everything we know seems, logically, like it favors Riya.

But I believe that there's more than that to him. I believe that he has a heart and that in it, all the darkness and contradictions Riya is so afraid of will all be brought together

and made sense of. I believe in that whole heart, somewhere out there, and I believe that it beats for me just the way mine beats for him.

Meanwhile, the conveyor belt keeps turning. The lightning continues to crackle. And I keep picking digging machines off the belt, turning them upside down, and setting them on the next belt.

But I'm not just any worker in a factory. I'm the woman that the man in the forest loves. I'm Brielle.

THALI

I creep down the hall of the manor, careful not to wake anyone in their rooms. I don't need any unnecessary drama making this job last any longer than it needs to. Not only that, but most of my clients prefer at least a little bit of discretion, and I want to get paid.

When I reach the room I know he'll be in, I use a quick spell to open the door that I already know is locked. They always lock themselves in, as if that would stop anyone dangerous enough to kill them. Foolish.

The moment I walk in, he turns from the window, eyes widening with horror. Yeah, he knows exactly who I am and exactly why I'm here. I raise my sword, ready to get this over with. But of course, he has to open his mouth. They always do.

"Please, I'm begging you! Please don't do this!"

"Begging me isn't going to do you any good."

"Please! I have a family! You don't have to do this! I have money, I can pay you!"

"Everyone has a family. Everyone has some reason to beg me not to kill them, but never once has that stopped me. You might as well save your breath."

He dodges me as I move to plunge my sword into his chest, and I chuckle. They always try to run, like they have a chance of escaping me.

"It would save us both some time if you would stay still," I tell him.

“You’re evil,” he spits. “You’re a disgrace!” He raises his voice. He’s hoping someone will hear him and come to his rescue. Little does he know, I used a silencing spell, so no one can hear him but me.

“I know.” I wink at him.

He spits again, slowly making his way in the direction of the door I just came through. I roll my eyes, annoyed at this point. I don’t have time for this.

“Why?” he trembles.

I don’t answer. I just smile at him, flashing my sharp teeth. If I had more time, I’d rip his throat out with them as punishment for talking so much.

“Who sent you?”

He’s stalling, and we both know it. Does he seriously think this is going to work? I guess he deserves some points for effort.

“I think you know who. But that doesn’t matter because you’ll be dead in a few seconds.”

“Please! You don’t understand, they need me!” he pleads with me one last time before I lunge and slice his throat open with my long sword, unwilling to listen to another pathetic word.

“They never listen,” I mutter, wiping my sword clean on his bed sheets.

Before jumping out of the window, I cut off his ear and stuff it in my pocket. It’s not for me, I’ve never been one to need a reminder of my kills. I have no use for it. But apparently, my client does.

Usually, I like to take my time killing. Usually, I like to play with them a bit before I take away the one thing they cherish most. I like to see them quiver and sob and work themselves into hysterics. I like to see how much pain they can handle before they stop begging me to spare them and instead start begging me to kill them.

But not today. Today I have more important things to do.

I decide against swinging by my townhome to wash up and instead head straight to where I know my client is waiting for me. Most of them don't need me to confirm, but this particular one did, probably because he wanted this fucking souvenir.

I slam the ear on the table in front of him, looking him right in his beady black eyes.

"It's done. No one heard."

With that, I turn around and head to my next destination. Her.

I get there as fast as I can, not wanting to waste another second away from her. Soon enough, I'm back in the clearing where I first saw her. Our little meeting place.

A slow smile spreads across my face as I see her already here. I knew she'd be here. My little obsession can't stay away. Maybe she's just as obsessed as I am. Maybe she can't stay away either.

Her long brown hair blows in the wind, exposing her neck to me. I inhale deeply, trying to catch a whiff of her. I know she'll smell exquisite. Just the thought has my cock growing hard.

But the thing that makes my cock physically *ache* is the fact that she's wearing the necklace I left for her. It looks even better than I thought it would against her tanned skin. All I want is to give her more, more, more. I think of all the other things I could put around that neck.

As she leans down to examine something on the ground, I notice how thin she is. For some reason, this angers me. Brielle is mine, and she deserves to be taken care of. She shouldn't want for anything.

I want to murder every person who has contributed to her living this lifestyle. I want to make them suffer the way I can tell she has. How many people have turned a blind eye while this girl went hungry? I'm almost angry with myself for not finding her sooner.

Despite her obvious frailty, I can tell that she is a strong woman. In the way she carries herself and the way she

assesses the world around her, it shows. But she wouldn't have to be strong if she were with me. I would be strong for her. She would never have to lift a finger again. Not unless I told her to.

Brielle stands back up, turning in the direction of the tree I'm perched in. As she does so, I spot her left wrist and the bracelet placed upon it. She's fucking wearing *both* of her gifts. She fucking likes them. Just like I knew she would.

It makes me grin, knowing that she's wearing the things I bought her. It's like she's already accepted that she's mine, before even meeting me. She doesn't even know that I've already claimed her.

Gods, this woman is perfect. For a moment, I wonder how she'll look wearing nothing but my gifts, and it almost makes me groan out loud.

Brielle's head swings to her other side, away from my spot. Her pet karasu swoops towards her, squawking at her.

"What is it, Skye?" Her soft, magical voice rings out through the clearing.

It's fucking perfect. It's exactly the kind of voice that any male would do anything to hear screaming their name. And I can't fucking wait to hear her screaming mine, over and over again.

The karasu, Skye, squawks again and flies back the way it came, almost as if it's asking her to follow. She looks after it questioningly, but before following it, she surveys the clearing once more.

Is she looking for another gift? Fuck, I should have gotten here sooner and left her one. I hate myself for not thinking of it before. But she doesn't look disappointed. In fact, she looks very peaceful right now. If only she knew the kind of danger lurking right behind her.

Brielle lifts her head towards the sky and breathes in. I want to wrap my hands around her sweet little neck and throw her to the ground, where she can look at the sky all she wants while I feast on her.

She stays there like that for a moment, closing her eyes. What would she do if I exposed myself right now? Would she freak out and try to run from me? I hope so.

Fuck it. It's time. I need to be close to her, to claim her.

Unable to hold myself back any longer, I quietly jump down from the tree. She's still standing there, enjoying the sun on her face, the breeze ruffling her cascading hair again. I need that hair in my fists.

I take one step towards her, creeping up from behind. She obviously doesn't sense me as I take another step, and then another. I'm beginning to smell her sweet scent, and it's so delicious that it almost takes me out, but I force myself to focus.

I'm so close, and I think about how I want to introduce myself. Maybe I grab the back of the necklace and choke her with it, holding her against my chest while she claws at me. Or maybe I spin her around so that I can look into her eyes before I devour her. Maybe I grab that long hair and yank her back towards me.

Just as I'm about to reach out to touch that hair, something stops me. Something makes me quietly retreat until I'm back in my tree, watching her again.

For some reason, I feel that today is not the day. She isn't ready. Not only that, but *I'm* not ready. I need to toy with her a bit longer before giving her what I know she so badly wants. What she needs.

Finally, Brielle opens her eyes and lowers her head. Before walking back in the direction her karasu flew, she turns around, her eyes swinging towards my tree. She pauses on it, eyes traveling up the bark.

Does she somehow know I'm here? How is that possible? I become angry thinking that she might possibly see me before I choose to reveal myself. Our meeting should be on *my* terms. But about halfway up the trunk, she stops and turns around, sighing as she walks away. Maybe she was just looking to see if another gift was pinned to it.

I sigh in relief that she didn't spot me, and the anger subsides.

Soon. I will expose myself to her soon, and then the fun will really begin.

BRIELLE

Every time I walk through the forest, I try to persuade myself that I'm not here for another gift. There might be something. There might not be. I'm just going out into the forest like I always do. I would be doing this even if no one had ever left me anything.

Skye perches happily on my shoulder, and every once and a while, she sings her little song out into the woods. Occasionally, there's an answer to it, but she never seems particularly interested in them. I often wonder what it is that they're saying anyway.

"Is anyone home today?" I wonder out loud as I creep to a halt and hide behind one of the trees. In front of me is the iypin den that I noticed for the first time a few days ago. Every time I go past it, I make sure to pause, just in case one of the little iypinnits or their mother decides to poke their head out.

Some people think that iypins are a sign of magic, but I just think they're beautiful. I've heard that no two of them have the same coat, and I believe it.

Nothing today. It's possible that they're not using this den right now. Iypins do sometimes build multiple dens and rotate between them. It's part of what makes them so famously difficult to hunt. Not that I would ever hunt one, but I would love it if one came out. They're skittish creatures, and it's quite a gift to get to see one.

I wonder if the man leaving me gifts sees me the same way I see the iypinnits. Maybe he feels the same kind of hope for

me when he leaves a gift that I feel standing here, waiting for one of them to poke their little nose out. Maybe he loves me the same way I love the animals of the forest. I'm the beautiful but strange thing that he wants to understand completely.

Suddenly, in the hole, I see two ice-blue eyes. I can't make out the fur at all, but I know this is a baby. It looks around for a few seconds, notices me, and then steps back into the den.

A short, incomplete sighting, but I'm happy with it. I got to see its eyes, and it saw me. I became a part of its world.

That's a difference between me and the man in the woods. I don't want anything from the iypinnits except to see them. He does want something from me. I don't know what it is yet, but there's a reason that he leaves me things rather than just watching me. There's something that he is hoping I will give him.

And I have no idea what it is. Obviously, I've been told about love and the sort of things that men want. But what does this man want? Why does he think I might be the one to give it to him? I have no answers to those questions, but I find them intoxicating to think about.

Riya would never understand that. Or then again, maybe she would. Maybe that's why she's so worried about me. She understands the whole thing perfectly.

There's a loud sound in the forest, a sort of high-pitched whine that clearly comes from something big. Skye is cut short in the middle of her song by it.

"What was that?" I ask her. She just stares as if saying she could ask me the same question. Truthfully, I have no answer. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe a batlaz, or even a lost worg. Fortunately, it sounds far enough away that I don't think I have to worry about it.

Still, it's a good reminder that there are dangerous things in the forest. There are predators and hunters among the trees as well as the smaller, more gentle creatures. I decide to hurry things up a bit. I don't want to be in the forest when night falls.

It isn't just animals that can be the predators, a voice in my head reminds me.

And that's true. It's another thing to think about. Except, strangely, that kind of thought doesn't frighten me the way it frightens Riya. Instead, it gives me a thrill. The kind of thrill people get from playing cards or rolling the bones.

He might be a predator, I think. *Or again, he might not be.*

I start walking straight to the clearing where the previous gifts have appeared.

Not that I'm here for the gift, I remind myself. I'm just taking a walk.

Although I wouldn't mind if I were to finally catch a glimpse of the man who's been leaving them...

The trees are starting to get thicker, and for just a moment as I'm stepping forward, I think I hear something or someone else moving in the forest nearby. I stop immediately, and I can't hear anything.

Could that be him? Is he looking at me right now? Following me?

I turn slowly around, trying to pierce the dimness of the forest canopy and look for any sign of someone else. I don't see anything, but that means nothing. There are simply too many places that a person can hide out here. Even if I did see him, he'd be able to disappear into the trees, and I'd never catch up.

But maybe I don't want to see him. Maybe I like being followed. Maybe I like the feeling of being watched by someone who loves me.

I smile and start towards the clearing again. Are those the sounds of something else moving through the woods? Are they just the echoes of my own footsteps? Or did I disturb some animal out there?

Maybe it's even that big creature that I heard howling. I don't know. And that's thrilling.

I'm about to reach the clearing when I see something sitting on the ground, clearly waiting for me. It's not a piece of jewelry this time, and it isn't nestled in a treetop. It looks like a piece of parchment, and it's been placed on a smooth stone, with another stone on top to keep it from blowing away.

Skye squawks. She's excited, too. Finally, the mysterious gift-giver has left a note! Maybe he's going to tell me how he feels about me. Or maybe it will set up a meeting place.

I step closer and pick up the stone, then the parchment. I turn it around, and my stomach sinks.

Little girls shouldn't go wandering in the forest alone. Stay away or face the consequences.

The words are scrawled in an aggressive hand. Possibly someone trying to disguise the way they write? But did he write it? Or was it someone else?

It couldn't be him. He wouldn't do that. I feel the bracelet and the necklace weighing on me. It wouldn't make sense for him to tell me to stay away. He's been drawing me out so many times. And he loves me. Why would he suddenly call me a little girl and threaten me with consequences?

No, someone else must have left it. But who? The letter is clearly written to me. Is someone else watching me in the forest? Is it a friend of the man who's been leaving me gifts?

For a moment, I think about Riya. She doesn't like me going out in the woods, or me seeing the man. But no, she wouldn't do something like this. She trusts me, and I trust her. She told me her doubts. She wouldn't try to trick me, much less threaten my life.

I feel something in the woods watching me again, but this time, it feels a lot less friendly. This isn't thrilling anymore. I'm scared now. I've gotten involved in something that I don't understand, something that might be dangerous.

I spin around on my heel, heading back toward the camp. Skye squawks and flies forward, settling onto the rock I just picked up the message from. She gives a few plaintive chirps. Clearly, she wants to keep going until we reach the clearing.

Probably, she's hoping that there will be some pretty, shiny thing waiting that she can peck at like she pecked at almost everything else I've picked up.

"Not this time. This time, I'm going back," I tell her. I'm not going to give up on my lover in the woods, but I need time to think, time to figure out this latest development.

What if he changed his mind about me? What if something happened to him, and now he's in danger?

The high-pitched howl comes again. I'm still not sure what it is, but it's definitely closer now. Too close for comfort.

I start back through the forest, trying my best to be as quiet but also as quick as I can be. Maybe the note's right. Maybe I shouldn't be out here. I don't know what's in the forest. I don't know who's watching me. All I know is that I want to be home and surrounded by people again.

I clutch the note to my chest as I go.

"I'm not going to give up," I declare to Skye as I hurry home. Even if he doesn't love me anymore, even if he did threaten me, well... well I want to know that. I want to know it for sure, and I want to know why.

Something is very wrong here. First gifts, now threats. It doesn't make sense. None of it makes any sense.

There's something else happening here. Something bigger than me, bigger than the man who I thought had loved me. There's danger here, and it's only going to get worse before it gets better.

But I'll see it through. Tonight I'm going home, but I will see this through.

No matter the danger.

I don't know exactly how long I've been walking, but the sun is mostly set when the trees finally start to thin and I come back to the fields. The moment I step out into the open and see the circle of makeshift tents again, I breathe a great sigh of relief.

I've made it. At least for now, I'm safe.

THALI

The air feels thicker today, and I can't put my finger on why.

Perhaps it's the rise of so many factories, filling the air with smog. It's true that Python has been expanding at an unprecedented rate, and we haven't exactly been able to keep up with the pace of it all.

Perhaps it's the stiff chill of winter approaching. Life here is already cold, but our winters are brutal. I grow more and more tempted to just stay indoors with each passing day, and I might, were it not for more *urgent* priorities.

But no. As I trample through the brittle grass, reflecting upon these woods I often take for granted, I realize it's none of those things. I reach up to touch a tree, and its bark is dry and fragile to the touch. The grayness of its wood, normally so rich and great for lumber, is instead malnourished, not even suitable to feed a pilla climbing along its trunk.

There's a sickness in these woods today that goes far beyond the approach of winter, or the irritation of the air. I can feel it in my bones, as real as the erection I carry for Brielle or the jeweled collar in my hand.

I chuckle. She really has no idea what she's in for. I have been planning this for some time, though I had to wait for my idiot brother to get off of my trail.

An iypin crosses my path, and I draw my bow, ready to take aim. I've always hated iypin. Their petulant whines grate on my ears. But their meat is delicious and rich in mana.

But its expression as it looks at me is pleading, in an atypical way. It doesn't run from my arrow. If it's going to get in my way, the least it can do is put up a fight.

It looks frightened. And for that level of fear, it hardly seems worth killing.

“Very well, little runt,” I say to it. “You live today.”

The iypin scurries off. I wonder what could have scared it so much.

Something my brother has never understood is that animal creatures have a powerful effect on their surroundings. When you neglect an animal, the world around it slowly falls into disrepair.

That's only speaking to the power of magical creatures – iypin, worgs, batlaz, and the like. You can mistreat your livestock, and your humans, as much as you like with no real fear of repercussion. But when you abuse your hunting companions, it starts to affect the world in subtle ways that become gradually more noticeable. It's why the world becomes so twisted around monster dens.

I stop in my tracks, my shoulders rustling an overgrown bush when I pause. I'm sure I'm not alone in these woods. I can hear movement through the branches. And as I listen more intently, I initially hear another pair of footsteps, followed by more steps and the sound of several large animals growling. But their growls are high-pitched and nasally, as though they're begging for care.

I sniff the air. I try to pinpoint where in the forest the noise might be coming from, feeling something in my gut.

Very slowly, I continue walking. Every step I take toward the noise brings me more anxiety because I am also taking my intended path toward the clearing. It's where I go to see Brielle most of the time, leaving gifts to better tempt her. And the farther into the forest I go, the more clear it becomes that I won't be alone in the clearing and that I can't expect Brielle to be waiting for me.

A lump of ice drops into my throat, not from the cold air, but from my own realization. If Brielle is in the woods with a hunter, she could be in grave danger. These creatures are not the playthings of humans.

I accelerate my pace, dashing through the grove, snapping brittle branches on my way forward. My hand is on my quiver as I sprint, my other hand hanging at my side and ready to grab my dagger at a moment's notice. Through bits of densely wooded forest and clearings alike, I run, tearing through everything in my path.

In the distance, beneath the lowering sun that casts the forest in a golden glow, I see a thin figure draped in a cloak, whose face is obscured by a porcelain mask. Beside him are two worgs, whose fur has fallen off in many places and who limp forward, their skeletal pink stomachs reflecting the light. Their starvation is pronounced, their drool falling steadily onto the soil beneath them.

I cannot let this man endanger Brielle, wherever she might be. He's a mere human, no threat to me. But he is in our territory, and I have no qualms about removing a potential problem for her, especially since the mask tells me he is up to no good.

Without thinking, I draw my bow, aiming for the tree where I have left gifts. I let loose the arrow, intending to intimidate the man from taking further action. If I can find out who sent him, I can make them pay for their actions. I can already tell he's not here of his own accord but doing the grunt work of somebody else.

He looks out toward the source of the arrow, following its path toward me. I do not intend to hide. As if on command, the worgs following him get my scent and snarl at me.

I can tell from his posture how furious he is, but from the way his eyes pause on me, I can tell even from behind the mask that he's confused. I have the element of surprise on my side.

As he goes to withdraw his weapon, I ready another arrow, firing it into his hand.

I can imagine the bones breaking on impact. The arrow flies with such a speed that it drives through his hand and into his waist, where he was preparing to procure a weapon. His arm is pinned to his side.

He screams. Blood is trickling out from both points in his body, falling to the ground quicker than the drool from his abused companions.

“Put down your weapon,” I tell him, unwilling to escalate so close to Lowtown, where I might be discovered and Brielle might be drawn into the fight.

I can see him reaching to pry the arrow out with his other hand. I feel vicariously pained from his attempt, and my hand tingles with a small, sharp sensation.

“Don’t,” I try to stop him. “Don’t make this any worse for yourself. If you pull out the arrow, you’re going to —”

“Fuck you,” he spits.

I can see his words staring at the blood spots on the ground, trying to restrain themselves from licking them.

He tries to stifle his squeals as he pulls out the arrow but collapses to the ground, blood flowing faster now. He’s on his knees, his starving worgs fixated on his dripping blood. I can see them licking their lips.

“I can heal you,” I tell him casually. “Just tell me what you’re doing here and who sent you, and this can all be over.”

He spends his last moments alive cursing me, trying to find the energy to fight back but failing. The blood loss kills him before I have to lift another finger.

I choose not to save him. I only wish that I could see his eyes as he passes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a small sliver of parchment tucked underneath a rock. In the clearing, it’s very visible and was clearly intended to be found by somebody.

My concerns for disposing of the body are eased, as the words are very hungry and clearly lost every bit of loyalty for their master the moment he started neglecting them.

I lift the rock and look at the note. The handwriting is shaky, forced, and unnatural. It is also unrecognizable and barely legible.

Little girls shouldn't go wandering in the forest alone, the note reads. Stay away or face the consequences.

I notice the fresh karasu droppings nearby, realizing that the note's audience is just one person and that it is meant for Brielle.

Unacceptable.

Inspecting the remains of the body, hesitantly petting the words as I do, I lift the porcelain mask, confirming my suspicions. This was a human nobody. His face is scarred to the point of being nearly indiscernible, his hair a mangled, unkempt mess.

But the mask, and the lack of weapons, confirm two things. He was here for no good purpose. He was not looking for food in these woods the way my Brielle does. Also, he was not sent here to kill, but to intimidate – stunning his target rather than killing them outright. He, or whoever put him up to this, wanted Brielle to find the note and be frightened.

And terrifying Brielle is my role.

I will find whoever is responsible for this note, and I will make them pay. Clearly, they did not expect their hire to find me here.

Remembering why I came here to begin with, I take the arrow out of the body, then produce the jeweled black collar from within my robes. The metalworking is a bit cheap, the gems a bit tacky, but to a human, this jewelry is incalculably valuable. I violently stab the arrow into the tree bark, then drape the collar on the arrow.

Finding the right trap to lure her is almost too easy. She thinks she's discovering free trinkets, unaware of the deeper implications they pose. She will learn that nothing in life is free. I will personally ensure it.

The worgs finish their meal, leaving only bones and the faintest hint of entrails, and I walk off, whistling a song to

myself. I can feel the ground healing beneath my feet, the sickness that wandered into these woods having been dealt with. As I walk off, I lift my hand, and the ground rises to accept the bones, swallowing up the corpse.

His death will help heal the land. From within my peripheral vision, I can see the worgs fleeing to seek their freedom. Now that nobody is depriving them, they will find their next meal in the woods.

BRIELLE

I sigh as I walk home. Today was such a long fucking day at the factory. All I want to do is go home and hide under the covers for a week.

I feel dirty and gross, and I need a bath, but I just don't know if I have it in me to carry buckets upon buckets of water back to my tub just to sit in the cold water. I sigh again. Being poor really sucks.

"Fuck, I need to figure something out." I scrub at my face.

I know I should be grateful for the opportunity to have work because at least it helps me keep myself alive. But working at the factory is terrible. There truly couldn't be a worse place.

We're treated like shit and literally worked to death, with at least one human dying from exhaustion and malnourishment a week. It's one of the reasons the human rebels have started to gather more frequently and get more ballsy with their movements.

I try to stay out of trouble as much as I can, but sometimes I have to join them, just to prove that I'm loyal. There's only one thing humans hate more than dark elves, and that is a human that sympathizes with the dark elves. The rebels have no mercy for that, and rightfully so.

The dark elves are ruthless with us. They don't care about our safety, and they don't care if we die. In fact, killing us is one of their favorite hobbies. Which is why I try my best to stay out of their way.

It doesn't help that most of us are employed by a dark elf, including myself. We're basically their slaves. And there's absolutely nothing we can do about it.

Some days I wonder what the point of rebelling is. The only thing that will result from it is the death of more humans. It's not like we could ever stand a chance against the dark elves, and I think the sooner more people realize it, the better.

There's no point in hoping for a better future for us. It won't come.

When I finally get home, I force myself to do the work necessary to take a bath. There's nothing worse than sitting in my own filth after a day in that disgusting factory.

An hour goes by, and I'm finally situated in my small tub, freezing half to death. I envy the dark elves for having the magic to heat their water. It must be nice to actually be able to enjoy a bath, instead of having to rush through it.

Once I'm clean, I make my way back to my room, shivering in my robe the whole way there. I change into my softest set of clothes, which isn't actually very soft at all, before brushing out my long hair.

My hair is the one thing I actually like about myself. It's not that I think I'm ugly or anything. It's just that my hair is the one part of me that always stays healthy, no matter how malnourished I am.

As I eat my measly dinner, my mind drifts back to the clearing. My fingers drift up to the necklace I'm still wearing. Suddenly I'm not hungry anymore, and I get the urge to go back there.

I've almost convinced myself to go when I remember the notes. How could I forget? They scared me half to death the last time I was out there. My stomach drops. Why would whoever is leaving me these gifts write such contradicting notes? It doesn't make any sense.

Despite this, I still really want to go back. What does that say about me? Before I can answer that question, I leap to my feet and run out the door.

A few minutes into my walk, I halt. Maybe I shouldn't be doing this alone in case the threats on the notes were real. What if whoever left them decides to be bold today? Maybe I should ask Riya to go with me.

Just as I'm about to change direction, I realize that Riya definitely would not support me in doing this. In fact, she would probably beg me *not* to go, and that is not what I want to hear right now, even if she would be right in doing so.

I know that Riya is right. I shouldn't be doing this. But apparently, all rationality has left my brain. I continue on my path to the woods.

The closer I get to the clearing, the faster my heart beats. It feels like at any moment, it's going to explode in my chest.

Suddenly, a loud noise sounds right next to my ear. I jump, and my eyes widen as I gasp, but I realize that it's just Skye.

"What the fuck, Skye, where did you even come from? *Fuck*, you can't be scaring me like that," I pant, clutching my chest.

I damn near had a heart attack just now, and my fear is even more of a sign for me to leave these woods right now. But I can't.

Skye clicks her beak at me, flying around my head before swooping to my left. I lift an eyebrow.

"What?" I ask, even though I know she can't answer me.

Skye simply flies back to me and clicks her beak again before taking off to my left once more. I roll my eyes but follow her anyway. Maybe she knows that I was starting to get lost out here, even though I should know this area like the back of my hand by now.

As I walk along, I listen to the sounds of the woods. I hear wings flapping and water rushing from a nearby stream. Leaves blowing in the wind. All of my favorite sounds.

If I could, I would probably live out here. It'd be nice to have a small cottage, isolated from the rest of civilization. Just

me and Skye. We'd spend our days going on walks and enjoying nature together.

Too bad I'll never get the chance. Humans don't get to live lives like that. We're considered lucky if we even have a place to call home.

A few minutes later, I realize that Skye has led me directly to the clearing. Is this a sign? Surely if she feels safe enough to lead me here, it can't be that dangerous, right? That's what I tell myself, anyway.

She squawks at me and zooms across the clearing, hovering in front of a tree. I'd recognize that tree anywhere. It's where my last two gifts were pinned. My heart rate picks up again as I slowly make my way to the tree.

From where I stand, it looks like another necklace. But as I get closer, I see that it's not. When I'm only a few steps away and can see it perfectly, I halt.

My heart beats impossibly fast at the same time as my stomach drops. I hear ringing in my ears, and the woods around me disappear. All I see is this fucking gift.

It's not a necklace. It's a fucking *collar*. I swallow once, twice. I cover my mouth with my hand. What the fuck does this mean? I know exactly what it means, but I don't want to accept it.

My surroundings suddenly come back into focus, and my head whips around. Searching the trees around me, I look for any sign of another living being besides myself and Skye. I find nothing, but that doesn't mean something isn't there.

I swallow again as I return my gaze to the collar pinned to the tree. My hand reaches towards it, but I quickly decide against touching it. I can't take this. No. This is too far.

I take a few steps back, suddenly feeling very unsettled. Something about this feels very wrong. What does this new gift mean? What is the intention behind it?

The overwhelming need to know who the fuck is leaving this shit envelops me, but another part of me never ever wants

to find out. So which part will win in the end? I'm not sure I want to find out any time soon.

I survey the clearing once more. Are they here right now, watching me? Can they see the thoughts crashing through my head? Can they smell the fear radiating off of me? Why haven't they shown themselves to me?

The amount of questions in my mind is never-ending. I have no idea what the fuck to think.

Skye does a loop around my head, and I snap back to reality. I should probably leave. Nothing good can come of me hanging around here.

I walk away without taking the collar, refusing for the first time to take one of the gifts. Something in me just screams that it's not right. Something is definitely off about this gift, and I ponder it the whole way home.

Back in my room, I take my new necklace off and quickly discard it in a drawer before wrapping myself up in my blankets and closing my eyes. That's when it occurs to me. What if the person behind these gifts gets angry that I rejected one? What if they feel the need to retaliate?

I shiver at the thought. But the more I think about it, the more I wonder what it was about today's particular gift that made me not want to take it. And more so, why am I now feeling intrigued by it?

I rub my thighs together, and suddenly, I feel very impatient. I throw the covers off of me and look out my window. The night sky stares back at me.

Even though I know that this can't go anywhere good, a very small part of me deep inside wishes I had taken the gift. An even bigger part of me wonders why that is.

I shiver again and huddle under the covers once more, forcing myself to close my eyes and forget about all of this.

THALI

I'm in an oddly good mood today, and it's mostly because of Brielle. How can this girl have such an effect on my day without even actually being in it?

I left the collar for her the other day, and I haven't been back yet to see if she took it or not, although I'm not actually worried about that. She's taken every single gift I've left, even if she hesitated at some of them.

I'm only upset that I didn't get to see her face when she took this one. I usually like to be there, to see her excitement or wonder. I like seeing her radiant smile that shines brighter than the sun.

Unfortunately, I had a job to do yesterday, so I had to just leave it before she got there. I guess I could've waited to give it to her, but I didn't want to risk her going out there only to find nothing from me.

But today I'm going back to see if she took it, and if she did, then I'm going to track her down and see how amazing her beautiful neck looks with it on. It'll be hard not to approach her and trace my finger over it, but I'll just have to make myself wait. Not much longer though.

I've already decided that I'm going to approach her soon. I'm fairly certain that she won't be scared off. She obviously likes my gifts, and she knows that I've been leaving them for her and her alone.

I know she wants to meet me just as much as I want to meet her. And it's going to be exquisite.

I'm on top of a building in Lowtown, scoping the place out. Even though I'm not in charge of these humans, I like to keep more of an eye on them since finding Brielle.

If anything were to spark here, it would directly affect her, and I would need to make sure to get her out safely before anything got bad.

As I'm looking around, I spot Kaisax. He's lurking outside the very same factory that I know Brielle works at, and it immediately starts a fire in my veins. He's watching them from the shadows as the morning shift filters out of the factory's front doors.

I jump from rooftop to rooftop until I'm on top of the building that's directly across from the factory. I'm going to approach him, but I need to get a closer look at what my brother's doing before I jump down there.

The focused look on his face makes me even angrier. Why does he even care about these humans?

I mean, I know that technically he owns most of them, but he has *never* shown any interest in them before. His methods have always been hands-off. If anything, he gets a lower-class elf to do his dirty work when it comes to the humans. This is definitely new behavior for him, and I need to find out why.

When I've had enough of watching, I jump down from the roof, landing perfectly on my feet. The humans near me scatter immediately, some outright running down the street. I grin at the fear, feeding off of it like I always have.

Kaisax trains his eyes on me and jerks his head to the alley next to the factory before stalking off in that direction. I meet him there, and before I can even get a word in, he's talking.

"You think I didn't know you were watching me this whole time? You think I didn't know it the minute you stepped foot on the first roof?"

"Kaisax, I really don't give a shit whether you knew it or not. But if you did know, then why not wave hello?" I smirk.

"Because I was busy. And I don't owe anyone a *wave hello*."

“What’s with your sudden interest in the humans?” I blurt out.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he counters.

“What do you mean?”

“This is now the second time I’ve caught you down here.”

“Caught me? First of all, you didn’t *catch* me down here. I’m allowed to be here whenever the fuck I please.”

“Whatever, I don’t care.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” I remind him. I need to find out if he’s after what’s mine.

“What question?”

“What’s with the sudden interest?”

He sighs, looking all around us before answering.

“The human rebels are getting bolder. They haven’t done anything outright, but they’re starting to meet more often, and I like to keep track of their movements.”

“Why are they getting bolder? Do you not pay them sufficiently?”

Considering the way Brielle lives, he definitely isn’t.

“It’s not about that. They’re used to not getting paid shit. They’re humans. But the dark elves have been attacking more often, and more humans go missing every day. The rebels want to put a stop to the brutality against their people.”

“Ah. And you couldn’t get one of your lackeys to stake them out?”

His answer explains the interest but still doesn’t explain why it has to be him.

“Because I don’t trust anyone. And these humans are *mine*. It’s no one’s business what’s going on with them but me. Which brings me back to you. Why are you even here? This is my territory. You don’t belong here.”

“You have no authority over me. Like I said, I can go where I please.”

“Of course, but what’s the reason to be here, on my turf? There’s simply no reason for it. You have no claim to anyone here.”

By gods, I do. But he doesn’t know that.

“I don’t care.”

“Well I fucking care,” he growls, stepping closer to me. “Leave, Thali. And I better not see you lurking around here again.”

“Why does it make you so angry to see me here?”

“Because they’re mine, Thali, like I just fucking told you. If you’re going to make yourself a threat to what’s mine, then I’ll have to eliminate you.”

This time it’s me stepping forward.

“You will do no such thing.”

“Watch me.”

“I could kill you right now and take your precious little humans as my own,” I threaten.

“Is that what you want? Is that why you keep coming back here? You want to take what’s mine? Are you jealous or something?”

“Why would I want your disgusting humans? The only reason I’d do such a thing would be to piss you off, after seeing how obsessed with them you are.”

“I’m not obsessed.”

“Clearly,” I scoff.

“Are you behind all the missing humans?”

“What? I do enough killing every day, and it doesn’t involve some measly humans.”

“Lots of dark elves have human fetishes. I didn’t say you were killing them, I asked if you’re taking them.”

“And why would I do such a thing?”

“I don’t know. To use them for your own filthy desires. I don’t give a fuck. Just answer the question.”

“No, I’m not taking any humans.” I roll my eyes. “If I were, you’d know.”

“Don’t.”

“I already made it clear that I have no interest in doing so.”

He narrows his eyes at me for a moment before returning his gaze to the street ahead.

“Leave then,” he mutters.

I grab him and push him into the wall. Before he can do anything, I have my bow drawn with an arrow pointing between his eyes.

“I think you’ve forgotten what I’m capable of, big brother. I could kill you right here, and no one would even know. You have no power over me, no right to tell me what to do. You will not boss me around or tell me where I can or cannot go. Understand?”

I don’t wait for him to answer. In fact, I’m gone before he can even open his mouth.

“Fucking cunt,” I swear to myself.

If Kaisax is this obsessed with the humans in Lowtown, then I definitely need to keep a closer eye on Brielle. Especially since he was lurking outside of the factory she works in.

He probably already knows who she is. And the anger that spreads inside of me at that fact makes me want to turn around and rip his head off. I don’t care if he doesn’t like me here. I’m going to protect Brielle no matter what. The humans here might be his, but *she* is mine.

My blood is boiling as I stalk into the woods, finding my way back to the tree I left the collar on. I try to calm myself down by picturing Brielle in nothing but that collar, and it almost works. Almost.

The collar is still here.

I scan the ground in front of and leading up to the tree in the direction Brielle would have been approaching it from. Thank the gods that it rained last night because the ground is still muddy enough for me to see clear footprints leading to and from the tree.

So she did see it... and she decided not to take it. What the fuck? If I thought I was angry before, now I'm *really* angry.

She does not get to defy me. If I want her to wear this collar, then she will. If she wants to reject that, then I will have to make her. She does not have free will here, not with me.

I snatch the collar off of the tree and stalk further into the woods. My brave girl needs to be taught a lesson about who owns her. She needs to know how serious I am about that.

This collar is a symbol to me and anyone else that she is mine. It means that no one can touch her but me. She does not have a say in that. She will obey me, no matter what.

And I don't care what I have to do to make her realize that. To make her submit.

BRIELLE

“**S**kye!” I call, clicking my tongue as I step out from between the trees. I’m purposefully ignoring looking at the trunks as I slip through the forest.

The collar has been lingering at the edge of my mind since I left it here. I’m still unsettled by it, uncertain of how to react. On one hand, the more I thought about it, the more creeped out I got. On the other...

It started to turn me on a little.

“Skye!” I shout again, trying to drown out the thoughts bouncing around in my head that I’m unwilling to acknowledge. “Where is she?”

A caw breaks through the air, and I move toward it, spotting Skye flitting from branch to branch. I chuckle under my breath as I approach her, lifting my hand up to give her some seeds.

She pecks them out of my hand, clicking her beak excitedly, and I shake my head at the pet I’ve managed to acquire. “What are you doing over...here?” My heart drops as I take a step back, my eyes finally catching on the arrow stuck in the trunk of the tree.

And the jeweled black collar hanging from it.

I spin around, looking for evidence of someone else, even though I know I won’t find any. My skin crawls like I’m being watched, though, especially since I know that this is not where the collar was left before.

He's trying to push it on me.

As I turn back around to face the collar, my stomach twists. Fear spreads through me at the implications...and so does excitement.

I gulp back the emotion, forcing myself to turn away from it. It's an inappropriate gift, that much I am sure of. Taking it would only send the wrong message.

Shaking my head, I walk away from it, muttering beneath my breath, "What have I gotten myself into?"

My thoughts keep drifting back to the collar, and then all the other gifts, as I collect the herbs and root vegetables I need and stuff my bag full. Scavenging and hunting haven't been going too poorly so we have almost enough food for our people – which is rare.

When I finally have a sackful, I stand, glancing back at the arrow I can see glinting in the distance. My body is thrumming with adrenaline as I weigh my options. Should I take it to appease whoever is leaving these gifts? Or will this push things too far?

Deciding that I need to take a stand against whoever is clearly following me, I turn away from the gift and start back toward my home.

The first sound of movement behind me, I try to ignore. The second snapping of a tree branch has me looking back. But when I hear what I swear is a solid footstep, I don't have time to turn around before my body is slammed into the tree in front of me, full force.

I drop everything in my hands as they fly up to grip whatever is pressed against my throat. I pull hard at the thin, sleek surface, and it takes me a moment too long to realize that it's a bow crushing my windpipe.

Oh, fuck. He must be a hunter.

Which means I am truly never escaping him. Not if he can track as well as I've been suspecting he can.

“What’s the matter, brave one?” a deep voice rumbles in my ear, turning my legs to liquid against my will. “You don’t like my gifts anymore?”

Something tugs at my hand, and I realize that he’s dragging my hand up by the bracelet I’m wearing, pinning that wrist up above my head where I can no longer see it.

“An odd gift, don’t you think?” I rasp against the pressure of his bow. He only chuckles and digs it in harder against my throat.

“I think it’s relatively tame compared to what I want to do to you right now.”

A shiver wracks my body, and I know I’m playing with fire. I just can’t help it as I lick my lips. “And what is that?”

He presses harder into me, his entire frame towering over me as he pins me in place with his body. His nose skims my ear, and I should hate the way that it stirs up arousal in me.

But considering how wet I’ve been since he pressed this bow to my throat, I know I have bigger things to worry about.

“If I had all the time I wanted,” he purrs, the deep vibrations of his voice echoing through my body. “I would strip you bare right here. I’d mark your skin and lay claim to you, prove that you are mine no matter how much you try to deny me.”

I bite down on my bottom lip to keep my whimper inside. It should be from fear, but I think we both know it’s not.

“Instead,” he growls, and the pressure loosens on my throat as he shifts one hand to hold both the bow and my wrist. The other comes around to my front, reaching for my pants, and my body is screaming at me to fight or run or do something.

All I do is lean back against him, too trapped in this spell as I wonder what this man could do for me. His voice bleeds pleasure, and I’m all too eager to have him focused on bringing that to me.

Maybe it's wrong, but I like having his attention. Even if it's dangerous or stupid, I'm his sole focus, and that has been rare in my life.

He rips the front of my pants open with a deep growl, and this time I do let out a little whimper as his hand splays out flat across my pubic bone.

“A little taste will have to suffice.”

I blink, trying to process his words when he jerks my underwear to the side. I gasp as one finger slides down my seam, and an animalistic groan rips free of him.

“Oh, sweet girl.” The praise in his voice is making my bones melt. “You are so wet, so godsdamn beautifully soaked.”

“Yes,” I moan as the pad of his finger presses against my clit, rubbing slow, tight circles.

“Gods, do you know how long I've waited for this moment?” His teeth graze my ear as a second finger joins in and my hips buck to meet the pressure. “I've wanted you for so long.”

Desperate need is sinking its grip into my skull. My arousal is pounding through my veins, begging for more and spreading my legs wider without me even realizing it. I keep leaning back farther into him, and if it wasn't for the bow notched under my jaw, I would have already fallen to the forest floor.

“You're hungry for me, too, huh?” His fingers pick up speed, spinning faster and faster. “Aren't you?” he snaps when I don't answer.

“Yes!” I cry out, bringing my free hand back to grip the back of his head. “Yes, I am.”

He chuckles under his breath. “Oh, brave one, you're so beautiful when you give yourself over to me.” His fingers slide back, inching closer to my entrance, and I thrust my hips up, begging for it. “I bet you are divine when you come.”

“F-find out,” I gasp as the tips of his fingers brush over my hole. My walls are clenching around nothing, begging for him.

“I will.” He plunges his fingers into me, and I moan at the sudden intrusion. My body fights it, too tight to take him, but I don’t care. He works me open as I continue to grind down on his hand, his palm rubbing against my clit. “Fuck, you look so fucking good taking me like this.”

The bow tightens on my throat, and I’m surprised that it only heightens what I’m feeling. I don’t scramble against the pressure, even as I grow lightheaded. Instead, I let him steal my breath and push my body to the brink of exhaustion.

“Your pussy feels so damn incredible,” he whispers in my ear, his voice sounding pained as he thrusts up into me hard. It feels so fantastic that I can’t even muster words. “I can’t imagine my cock even being able to fit in here.” He curls them, hitting a new spot, and my knees start to give out.

“But you’ll take it, won’t you, brave one?” My eyes roll back in my head as he pulses his fingers against my walls and grinds his hand against my clit. “You’ll take anything I give you.”

“Yes,” I murmur without fully registering what I’m agreeing to. All I can think about is the orgasm teasing at the edge of my consciousness. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Oh, fuck, you’re close. I can feel it. Your pussy is squeezing me so hard.” His hand moves faster, and a scream rips from my throat. “Do you want to come?”

“Please!” The word is little more than a violent scream.

“Go ahead.” His voice is deep and low, so raspy that it is the final thing that pushes me over the edge. “Soak my hand and show me just what I do to you.”

My orgasm slams into me violently, and I come hard. He has to keep me pinned in place as I shake violently, my head flying back against his shoulder. Wave after wave of pleasure wracks my body, and his hands keep working me all the way through it.

And when I finally start to come down from the best climax of my entire life, I open my eyes to stare up at the canopy above. Just out of my peripheral vision, I see something I didn't expect.

He must have not realized how far back I sank into him, but I can just make out his gray skin. My heart stops. My blood runs cold. And reality hits me hard.

He is a dark elf.

BRIELLE

I pant, a sob of some sort escaping my lips as I scramble to catch my breath and wait for my body and mind to come back down to Protheke. A few seconds ago, they both shot up into space as I had the best orgasm of my entire life.

He's still holding me just as tight, and he still has me by the neck. I couldn't move if I wanted to, and I'm not really sure that I do until I remember that glimpse of gray skin I thought I just saw. I almost forgot about it while I was coming harder than I ever have before.

It could have been my brain playing tricks on me. That's what I tell myself because the alternative is just not possible. It can't be. The human rebels would kill me.

I can hear him breathing in my ear, accompanied by another sound I can't quite place – oh gods, is he licking his fingers?

“Mmm, you taste so good, Brielle. Absolutely delicious,” he drawls.

I can hear him slowly licking the rest of his fingers, moaning as he goes from one to the next. The sound of his deep moans makes my pussy pulse, and just like that, I'm wet again. Gods, I want him to keep going.

Just as I'm about to open my mouth and possibly say something incredibly stupid, he lets go of me. I immediately spin around, but he's already gone. How did he get out of here so fast? No human could be that quick. I'm starting to think I really did see gray skin.

I'm still panting, and I know that I need to get my shit together and get out of these woods before someone sees me, or worse, the potential dark elf comes back.

Not willing to stay here for another second, I start running back in the direction that I came from, but once I start tripping over twigs and rocks, I slow to a walk. I'm obviously in no condition to be running right now.

I take a deep breath and continue to walk back home. As I walk, my traitorous brain starts thinking about what just happened. The way his hands felt on me, the way his fingers felt inside of me, the way he said my name.

Wait. How does he know my name? Has this guy really been following me around enough to know my name? The fact that I'm so turned on right now that I don't even care about that is worrisome.

One would think that after such a magnificent orgasm as that, I would be satisfied, but apparently, I'm not. I need more, and I need it so badly that if I had just a fraction less control over myself, I would turn back around right now and try to track him down in the woods.

No, I wouldn't. I *couldn't*. If he's a dark elf, then I can *never* see him again, for about a thousand different reasons. And if a dark elf has taken this much interest in me, then maybe I need to consider somehow getting off of this continent. Or at least getting somewhere far, far away where he can never find me.

Who am I kidding? He would probably find me regardless. I've heard that dark elves are ruthless hunters when they want something. The question is, why does he want *me*? No one has ever wanted me. In fact, no one has ever even noticed me.

I mean, sure, I've had sex before. But it's not like humans are that picky with who they sleep with. Not when any one of us could be dead tomorrow.

Why did I have to catch that glimpse of his skin? Why does he have to be completely off-limits? It's not fair. None of this is fair.

As I near my dorm, I realize that I probably look like a mess. I know for a fact that my hair is beyond fucked, and as I look down, I see that my clothes are, too. Hopefully, I don't run into any humans on the way to my room, because they will *definitely* question me, and it won't end well.

At the thought, I walk a little faster, and as my breathing picks up again, I realize that my throat hurts *bad*. Fuck, I hope I'm not bruised from where he held me by what felt like a bow. I'll have to find a way to cover that up if I am.

Finally, I reach my room. I'm ready to just pass the fuck out, but when I open my door, I see Riya, standing there with her arms crossed. She immediately opens her mouth to say something but stops as her eyes lock on my neck and widen.

"What the fuck is that?" she demands.

"What are you talking about?"

"*That*, on your neck." She points.

Fuck, he did bruise me. This is not good. But as I reach for my throat, I feel something. Oh, fuck... it's the collar, it has to be. He fucking put it on me when he first grabbed me. That's what that pressure was. This really could not get any worse.

"What are you doing here?" I deflect.

"I was worried when you didn't come home by the usual time, and you didn't mention anything earlier about going anywhere. With the rise in human deaths lately, I thought something might have happened to you."

By the shine of her eyes and the tension between her brows, I can tell she means it. She really was worried about me.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you I planned on taking a walk today."

"Brielle, even without everything going on these days, you still need to be careful. You can't be naïve about this. It isn't safe for us out there."

"I know it isn't. Trust me, I'm always aware of my surroundings. I was with a friend."

“A friend? Is that who gave you that?” She points to my neck again.

“Yes.”

“What friend? Do I know them?”

“I’m not ready to share that yet.”

“You’ve never been this secretive before.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not trying to keep secrets from you. I’m really not. It’s just – I think this thing I have going might be real, and I don’t want to jinx it by talking about it too soon,” I lie. “It’s like you said, tomorrow isn’t promised for us. So I don’t want to talk about it just for them to die the next day.”

She nods, and it seems like my lie satisfied her, because her shoulders relax and her face becomes less tense.

“Okay, well, I’m glad that you’re okay. I was really worried. Just tell me next time you know you’re not going to come home. I don’t want to think you’re dead every time. I care about you, Brielle.”

“I know, Riya, I care about you, too. I’m really sorry.”

She nods again and gives me a soft smile before leaving my room. I sigh in relief that she didn’t question me more because I’m not sure how much longer I could’ve kept the lie going. Especially not when I can’t stop thinking about how he put the fucking collar around my neck.

Now that I’m alone, I let my hands explore my neck. Yep, it’s definitely the same one that was pinned to the tree. Wow, he really refused to take no for an answer. How possessive can this man be?

I slide my fingers to the back of it, searching for some kind of clasp, but there isn’t one. I become more frantic, searching. Surely there’s a way to get this thing off of me.

Minutes later, I’m still clutching at my neck, and I’m practically hyperventilating. The tightness of this thing is definitely not helping with the panic. Why does it have to be so tight? I can barely breathe in this thing!

Sitting down on my bed, I force myself to take some deep breaths. I need to calm down, or someone is going to hear me freaking out and come check on me. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

It takes almost ten minutes for me to fully get my breathing under control, although it's still just a little hard, with how tight the collar is. I can't fucking believe that he locked this thing on me. How am I going to get it off? It's not like I can ask for help from any humans, not without raising suspicions or bringing attention to myself.

Fuck, this is not good. There's no way everyone at the factory isn't going to notice my new accessory. Not only that, but I don't think I can put up with my throat being permanently sore.

Maybe I can go back to the clearing tomorrow and ask him to take it off. Maybe he's a reasonable elf... maybe he won't kill me just for asking.

I roll my eyes at myself. Of course, he'll kill me for asking.

I change my clothes and slide into bed, adjusting my head about a million times on my pillow, trying to lay at just the right angle so that the collar doesn't pull at my neck all night.

As I drift off, my mind wanders back to his hands. He was definitely highly experienced. He knew *exactly* the right places to touch me, and he listened to every clue my body gave him.

Is it bad that I want to see what else he can do? In my heart, I know that it is. But my pussy doesn't care, not as it gets wet again just thinking about the endless ways I know he could make me come.

I am so, so fucked. And I have no idea how I'm going to make myself stay away.

THALI

A snap of a branch alerts me to Brielle's presence. I grin as I twist to look down at her as she walks right beneath me, not spotting my body stretched out on the massive tree limb.

"Skye!" she calls, searching around for the bird I've seen her with.

I'm tempted – not for the first time – to respond to her call. I'd love to see my brave one when she realizes that I'm right here.

Instead, I let her wander deeper into the forest, watching her as she slips between two trees and spots my arrow there. Deftly, I slide off the branch, dropping to my feet and using my magic to silence the sound. If she were to turn around right now, she'd see me, and the idea sends a thrill through me.

I watch as Brielle leans forward, and I can just make out her muttering to herself with my enhanced hearing. "What is this?"

I lean against the trunk as she plucks the arrow – the same one I killed a man with the night we met – from the tree. Pride and arousal shoot through me as I watch her slip the ring off the tip of the arrow. It gets my dick hard seeing her holding something I picked out for her.

Just slip it on, I want to encourage her. I grit my teeth, watching to see what she does.

As she stands up, rolling the ring between her fingers, I have half a mind to go over there and force it on her hand. Then bend her forward and remind her who she belongs to.

But then I see her reach into the pack slung across her and pull out a folded piece of parchment. My curiosity piques, and I press against the trunk of the tree as she turns to look around her.

Brielle's eyes look straight past me before she turns back to the tree and produces a small, thin piece of burnt wood that I've seen some humans write with when they can't afford a quill and ink.

It makes me want to buy her a set, an enchanted one, of course. I wonder if I could have it spelled to send me the letter every time no matter who it is addressed to.

I grin to myself, nearly missing it as she folds up the letter and sticks it back in place into the tree with the ring pinned to the trunk by the arrowhead. Rage surges up my throat as I see her step away, turning down another one of my gifts.

I'll punish her for that.

But the flash of anger that flooded me starts to dissipate when I watch my brave one slip behind a tree a few feet away from the arrow. She's not going back to her camp. She's trying to set a trap.

I press my knuckles to my mouth to keep from laughing out loud. She thinks she's clever. How cute.

But I am tired of watching and not touching. I had one taste of her, and now I am dying for more. I thought I was addicted before, but that was nothing. Now, I want to slice my wrists open, bleed myself dry, and gorge myself on her sweet cunt until there is nothing left in my body but the taste of her.

So, I decide that I'm ready for her to meet me. Face-to-face.

With amusement coursing through my body, I slip between the trees, not towards the note but away from it. I'm careful to move back and behind Brielle, grinning widely as I see her back to me.

She doesn't hear anything as I slip up behind her on silent feet, and I have half a mind to pull the bow from behind my shoulder and pin her in place again.

But I decide I'd rather have her eyes on me this time when she comes.

I stop just behind her, and I watch as her body tenses. Her natural instincts seem to register that I am here before her mind does, and I take advantage of that disconnect, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“What are you waiting for?”

Her skin breaks out in chills, and I nearly lean forward to run my tongue along her skin before she spins around. Her deep brown eyes are wide with alarm, and I lean back enough that she can see me.

It's a mistake.

Taking her in steals my breath away, especially as I soak in the light freckling across her tanned face that's hard to see from a distance. As her hair swings around her shoulders, my fingers twitch, begging to be buried in the long locks.

And when her gaze roams my face, those luscious lips that I have thought about endlessly part, undoing any self-restraint I thought I possessed.

Before she can say anything, my hand cups the back of her head, and I jerk her against me, lowering my mouth to capture her beautiful one in a bruising kiss. She gasps against me, and I take advantage of her parted lips, my tongue slipping into her mouth.

To my surprise, Brielle sinks into my grasp, succumbing to me as quickly as she did when she came on my fingers. I knew that she was mine the moment I saw her, but it seems she has realized this, too.

Her hands slide up my chest, and I shift to press her firmly against the tree behind her. With her pinned, I can feel every curve of her soft body, and I'm already imagining running my tongue down every inch of it when Brielle moans into my mouth.

The sound is so perfect, so beautiful, that I let loose a growl and jerk back. Her eyes are hooded, lust dancing plainly in them, and my cock swells at the sight. Her hands tighten in my tunic, already trying to pull me back, but I resist her.

“If you’re going to fucking moan,” I growl, leaning down to drag my tongue along her neck. Her skin is sweet and salty with her sweat, and I drag my teeth along the delicate flesh, making her groan again. “It better be *my* name on your lips.”

Her head is tipped back against the tree, her eyes fully closed now. But there’s still a bite to her tone as she snaps out, “I don’t know your name.”

I chuckle darkly, and her grip on me tightens. “It’s Thali, baby,” I murmur against her neck. Then I sink my teeth into the base of her throat, right above that pretty little collar, and revel in the way that she screams.

“Thali!” Fuck, I could come just from the sound of my name on her lips. It makes me want to spin her around and rut into her until her voice is raw and hoarse with how many times she’s screamed it.

“Holy Maws,” she whimpers as I pull off, licking at the site. I didn’t break skin, but I nearly did, and it’s throbbing, just like my cock.

“You like that, pretty girl?” I kiss the sight and move lower, enamored with the thick black collar around her throat. “You like being rewarded for being so brave?”

“Yes,” she moans. “Thali, I need more.”

“Fuck, baby.” I drag my tongue back up to her jaw. “My name sounds damn good on your lips.”

Her hands slide behind my neck, twisting in my hair. “Then making me fucking scream it.”

My eyes widen slightly before I crash my mouth back into hers. This time isn’t as gentle as before. She fights me for control, and the kiss turns into all teeth and tongue.

I fucking love it.

I slam my hips into hers so that she can feel how stiff I am, and she grinds against me, making pleasure shoot up my spine. “More,” she pants without pulling away from me. “Give me more, Thali. Please.”

My hand flies down to her pants, wanting to shred them and bare her to me. But I don’t allow myself the luxury when I know she’ll have to walk back home like this.

Her cunt is mine and mine alone. No one else will lay eyes on it.

Or they’ll lose their eyes. And life.

Just before I undo her pants, though, I hear something in the distance. It is a high-pitched snap. I pull back, my hand stilling on her waistband as I listen for another noise.

“Thali,” Brielle pleads, her hands gliding down her gorgeous tits as she makes her way to the top of her pants. It’s nearly enough to make me forget what I heard.

Until there’s another snap, this one closer. My head jerks to the side this time, my eyes scanning the woods.

It’s not that I don’t want to be seen with Brielle. I want to lay fucking claim to her, actually. But I know her people are not kind to elf sympathizers, and they will riot against her. And my world, especially my brother, will not be kind to her.

So we can’t be seen together.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath as I try to calculate how much time I have.

Not nearly enough. Whoever it is has gotten too close, and I grit my teeth, considering killing them so I can feast on Brielle.

But then I hear footsteps, and I know that I’m out of time. I don’t want to stir up trouble for anyone but Brielle, at least not yet. So I do the most painful thing I’ve ever had to do, and I force myself to take a step back.

I glance at her one more time, noting how beautiful she is when she’s confused. Her lips are parted like she’s about to ask me a question, but the person is getting closer.

I'm out of time.

Without explanation, I turn, darting through the trees just as I hear another voice, cursing beneath my breath as I go.

Fuck whoever that is. I swear to the Thirteen below that I will make them pay for this interruption.

BRIELLE

Why does he have to be so handsome?

In the clearing, he reveals himself to me, bringing me in for a kiss. His pointed incisors shine with the light penetrating the canopy, his ears drooping heavily from his head. Moving toward me, I can see my reflection in his shimmering silver eyes.

I know what he is. I've always known what he is, from the moment I found his elaborately gemmed bracelet, but I lied to myself. I thought that maybe, if I humored the idea long enough, fate might rearrange itself to suit me, turning him from my captor to my prince.

His kind are the reason I've spent my life in misery, toiling in factories and never knowing a childhood.

His hand cups the back of my head, and his fingers roam through my locks. They are dextrous, rough, and callused.

His kind have killed my friends and surrogate family members – those who sacrificed so much to take me in – through systemic oppression, and, in some cases, even directly.

He presses my lips to his. I could be imagining it, but even his tongue feels sharp.

So many have died in factories, working under the dark elves. They have every ounce of power to help us, but they don't lift a finger because they deem us inferior, no better than the livestock they herd into stables.

His tongue dances against mine. I can feel him stealing my breath.

I have to end it. If I don't, I'm a traitor to my kind.

I can feel myself melting into him. His hands in my hair are an undeniable source of comfort.

I want to scream out and run away from him, careening through the forest and dodging his arrows. I want to guide the people of Lowtown somewhere the dark elves will never find us and I can be truly free.

My hands roam along his torso. The jagged, rough bark collides with my back as he pushes me against the tree and his fingers caress my skin.

He tries to pull away, emitting a harsh moan, but I won't let him. I reach to pull him toward me.

"If you're going to fucking moan, it better be my name on your lips," he says, cockiness oozing from his voice. He thinks he's already won me over. He thinks he owns my soul.

"I don't know your name."

"It's Thali, baby."

His tongue roams along my neck, his teeth penetrating my skin. His name escapes my throat, surprising me. It gets louder and louder, a billowing contradiction rising from deep within my soul.

I am no longer holding the reins. The words that escape from my mouth, as I urge him on, are not mine, or they do not feel like mine. I am trapped, a prisoner within my own body.

Stop lying to yourself. You know you love this.

I close my eyes, succumbing to whatever vile plans this dark elf, Thali, has for me.

His hands reach to undo my pants, and I've fully committed to him. I can feel the heat burning within me. I want him to strip me naked in the forest and fuck me against the tree. I want everybody in Lowtown to hear my moans and know my treachery, watching me bend over as he impregnates

me with his turgid cock, helping to create a new generation of dark elves to torment them.

A branch snaps.

“What are you doing?”

I realize that I am alone in the clearing now. I recognize Riya’s voice behind me.

“Nothing,” I lie, turning around to face her. “Just out for a walk.”

She looks down at the ground where I stand, numb to the dishonesty.

“Your pants are falling down,” she tells me.

“Right,” I say, re-clasping them. “Damn clasp is faulty. Keep meaning to get a new pair.”

“The clasp looks fine to me,” she says dismissively before proceeding back toward Lowtown. I follow her through the rows of trees, Skye closely trailing me, my body sweating either from the stress of keeping this secret or from the earlier assault on my body.

I want to appreciate the passing scenery. With so many hideous things in life facing my vision daily, it’s important to never take anything for granted, and in spite of my internal disgust with myself, the animals of the forest seem content to frolic.

I envy their existence. I’d love to be an iypin, roaming mindlessly through the woods, my only concern what I’m going to eat and who I’m going to fuck. It would be so much less complicated, and I’d probably be treated better.

“Who was that you were with?”

I look over at Riya. I can feel my nerves tingling, my eyes wide. I’d rather be back at the clearing, kissing Thali. Partly, I still feel like I am.

“What do you mean?”

“In the clearing, before I found you. You were with somebody. Who was it?”

I shake my head because I have no answer to give her. Thankfully, she doesn't press too much more. I'm at least grateful that she doesn't seem to know I was with a dark elf.

I hesitate to think what she'd do to me if she knew that. She has a great deal of loyalty for the people she cares about, but that list doesn't stop at me.

If she asks many more questions, I'll just claim it's somebody in Lowtown and leave it at that. Maybe then her mind will form the wrong conclusions, and I'll fail to deny them.

Selfish. I'm being incredibly selfish.

I nod solemnly. The forest begins to open up, and soon the towering trees become stone buildings, weaved in vines. A group of small children are running around the street, fighting each other with tiphe sticks and pretending to be warriors.

I smile at them, remembering that even with everything I'm facing, life goes on.

"I got you!" The boy, Calen, shouts, as he swings his stick at Melandriss. The wood collides with her shoulder, and as we walk by, I can see her yelling at him for injuring her despite carrying a much larger, sharper branch. She screams and starts crying. On any other day, I'd probably intervene, but their parents will be back shortly.

Riya gives me a confused glance as I shrug.

We part ways at our dormitories, and I head to bed much earlier than usual.

I dream only of his embrace, his coarse lips caressing mine. Even in my dreams, I feel like an accessory to him. There's a part of me that hates that, but the much larger part of me is consumed by every little sensation. I revel in it when he nips my neck. And even though his tongue feels like it could cut me, I am suffocated by his kiss, not interested enough in air to separate from it.

Early in the morning, I return to the clearing, my body moving almost of its own accord. I'm too invested to leave now. Getting up, throwing on my clothing, and kicking myself

up from my bed, not a bone in my body resists the trajectory of my legs.

I can hear the batta chirping loudly, their sharp, angular wings cutting together in the hopes of attracting a mate. The woods are still partially dark, and in the overgrowth, that darkness grows exponentially.

Skye follows me through the forest. Every noise puts me on edge, and my eyes are both in front of me and behind me as I peer over my shoulder every other second.

She knows. She saw his ears.

I shake my head. There's no way, if Riya suspected he was a dark elf, that she would have kept quiet about it. She's scolded me for so much less.

But there's still some fragment of me that wishes she'd scold me and bring me to my senses. I am hypnotized under the glimmer of those silver eyes, completely in thrall to him. Perhaps I'm not even accountable for this. He could have cast a spell on me, and I'd know nothing about it.

My necklace cuts uncomfortably into my clavicle, and I move it further around my neck, trying in vain to loosen it before realizing that a piece of my hair is entangled in its clasp. I pull it out gently before realizing that I've arrived. The clearing stands before me, the first rays of sunlight peering into the grove from above.

Illuminated by the glow, a singular piece of parchment is pinned to the tree, this time by a dagger. Looking closer at the dagger, I can see that its serrated edges are brown with the drying of blood. A cold shiver registers down my spine.

Pulling the dagger out of the tree, a golden band, beautifully radiated by the golden glow, clatters to the ground, falling from the point where the knife penetrated it.

I understand its meaning. It has the same meaning between elven kind and humanity, a universal symbol. My heart flutters but fills with anxiety. My mind runs rampant with the unending flow of questions.

I unfurl the parchment and read it. The handwriting is methodical and tidy but still elegant.

Would you kindly join me in my conquest? Would you linger forever in my embrace? Would you always guarantee me your best? And do you falter when you see my true face?

I retrieve the ring from the soil, picking it up and glancing at it. I run along its edges, gliding my fingers over it. It is smooth and cool to the touch, the same ring I pretended to ignore the other day.

The temptation to adorn my finger with it overwhelms me. I want to put it on, making it clear to him, once and for all, that I belong to him.

But then two thoughts cross my mind.

The more rational one tells me that I shouldn't commit, telling me that I hardly know him. I only learned yesterday that his name was Thali and became aware of what he was. I am able to silence that thought without much trouble.

The much louder thought tells me that every time I have accepted his gifts, he has remained hidden from me, a continual secret admirer. Only when I left the collar did he come for me.

A wicked smile crosses my face, and I pin the ring back on the tree, laying the parchment back on the ground so he'll know that I read it. I head back to Lowtown, trying in vain to silence a flurry of thoughts and fantasies.

THALI

The house has fallen into disrepair, a particular oddity given the care which my parents always take in ensuring its consistent maintenance. They make my cleaning habits look negligent by comparison.

I tend to keep a safe distance from my parents, but they still make semi-regular family meals a priority. They are not old by any means, but time has made them more sentimental. They want me and my brother to eat with them together, though they've forgiven my younger brother, Aylmer, from visiting on some occasions. He's been tied up in other obligations.

Today, Father has not prepared the cleaning spell for the dishes, the servants are all attending to other business, and the lights are flickering different colors, a sure sign of diminishing reagents. By all accounts, the house is filthy, even when held up to human standards.

"I don't see what the problem is," I tell my father. "I'll stop by the market and pick up some hearthsbloom and goligan leaves. We'll have the problem fixed in half an hour, and it won't cost us more than five jetons and fifteen minutes of labor."

He is insistent.

"I keep telling you, we'll get it tomorrow when we're out. Don't worry about it."

"What's this your brother is telling me about you meddling with the humans?" Mother asks. "You know how important

this is to him.”

We are gathered around a table of various spreads and meats. Father even brought in some iypin, a favorite treat of mine. But Kaisax is still notably absent. He always talks about how busy he is.

“Mother,” I start, then wait for her to allow me to speak. “He’s always been defensive of that territory as if it’s not a huge quadrant in the city. How am I supposed to do my business effectively when he’s walling me off?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Figure it out. Just don’t take this away from your brother after everything he’s been through.”

I shake my head, looking at the filthy oven. I want to clean it for them. I want to help.

“I really don’t get it,” I reply. “You know I don’t have the power to take anything away from him. Why is he so threatened by me?”

A servant girl with Brielle’s build enters the eating room, her hair disheveled and falling in her eyes from hard work in the cellar. My mind avoids the temptation to wander, as I mull over whether or not Brielle has accepted my proposal. In the morning, I will look. But I’m still coming up with excuses not to check, even though it’s all I think about.

“I’m just going off of what he told me,” Mother says. “You know, he’s been all out of sorts lately... even more than usual. If you two would look after each other rather than bickering all the time, maybe you’d both be a little happier.”

“Yeah, well...” I reply, taking a piece of braised iypin from the center of the table and placing it on my plate. “We’re survivors.”

Father casts me an angry look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks.

I shrug, taking a bite of the meat. They may not always be great people, but they know how to cook iypin. The meat is succulent and delectable, its juices well-preserved and bursting with flavor.

Right on cue, Kaisax bursts through the door. He can't ever enter a room without boisterously announcing his presence. By contrast, I always learned to seem small and to keep well hidden to avoid being needed.

"I've arrived!" he shouts, knocking several items off of an adjacent table when he enters, and I can already tell that he's inebriated. I give him a small scowl before returning to my meat.

"Oh," he says, looking at me. "You're here."

"And as chipper as ever," I tell him, smiling brightly. I make sure that the smile is patronizing enough that he'll see its dishonesty while my parents will register it as genuine.

He groans.

"Is Aylmer coming?" he asks. "I find he's much better at conversation and a little more civil."

"You don't have to talk about me like I'm not sitting right here," I say.

Where they might have earlier taken a more aggressive and perhaps inappropriate approach to stop our feud, our parents have grown more mellow and are content to not intervene.

After all, the last time they tried getting involved, it nearly wiped out half of their home. Even meaningless conflicts between two drunk magic users can escalate rather quickly. I can still see the spots in the wall where the contractors patched over what was lost.

"Why don't you sit down and enjoy the food?" Mother asks, as calmly and quietly as possible. "If you don't want to get along, you don't have to for our sakes. You can just pretend your brother isn't here."

"That sounds fine to me," Kaisax says, shuffling his chair backward, sitting down in it, and shuffling forward aggressively. The chair scratches resonate loudly throughout the room. He catches my eye, and it looks like he wants to say something, but he suppresses it.

And the next thirty minutes pass by peacefully and uneventfully. I wish Aylmer could have been here, too. He always has such interesting stories.

We even get to a point where my brother doesn't want to rip my throat out, and he somewhat interacts with me as our parents ask us about how jobs are going. Kaisax is notably tight-lipped about some things, especially when it comes to Lowtown, but he does go into detail about some of the finer details of his work. Apparently, he has a dfam who performs all of his clerical duties, but the last one went missing, and he's gone through several headaches training the new one.

Mother blushes at some of the mentions of how I conduct my job, but she's still willing to listen, and Father is very invested in it. He used to say that if he could go back and retrain, he'd love to be a mercenary working for the crown, though I'm not sure if he's just flattering me or not.

But when I step away to help with the cleaning spell on the dishes, Kaisax reveals it was all a ruse, following me into the keeping room.

"What I did in there," he says, opening the door with no ceremony as I check the brim for diluted powder. "You'd better appreciate it."

Mother has put on a recording in the other room, and I can hear the harps as the door slams shut behind Kaisax on entry. Advances in magical sound keeping technologies always astound me.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

I maintain a stoic, almost friendly, demeanor with him. The less fuel that I can add to the fire, the better.

"Cut the shit," he tells me. "I know you didn't heed my warning."

His torso is large in my vision. He crowds me to try to intimidate me.

"Look," I say, taking a sterner approach and trying to stand up. He moves closer to try to keep me down as I work on the dish cleanser. I back down and stay hunched over, shaking my

head. “I don’t really know what your problem is with me. I know we had our differences in the past, but I apologized for that.”

“Oh, you apologized for that,” he says, making light of my claim. “I’m sorry, but your apologies rang as hollow as your dignity. You don’t *get* to disfigure me and walk out of it with a stupid apology.”

I chuckle to myself, and immediately he throws me against the machine, my back aching as I’m thrown into steel. No sooner has he done it than the machine sputters to life, cleaning the dishes and returning them magically to our cabinets.

“It’s a miracle,” I shout, in notable pain. “You fixed it!”

“You’ve got no idea how easy you’ve had it,” he tells me through his teeth. “You think Mom and Dad were mean when you were around? You weren’t *there*. Try being their first little mishap – the accidental child who could never live up to any of their expectations!”

He sets me back down on the floor and walks toward the door.

“I don’t want to catch you anywhere near Lowtown again,” he says fiercely. “This is your final warning.”

His hand is on the door, preparing his exit.

“You can’t stop me from traveling through the city,” I tell him. “I keep telling you that.”

He stops, his shoulders facing me. He is hunched over, looking at the ground.

“Dish cleanser isn’t really clean if it’s leaking everywhere,” he growls at me.

And I look down to confirm. Puddles of water are magically appearing, leaving the font where the dishes are kept.

Crap.

“I’ve been called back to the city,” he tells me. “Just remember my warning. Stay out of my business and away from my subjects.”

“You’re a guard, not a king,” I spit.

The door opens, and he walks out.

“Tonight? I didn’t do that for you. I did that for Mom,” he tells me. “We’re working through some stuff, and we’re finally getting to a good place. But the next time I see you in Lowtown, I’m killing you myself.”

He leaves my field of vision, and I am alone with the flooding dish cleanser.

I scoff, kicking it with my foot, and the spell stops working.

Must be a problem with the seal, I think.

There’s no way I’m heeding his idle threats. He can’t keep me away from Brielle.

He threatens to kill me, as though he’s even capable of it. The only power he holds is over the guards in the city. He’s grown weak over time.

He has to know that in a fight, I would easily outmaneuver him, sliding my dagger cleanly through his heart.

“Sorry, Mother,” I say, returning to the eating room. “I got the dishes cleaned, but the spell malfunctioned.”

She smiles warmly at me. It’s a contrast that I’m still not used to. It seems you grow more affectionate toward your children when they’re out of the house and threatening to disappear.

“Was that Kaisax I saw leaving?” she asked me.

I sit back down at the table, knowing that I’d still rather be with Brielle.

“He had to leave and attend to some business,” I say, picking up some baked dae. “He says he’s sorry he can’t stay longer.”

THALI

I leave my apartment when the city is asleep. The only people awake are the tavern owners and the club owners in the Red District.

The night sky is an inky black, and I, wearing my darkest set of clothing, meld right into it.

My parents visited for dinner the week after my meal at their house, which was infuriating to say the least because they spent most of the first course questioning me about my relationship with Kaisax.

“We’ve never liked to see you two fight,” my mother said in a crooning voice. “You know how this upsets us.”

I ignored them for the most part, but after the second course, I couldn’t take their presence in my space any longer.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” I told them, and the warning in my voice was clear.

Now I head for Lowtown. Because the truth is, in my head, I have abandoned my apartment and my parents and especially my brother.

In my head, I am with Brielle all the time.

She is mine after all.

Brielle. Brielle. Brielle.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

I shudder with pleasure as her name rolls through my head. I need to see her. I need to see this beautiful, fragile, human thing I own.

This thing I have made mine.

Lowtown is quiet, although the factories and mills churn and pump on in the distance. I know that there are some humans who work right through the night, but the streets of Lowtown are quiet.

It is almost too easy to slip into Brielle's little house and head for her bedroom. I frown at the thought that just anyone could get in here.

Like Kaisax, for example.

You'll have to fortify her security. Otherwise, your brother can waltz in here at any time.

I know that what I am doing – sneaking into Brielle's room to just be close to her – is a great risk.

I know that this could put her life in danger. I am quite sure that none of her human neighbors will be too thrilled that one of their people is being fucked by a dark elf.

But I need to be close to her.

She is mine. And I want to admire what is mine. All the time.

It has been fifteen days since the first time I left a gift, the necklace, in the forest clearing for Brielle to find.

It has been fifteen days since the first time she became aware of my presence. It has been fifteen days since she put the jewelry on.

TEN.

I come back every night after the first night that I crept into Brielle's room.

Tonight will be the fifth night that I leave my apartment in darkness to visit Lowtown. Thankfully, no one decided to

show up for our family dinner tonight.

I realize, as I make my way through the dark streets of Pyrthos, that I didn't eat anything today.

I had a job this morning – a quick little assassination of a lesser royal – and I am still running on adrenaline and the five cups of roasted kaffo that I had this morning.

There is a vague idea in my mind that I may be hungry, but the thought of food doesn't sway me from my mission.

The most important mission in my life. More important than any job I'll ever receive.

Being with Brielle.

She woke up before I left last night. I didn't try to conceal my presence. Instead, I loomed over her and grinned as her body froze in fear.

I think she almost stopped breathing. I had to swallow my laughter as I sat down on the bed next to her, before I reached out to stroke her hair.

I just needed to feel her. Inhale her scent. Feel the fragility of her. I think this to myself as I walk through the Red District, and then the theater district.

There is a mighty river, dedicated to The Guide, that separates Lowtown and the factories, mills, and farms from the rest of Pyrthos.

It is a freshwater river and is used as a method of travel between Pyrthos and Orthani, though it isn't utilized all that much.

They're probably afraid that The Guide will tip their boats over and drag them to the depths of the river.

Now, as I walk up to it, I inhale the scent of musk and algae that always lingers around the river.

The singular smell of manure also hangs in the air, and I wrinkle my nose as I look over at the farmlands.

“Do they really have to allow the tauras to take a shit right here on the riverbed?” I grumble to myself as I step carefully

to avoid taura dung. “This has to be a health hazard,” I say to myself before I finally make it across the river.

I cut through the farmlands on my way to Lowtown.

When I slip into Brielle’s room, she is waiting for me. Her body is still stiff with anticipatory fear, and I smile at the smell of her fear, which is palpable.

I do all the talking. She just sits, curled up in her bed, her back against the wall.

Waiting for me to hurt her.

Or fuck her.

She wants both. She wants you to hurt her as much as you want to hurt her.

It has been ten days since the first time I made Brielle moan for me.

Has it really been only ten days?

It feels like a year has passed since the first time I made Brielle shake beneath me.

EIGHT.

Tonight, Brielle did not stay awake for me. And anger surges over me so quickly that it almost knocks me off my feet.

I grab her hair gently and shake her awake. She gasps, choking on a scream, as I drag her from unconsciousness.

She bursts into tears, but I sit down next to her on the side of the bed and take her in my arms, soothing her.

Again, I do all the talking, while she waits for me to hurt her. Or fuck her.

She is less afraid tonight, despite her tears. Instead, she arches her back expectantly when I turn toward her. She licks her lips when she looks me up and down.

It is difficult to control myself around her. I want to take her right here and now, no matter who hears, and no matter who comes running.

That is all I want.

To have her completely and solely. I am halfway there, I know. Because Brielle's fear has become twisted and entangled with my desire until her fear and my desire look like the same thing.

I am starting to find it difficult to know where she ends and I begin.

I come back again and again, for another few days, until nearly a fortnight has passed.

Sometimes she is awake, and sometimes she is not. And sometimes, on the nights that she is asleep, I force her to wake up and sit with her back against the wall and listen while I talk.

Exerting that kind of control over her is addictive.

And I think she is starting to find it as addictive as I do.

It has been eight days since I found the threatening notes. Just thinking about it makes me irrationally angry.

Brielle hasn't been hurt, yet, but it irks me that I cannot keep her under watch every hour of the day.

She is mine! I am the only one who gets to hurt her! I rage against the memory of the note.

Once I find out who the perpetrator is, I'll make sure that they suffer good and long before I dispose of their body.

But not before bringing their head to Brielle on a silver platter. I know she'll appreciate it.

THREE.

It has been a fortnight since my visits to Brielle's room started.

Tonight she is asleep, and I think I'm going to let her continue sleeping.

Tonight, I am worried about her. She has grown thinner, and there are dark circles underneath her eyes.

I know that she is working hard at the factory. But Kaisax must be driving even harder and harder every day.

Brielle is mine. He can't do this to her! I am the only one who gets to hurt her!

It has been three days since I first started having visions of killing my brother.

I don't know if I'll actually do it, but he threatens the one thing in this life that I hold dear.

He threatens the one thing in this life that I really, truly own.

Brielle.

And I cannot let him get away with that.

No one can get away with hurting Brielle. No one can get away with tarnishing my property.

How can I own her if she is broken? I want her whole and happy now, so that when I finally, really have her, she is mine to break.

I leave at dawn. I checked her pulse several times throughout the night because she did not stir even once throughout the night.

She did not even move underneath my light touch against her throat.

As I leave, I know only one thing. I need more of her, with every day that passes. I cannot continue living a life that is only half occupied by Brielle.

Brielle. Brielle. Brielle.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

She is mine. I deserve to have her whenever I want her. I deserve to have her, arching her back underneath my touch

and bucking her hips against mine.

I deserve a portrait of her with my hand around her throat, hanging on the walls of my apartment.

And now, now that I know how much of her I need, it is time to do more. Because I cannot live without her.

BRIELLE

I'm on my way back to my room after getting a glass of water from the kitchen, and I'm ready to just curl up in bed with a book and enjoy the little time I have off. Moments like this don't come around often. I've been looking forward to this all day.

I open the door to my room and almost drop the glass, gasping before quickly shutting the door behind me.

Thali is laying on my bed, head propped up on my pillow and holding the book I planned on reading. He's smirking at me in a way that makes it hard to breathe. My heart feels like it's beating in my throat.

"What, scared someone might see me?" he drawls.

"Y-yes," I admit. If someone saw him in my room... they would kill me before sunrise.

"Why? Ashamed of me? Embarrassed to be seen with me?"

"No." I quickly shake my head.

I'm fucking terrified, but at the same time, kind of excited in a way I can't identify. I'm also confused, because Tali only appeared at night before, though it really shouldn't surprise me. Nothing should surprise me where he's concerned.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

His brow furrows and his eyes darken. It seems I may have struck a nerve. He hops off of my bed with so much grace, it's

hard not to appreciate it. In just two strides, he's dangerously close to me.

"What gives you the right to question me?" he demands, his voice so low it's almost hard to hear. When I don't answer right away, he grabs my jaw. "I asked you a question."

"I-I didn't mean to question you."

"Don't do it again."

"Yes, sir."

From the way his eyes flare and his posture changes, I can tell that he liked that response. His tongue swipes his bottom lip as his gaze trails down to my mouth. I think he's going to kiss me, until his eyes snap back up to mine.

"Sneak out with me," he leans in and whispers in my ear.

"I can't... someone will see us."

"I thought you said you *weren't* ashamed to be seen with me," he growls, fingers tightening on my jaw.

"I'm not! I'm not, it's just that... the humans don't take well to us fraternizing with dark elves. They would kill me if they saw."

His eyes darken again, and I know it was the wrong thing to say.

"No one touches you but me. No one."

"O-okay," I whisper.

"As I said, sneak out with me. No one will see us, trust me."

He gives me all of two seconds before letting go of my jaw and stepping back.

"Let's go."

When I just stand there, unmoving, his nostrils flare.

"I don't think you're understanding me, so let me tell you how this is going to go. When I tell you to do something, you do it. With no resistance, and no questions asked."

“Okay,” I whisper.

“You don’t have a say in this. Let’s go.”

“Okay, yeah.”

He sighs and looks me up and down, assessing me.

“You don’t want to go with me?”

I think about it for a second. Do I? Yes, unfortunately, I really do. “I do!”

He grins, clearly pleased with my enthusiasm.

“Where are we going?” I dare ask.

“What did I say about questioning me?”

“Don’t do it?”

“Exactly.”

Fuck, this elf is bossy... but I can’t help but love the thrill it gives me.

Minutes later, we’re in the woods on the outskirts of the dorm. He got me out so fast that I’m absolutely positive no one saw us. He turns sideways to look at me as we walk.

“You look exquisite in your collar,” he compliments.

“Thank you.”

“Do you like it?” his voice drops an octave.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I like it.”

He grins again. “Good. I had it specially made just for you.”

“How did you know it would fit?”

“Lucky guess.” He shrugs.

“It’s a little tight,” I dare admit.

He lets out a low chuckle. “That’s the point.”

Huh? What does that mean? And does this mean that I'm stuck with it being like this, forever? How long am I expected to wear it?

“You haven't been trying to get it off, have you?”

“No!” I answer a little bit too quickly.

“You're lying.” He smirks. “Just don't do that again. It's there for a reason.”

I don't dare ask the reason. I'm not sure I even want to know.

After ten minutes of walking, we reach a small table with two chairs and a plate of food on it. I peek at him. He did this for me? He doesn't really scream 'romance'. But this was clearly meant to be a date. Something flutters in my chest at the thought, despite the fact that I'm terrified of him.

“Sit,” he orders. I do as he says, because what choice do I have? “I wasn't sure what you liked, so I got a little bit of everything.”

I'm genuinely surprised he doesn't already know what I like, considering he seems to know everything about me. But I'm even more surprised at the selection of finger foods. I haven't had food this decadent in... ever.

I take a small bite of some kind of bread and smile at him, so he knows I like it. He doesn't take his eyes off me as I eat. Suddenly, he scoots his chair closer, and I feel his hand running through my hair.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, and I feel my face heat up. I can't breathe when he says things like this.

He tugs at the collar, smirking as I gasp from the pressure. Fuck, he's barely touched me, and I'm already wet.

“You like it when I do that?” He tugs again, harder this time.

“Yes,” I squeak out.

“Good,” he growls, leaning in towards my neck and inhaling. “Gods, you smell so good. How do you smell so

good?”

I give him a meek smile, batting my eyelashes in the process. Why does he bring this side out of me? My breathing quickens, and suddenly I feel shy.

“It’s okay,” he says as if he can see it in me. “It’s okay to want me.” He leans in again, licking a line up the side of my neck, causing me to shiver. “You do want me, don’t you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper, closing my eyes.

His hand is suddenly on my thigh, and he begins caressing it, drawing circles that gradually get closer and closer to the middle of my legs.

“That’s what I thought,” he whispers back, nibbling on my earlobe. “I want you, too. So bad. I should just take you right here, where anyone could walk by and see me fucking you.”

“Why don’t you?” I breathe.

He pulls back from my ear, and his hand stops on my thigh, just inches away from my pussy. He looks angry again.

“Because you’re *mine*,” he enunciates, tugging at the collar harder than before. I cry out before I can stop myself. “You’re mine, and no one should ever see you like that but me. No one should ever see the look on your face when I make you come but me. Do you understand?” he growls.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“A little louder.”

“Yes!”

“Good girl,” he praises, and my heart soars. “You’re such a good girl, Brielle.”

The sound of my name on his tongue is magnificent, and I want him to say it while inside of me. I want him to use that tongue for other things. I just want him so bad right now, I can hardly bear it.

He clicks his tongue at me.

“Such an eager little thing, you are. You’re perfect for me.”

“Please,” I beg.

“Please what?” He smirks.

“Please,” I repeat myself.

“You’re going to have to give me more than that.”

“I just... I need you.”

His hand resumes its circles on my thigh until it’s between my legs.

“Open your legs for me,” he orders, and I do so immediately. When he chuckles, another shiver runs down my spine.

His fingers slide up my dress until I’m practically exposed, and finally, he slips his hand inside. He touches my clit over my underwear, and I gasp.

With one finger, he lightly touches me at my opening and moves back up to my clit.

“You’re soaking for me,” he whispers. “What do you want?”

Just as I’m about to beg him to do something, anything, a tall dark elf with long black hair crashes through the trees. Thali swears and immediately tugs my dress back down, pulling away from me.

“What the fuck, Luocre?”

“I need you *now*, Thali,” the elf urges, not even glancing at me.

“I’m a little busy here,” Thali growls.

“It’s important, and I don’t have time to argue. Let’s go.”

Thali sighs and looks at me.

“I’ll walk you home.” He tugs my arm as he stands up.

I think about whining, but he already looks so angry that we were interrupted, and I don’t want to make it worse. He scares me when he’s angry.

The elf named Luocre leaves us. Thali turns towards me, pulling me closer.

“Look, I didn’t know this was going to happen. *Fuck*,” he swears, running a hand through his hair until it reaches the top of his braid. “I’m sorry, but we’ll continue this later.”

“It’s okay.” I pout. He cups my chin in his hand and forces my head to look straight up at him.

“Don’t pout. We’ll continue this later,” he repeats. “Trust me, this is *far* from over. You’re not getting rid of me, ever.”

I nod, blinking up at him. Gods, what is wrong with me? Why am I like this around him? Why do I just relinquish all of my control for him? He smiles and gives my collar a tug as he steps away.

“Come on, let’s get you home.”

THALI

Fuck. I'm beyond livid that I have to leave Brielle just when I was finally getting somewhere with her. I waited *weeks* for this, only to be interrupted the minute I decided to take action. Someone is going to pay for this.

I take her arm and lead her through the woods back to her place. She looks so beautiful, she's practically glowing right now.

I can tell by the way she keeps sneaking peeks at me when she thinks I'm not looking that she's just as enthralled by me as I am with her. Little does she know, I'm always looking.

I pull her closer to me, trying to savor as much of this time we have left as possible. A grin spreads across my face, and I look at her.

"What are you thinking about, brave one?"

She instantly blushes, which only makes me want to taunt her more.

"Nothing," she mumbles, looking away so that I can't see her face.

"Nothing?"

I know she's lying. I can smell her arousal from here, and it's taking everything in me not to push her up against one of these trees and taste it. The only thing stopping me is the fact that Luocre is out there waiting for me.

“Are you sure about that?” I grab her arm and yank us to a stop.

She peeks at me, her face going even redder when she sees my tongue swipe out and lick my bottom lip.

“Yes,” she says defiantly.

“Ah. Okay, then, let’s get you home,” I say before resuming our path.

“Wait!”

“Yes?” I stop and look back at her.

“Can I at least get a kiss goodbye?”

Within seconds, I have her against a tree. I’m sure Luocre can wait an extra minute or two.

“You want me to kiss you?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Where?”

Her eyes widen, and her pupils dilate. Fuck, she’s even more beautiful up close. She clears her throat before answering. I love how nervous I make her.

“On the mouth.”

I lean in slowly, bringing my mouth to her ear. I nip at her earlobe, knowing how much she loves that.

“I’m a little disappointed you didn’t pick somewhere else. I would’ve kissed you anywhere.”

“Is it too late to change my mind?” she breathes.

“Yes,” I say before capturing her lips with mine.

Within seconds, we’re both panting, clawing at each other. While she’s distracted, I slip the ring she declined to take weeks ago onto her finger. I had it specially made so that it can’t be taken off. Maybe that will teach her a lesson about rejecting my gifts.

After another minute of pure bliss, I force myself to tear away, only because of Luocre. I could have kissed her for

hours.

Leaning in until my lips touch the shell of her ear, I whisper, “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about your taste since the first time I made you come. I stay up all night imagining what it would be like to shove my head between your thighs and let you ride my face while I devour you. Would you like that, brave one?”

She whimpers, pressing herself into me, but I keep going.

“What if I tied you up? Are you brave enough for *that*? What if you were bound by your wrists and ankles, completely at my mercy? Could you handle it? Would you like what I’d do to you once you were unable to run away from me?”

She whimpers again, nodding fiercely. I chuckle and push off of the tree, retreating a few steps.

“I guess we’ll find out. Keep walking.”

Her eyes widen, and she pauses for a second before doing as I say. When I have more time, I’ll make sure she never pauses again when I tell her to do something.

When we near her building, we stop before walking out of the woods and into the view of any humans. I grab her wrist and pull her towards me.

“I know I have to leave right now, but I’m not done with you yet. I’ll be back, and you should prepare yourself for all of the things I’m going to do to you. Because once I start, I’m not going to stop.”

The look she gives me and the way she subtly rubs her thighs together *almost* makes me tell Luocre to go find someone else to help him. But I know that it must be important if he pulled me away.

Her pulse is pounding in her wrist against my hand. I wish I could give her what she wants, but instead, I walk away without another glance.

Less than a minute later, Luocre jumps down from a tree, landing next to me. I keep walking.

“You couldn’t have been any faster?” he growls.

“No, I couldn’t. You’re lucky I even agreed to do this.”

He scoffs, and I turn towards him.

“You want to tell me what the fuck was so important?”

“I have a job I need your help on.”

“A job? You pulled me away from her for a fucking *job*?”

“It’s an important one, and we need to get going now. You already wasted valuable time walking your little obsession home and kissing her goodbye.”

“Don’t talk about her,” I growl. “Don’t ever fucking mention her again.”

He holds his hands up, smirking.

“Woah, Thali. Chill. I have my own desire. In fact, I *married* mine. I don’t need yours.”

“Fuck you. I don’t care, don’t do it again.”

He rolls his eyes and starts walking again before speaking. “Whatever. Just hurry the fuck up.”

“What’s the job?” I say as I follow him.

“A large group of Dfam elves kidnapped an important Miou. There’s about a hundred of them in the underground bunker that they have him in. Looks like they were trying to hold him for ransom and use the money to leave Pyrthos,” he scoffs. “But they were sloppy, and we found out where they’re holding him, so I was ordered to kill everyone instead.”

“Naturally. And I was the only one who could help?”

“No, but you’re the only one I trust to get the job done. We’re to leave no one alive. This is the second time this group has caused trouble, and there won’t be a third.”

“Fine.”

I guess this was an acceptable thing to pull me away from Brielle for. But that doesn’t make me any less pissed off about it.

Twenty minutes later, we’re standing outside of the abandoned building where our targets are hiding in the

basement. In about five minutes every Dfam in there will be dead.

If we were anyone else, we'd need to plot our way into this and come up with some kind of plan. We'd probably have to send for backup. But we're not anyone else, and the two of us have handled far, far worse than this. This is nothing to us.

I pull my bow from my back and get an arrow ready, grinning. It's been far too long since I've killed anyone, but I've been too focused on Brielle to care until now.

“Let's go.”

The two of us walk right through the front door, and the first floor of this place looks exactly like the outside – abandoned. There's dust everywhere, and it smells stale. To an untrained elf, it would seem as if no one has been in here in years. But I'm far from untrained, and I easily spot the signs others would have missed.

We quickly find a trap door in the back of a closet, and the two of us grin at each other before kicking the door open. There's a staircase leading into the hidden basement, and the air quickly fills with the sounds of screaming elves.

I charge down the stairs, immediately firing off five arrows that all strike true. Another five. Then I switch to my sword, cutting off heads left and right.

“Where is he?” I demand as I slam an elf against the wall by his neck.

Unfortunately, I misjudged how angry I was, and his neck broke on impact, so I whirl on to the next one and repeat myself. He holds his hands up and then points across the basement to another door.

“Please, I didn't want any part of this,” he begs.

“That isn't my problem,” I say as I stab my sword clean through his chest.

I yank the sword out and slaughter my way to the door he pointed to, busting it open in seconds. Inside, there appear to

be another fifty elves cowering. Behind them is the Miou, strapped down to a table and unconscious.

They must have given him something to sedate him. That's the only way these low levels would have gotten someone of his rank strapped to a table like this. That, or they have someone of a higher rank helping them, in which case a lot more elves are going to die.

I charge in and swing my sword to the left, cutting off two heads in the process. A few of them try to fight back, and those are the ones that die first. The ones that try to run have their heads ripped off by Luocre, who joined me in here only after everyone in the main room was dead.

Nothing compares to the feeling that killing gives me, except for maybe the way that Brielle looks at me. Or the way her lips feel against mine. Or the noises she made when she came on my fingers all those weeks ago.

I kill the last ten elves with my arrows, before approaching the table and ripping off the restraints on the Miou. I feel for a pulse, and he's alive, but barely. They definitely fed him some numiscu berries. Credit to them for being able to find some. He'll survive.

Luocre throws the Miou over his shoulder and begins walking out.

Once outside, we go our separate ways. Part of me wants to go check on Brielle, but the adrenaline from those kills leaves me needing more, so instead, I set off to find my next victim.

BRIELLE

I stare after him as he walks away, utterly shocked at the things he just said to me. My face burns up as I think about it.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about your taste since the first time I made you come. I stay up all night imagining what it would be like to shove my head between your thighs and let you ride my face while I devour you. Would you like that, brave one?”

I would’ve told him that yes, I would like that, except he didn’t even let me answer him before moving on. But I would’ve done it right there in the woods if he had asked me to.

“What if I tied you up? Are you brave enough for that? What if you were bound by your wrists and ankles, completely at my mercy? Could you handle that? Would you like what I’d do to you once you were unable to run away from me?”

I only wish he had told me what it was he would do to me. Gods, it’s all I care about right now. The inside of my thighs are sticky and absolutely *soaked*, but I need to pull it together. Now is not the time to be thinking about what he’d do with me behind closed doors.

Sighing, I walk towards my building.

This is so bad. I’m in such deep shit, and I have no idea how to get out of it, or if I even want to get out of it. But how can I let this happen? It’s not like this is going to last. Sure,

Thali's obsessed with me now, but I know how dark elves are. Easily distracted.

As I reach for the handle to open the front door, something on my hand glints in the setting sunlight. *Fuck*, it's the ring. How did he get it on me without me noticing? Am I really that oblivious? I guess I am since I didn't notice a sickeningly gorgeous dark elf stalking me for weeks.

I try to slide the ring off, but it's stuck. Of course, it is. Putting things on me that can't come off seems to be his new favorite hobby. I would be mad, but the ring is absolutely beautiful. It's the prettiest thing I've ever owned, and besides, it's not like it's hurting me.

Sure, the collar pinches a little sometimes and I haven't been able to take a full breath since he put it on me, but I kind of like that. It's a reminder of him, and somehow that has become a good thing.

Not only that, but the pride radiating off of Thali every time he looked at the collar made me feel so special. And the way he praised me for wearing it?

"You look exquisite in your collar."

I could barely look him in the eyes when he said it, it made me feel so vulnerable in such a good way. Something I've never felt before.

"I had it specially made just for you."

Yeah, I am so fucked. This is so wrong on so many levels.

The humans *should* kill me for this. They'd have every right to. But what would Thali do to them when he found out? I shiver at the thought. Just another reason that they can't find out about this, even Riya. *Especially* Riya.

I open the door and walk inside, making my way down the hall to my room. How can I just go to sleep now, after the excitement of this afternoon? A horrible part of me wishes he would come back after...whatever it is he went off to do and finish what he started. Where would the night have gone if we hadn't been interrupted?

When I reach my room and open the door, it's like déjà vu. Riya is standing there, arms crossed again. And this time she looks visibly hurt. *Fuck.*

“I came to ask you if you wanted to go for a walk with me, and you were gone. We walked home together, so I know you were here. But you never said anything about leaving. I've been worried sick. I almost asked Silas to go looking for you.”

“Why are you so worried about me lately? Why would you have any reason to think I'm in danger?”

I'm not mad at her, I know that this all comes from a good place. But it is slightly annoying that she's always in my business lately.

She pauses, blinking at me.

“Because, Brielle. Have you been paying any attention at all? Gods, what is up with you lately?”

“What are you talking about?”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath before answering.

“Zion was found dead last night. They strung him up in the woods, hanging from a branch. His body was so mutilated, we almost didn't know it was him, but we found a piece of parchment with his name on it. He was on his way to deliver it to another human dorm. It was addressed to his girlfriend. He told Silas where he was going, and he still died.”

“If he still died, then what good does telling anyone do? If I'm going to die either way, then what is the point? Why should I live my life in fear?”

“So that I know where to look for your dead fucking body when you wind up missing. That's the fucking point.”

I flinch.

“I'm sorry, Riya. I didn't know about Zion.”

“Of course, you didn't. Because you never listen at meetings anymore, if you even go. You don't talk to anyone anymore, even me. What is going on with you?”

“Nothing! I’ve just been exhausted from working so much.”

“So it isn’t because of this person you’re seeing? Are they bad to you?”

“No, it’s not – and no, they’re not. It’s not like that.”

Lie, lie, lie. I hate having to do this.

“So where were you?”

“What?”

“Where were you just now?”

“Why do you want to know so bad?”

“Because I saw you walking out of the woods just now, and you looked pretty distraught.”

She saw me walking out of the woods? Fuck, is there a chance she saw Thali?

“Like I said, I’m just tired.”

“So then where were you? Why won’t you answer me?”

“I was just taking a walk, Riya.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone.”

She sighs. “Can you please just ask me to come with you next time? It’d make me feel better. I hate worrying about you. Things have been so bad for our faction lately, and I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I can take care of myself. I’ve done it my whole life.”

“I know you have, and I know that you didn’t grow up with any family, so you aren’t used to people caring this much, but you have me now. I’m your best friend, Brielle. If you die, I’ll be all alone,” she says, a tear falling down her face.

I hate myself for making her feel this way. She’s always been good to me. She doesn’t deserve this. I wish I could just tell her the truth, but I know she would freak out. She would

probably turn me into Declan, our faction leader, just to get me to stop seeing Thali.

“I’m sorry, Riya. I promise to be more careful. I’ll tell you the next time I plan on going out. But you really don’t have to worry so much. Besides, I’m a really fast runner, so if anyone tries to grab me, I’m sure I could get away.” I smile, trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s not a joke. No matter how fast you think you are, dark elves are ten times faster. I know you love the peace and quiet in the woods, and I love you for that, but if you go back there after Zion was murdered there, then you’re a fool. Stay away or face the consequences, Brielle.”

My blood runs cold.

“What did you just say?” I demand. She sighs and runs her hand through her shoulder-length hair.

“Just be careful, please. Keep one eye over your shoulder at all times.”

Before I can say anything else, she pats me on the arm and leaves my room. Long after she’s gone, her words are still ringing in my head.

It sounded *exactly* like one of the threatening notes that was left for me in the woods. Word for word. I thought it was Thali that left those for me... but maybe it wasn’t. I shake my head, trying to dismiss the thought. Riya wouldn’t do something like that. She has no reason to, not when she clearly has no problem confronting me and speaking her mind.

As I change into my night clothes, I can’t stop thinking about what she said. For some reason, the whole thing just feels wrong. I don’t want to think about my best friend like this.

When I slide under the covers, I decide not to fall asleep with this on my mind. I’m a firm believer in not going to bed upset. Instead, I let my thoughts drift to Thali without letting myself think about the fact that he’s a dark elf who I should be absolutely nowhere near.

Something about him just draws me in, and I crave the danger he brings me. His presence has always been so magnetizing, even before I met him when I only knew him from the gifts he left. Something made me keep going back for more.

My heart races as I picture his face. Gods, he's the most attractive male I've ever come across. No one even compares.

I picture his bright silver eyes and the way they change into a dark gray when he's angry. The thrill his anger gives me is hypnotizing. I wish he was here right now, whispering all the things he wants to do to me, just the way he was earlier.

The thing is, I know that I would let him do anything to me. Everything. But does that make me just as bad as him?

BRIELLE

It's been five days since the confrontation with Riya... and five days since I've seen Thali. To say I've been going out of my fucking mind is an understatement.

The first day was a struggle. I was still so on edge from being teased mercilessly by Thali, and all I wanted was his hands all over me, him whispering in my ear. I would've done anything to have him visit me.

On top of that, I was avoiding Riya as much as I could. I hadn't been ready to see her yet. Not when my suspicions kept replaying in my head over and over again, along with her words that made my blood run cold.

On the second day, I tried not to think about either of them. I buried myself in work at the factory and even stayed late just to keep myself distracted. By the time I got home, I was so tired that I just passed out without even eating dinner.

On the third day, I was feeling the effects of working so hard the day before along with not eating, and I was half dead all day. I barely remembered my day at the factory, or how I walked home. But at least I wasn't thinking about either of my very big, daunting problems.

By day four, my distraction techniques were no longer working. All I could think about was whether or not Riya was the one who left those notes or not. It was all I could do to stop myself from running down the hall to her room and demanding she tell me. But if it wasn't her, then charging in

there would only raise more questions from her that I can't nor do I want to answer.

Then there was Thali, of course. I woke up thinking about the way his teeth felt tugging at my earlobe, his tongue swiping seductively against the hurt. And that led to more thoughts about what those teeth would feel like elsewhere, what his tongue would do to me. On the fifth day, it was all I cared about.

Finally, I've had enough. Or at least, I can't just sit still anymore. After cleaning up from my day at the factory, I tug on a mid-length, plain white dress and slip out of the dorm, still avoiding Riya.

I haven't been back to the woods since I begrudgingly left Thali in them. It's not like Riya's words really got to me, but I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. Plus, I'm sure she's just been waiting for me to return to them so that she can catch me in the act.

I can't stay away any longer, though. I don't know why Thali has stayed away for five days, and I don't really care... except that I do. It's the reason I'm out here. A part of me wants to walk into that clearing and find one of his gifts. I've come to love and adore those gifts. I miss those gifts, more than I'd like to admit.

Maybe he's stayed away because I haven't returned to these woods. Maybe he's been waiting for me.

Something tells me this isn't true. Waiting around for me to act isn't really Thali's style. He does what he wants, takes what he wants, and doesn't apologize or care what anyone has to say about it. So does that mean he no longer wants me? And why does that create such an impossible ache in my chest at the thought?

I don't care. I just keep walking through the trees, stepping over twigs and trying not to trip and get a face full of mud. Riya would surely see me coming back like that and get mad at me for not heeding her warning about taking her with me the next time I ventured out here. And I don't know if I could keep my questions to myself if that happened.

I know that Riya's constant worrying about me comes from a good place. For years, she's been all I had, and I've been all she's had. We've been each other's rocks. She's family.

We stick together, and we tell each other everything. Every horrible day, every terrifying dark elf encounter. Every insecurity or fear. She knows more about me than anyone else I've ever known.

That's why keeping all these secrets from her is killing me. She doesn't deserve this, not after everything she's done for me over the years.

I just hope she can forgive me when she inevitably finds out the truth. Or when I never see Thali again and I'm forced to cry into her shoulder about it. Will she hate me? Will she see this as a betrayal of our friendship? Or will she put her feelings aside and comfort me?

Hopefully, I don't ever have to find out. I couldn't handle losing her. I've already lost so much.

When I get deeper into the woods and the tall trees block out the sunlight, the hairs on my arms begin to stick straight up. The back of my neck prickles.

I stop and look around, growing suspicious at how quiet the area has become over the last minute. That usually isn't the best sign. Suddenly, I wish Skye were with me. She would warn me if something was approaching far before it had a chance to get close.

I scan the foliage but see nothing out of sorts. That doesn't mean something isn't out there, but maybe I should head back home just in case. Riya's words ring through my head.

"They strung him up in the woods, hanging from a branch."

I don't want to share that fate, so I spin around and walk as quietly and quickly back the way I came. As I hurry my way along, I try to control my breathing, so I don't work myself into a complete panic.

A few seconds later, a loud crack sounds from behind me, sounding like a thick branch being snapped clean in half. Shrieking, I whip my head behind me at the same time that I break out into a run.

I won't let myself die. I won't let myself die. This is not how I will go.

Seeing nothing behind me, I focus on the path ahead, running as fast as my legs will carry me. I bunch my dress around my thighs in one hand so it doesn't catch on to anything while throwing my other hand out to catch myself just in case I fall.

I hear rustling behind me, and tears spring to my eyes. This is really it. I'm actually about to die. I didn't even get to live. My life has barely begun. I know that it probably wouldn't have been that great anyways, but maybe I could've found someone. Maybe I could have loved someone.

I don't dare look behind me as it becomes perfectly clear that someone is running behind me. If I look, it'll be over, and I'm not ready to give in yet. I'm a fighter, until the very end.

My mind betrays me by forcing negative thoughts right to the forefront.

What will Riya do without me? Tears openly stream down my face at the thought of her finding me in the woods, just like she's been terrified of this whole time. Why did I do this to her? She'll be all alone now, and it's all my fault.

I'm gasping, trying to swallow my sobs down. I'm forced to let my dress go and risk it being my downfall in order to wipe the tears out of my eyes as they make my vision blurry.

Almost instantly, my dress gets caught in a thorn bush, but I don't let it take me down. I keep going, letting the bush rip the fabric of my dress along with my skin. I don't even care what is now exposed to whatever is after me. Nor do I care about the blood now trickling down my thigh. All I care about is making it out of this alive.

But I'm only human, and my lungs weren't meant for this kind of exertion. If I were trained, maybe. But my frail body

can't handle this, and if I don't make it out of here soon then I'll collapse.

I'm fully sobbing now, and I don't even bother wiping the tears from my eyes. I just blindly run towards a home I will never reach again. A hope that will soon be crushed. A life that is about to be over.

Suddenly I don't even care. I submit to my fate, despite the fact that I keep running. Maybe this is what I deserve, for betraying the humans and lying to my best friend. I deserve to die. I deserve to never have that little cottage in the woods that I once dreamed of having.

Whatever is waiting for me on the other side will be well-deserved, and I'll embrace it with open arms. I will be a coward no more. But I won't go freely. They'll have to catch me first.

For some reason, I feel the need to see what or who is about to kill me. I need to know. Fuck it. I decide to risk a peek over my shoulder, holding my arms straight out in front of me as I do just in case I trip.

As I turn my head and glance behind me, my heart skips a beat. Nothing is there. Nothing is after me. Have I imagined this whole thing? Did my paranoia get the best of me? Even though this is a terrible sign for the state of my mind, my heart soars. Maybe I'm not going to die after all.

Turns out, I should stick to listening to my gut. Turns out, hope really is dead. My outstretched arms collide with something hard and unmoving. As my head whips back around, I catch sight of what death is awaiting me, and my eyes widen as I scream.

THALI

My dick has never been this hard.

I swear all my blood flow was diverted there the second I saw Brielle take off. I've always loved to hunt, but the idea of capturing her as my prey does something unbelievable to me.

Pure fear is radiating off of her and I can't wait to lick the scent from her skin as I bury myself deep in her, make her come despite how afraid she is.

Brielle is fast, but I'm faster. She bobs between the trees with ease, but it's nothing like the way a dark elf moves. The only thing that's kept her so far ahead of me is the head start she got.

But it's not enough.

I lunge forward, my hand wrapping around her wrist as I jerk her back toward me. Her scream pierces the air, only making my cock throb with excitement. I let loose a growl as I spin us both around, slamming her back into a tree.

"Where are you going?" I snarl as I jerk her hand above her head, shoving it roughly against the bark.

Brielle's eyes widen as she stares up at me, her pupils blowing wide as she takes in my hungry stare. I lean my body deeper into hers, and she responds in kind, tilting her hips up against me.

Her teeth drag across her bottom lip as I drive up into her, and I lean forward until my forehead is pressed to hers. "I

asked you a question, brave one. You take off running from me and don't expect to get punished?"

With my free hand, I slowly drag my fingers up her side until they come up to the collar wrapped around her neck. I slip one finger underneath, tugging on it, and she gasps as the material cuts into her throat.

But she doesn't fight against me. Instead, she sinks into me, pink tinging her cheeks and I feel a bead of precum drip down my cock at the sight.

"I wasn't running from you." Her words are rushed and breathless, and her gaze dips down to my mouth before back up to my eyes. "But now I'm glad I did."

I cock a brow, pressing more firmly into her. I know the bark of the tree must be biting into her skin, but she doesn't so much as squirm. "Do you like being punished, dirty girl?"

Her head tips back, her chest heaving with each breath, and she writhes beneath me. I slide my leg to the side between hers and she sighs softly as she starts to grind against my thigh. "I like anything you'll give me."

Holy. Fuck. This girl is trying to ruin me.

"Anything?" I murmur, my nose tracing down hers. Now that she's said that, I can't stop picturing her pussy stretching around me as I bury myself to the hilt. She would look so godsdamn beautiful being split open by me.

"Anything, Thali," she murmurs just before arching up off the tree and pressing her lips to mine.

I groan as I pull tighter against the collar, jerking her up into me. She parts her lips for me, my tongue swipes in. She tastes sweet and salty, and I pull tighter against her throat, feeling the vibrations of her moans deep in my bones.

My cock is straining against my pants, begging to be set free. The frantic rhythm at which Brielle is grinding against my leg isn't helping matters, either.

Suddenly, she rips her mouth away, throwing her head back as best as she can with my fingers still hooked in the

collar. She doesn't seem to care when I growl and cut off her air supply. The hand in my grip curls forward while the other slides to my chest, balling in the fabric there.

Sweet little moans escape her as she keeps going, and I look down at where she's riding my thigh. Then, with a malicious grin, I step back.

Brielle's head snaps up, her eyes on fire as she glares at me. I still have her by the wrist and throat, but I decide to let go of the collar in favor of grabbing her other hand. I lift it over her head, jerking harshly when she tries to resist me.

"What the fuck is your problem?" she snaps when I have her hands pinned in one of mine.

I drop my now free hand down to cup her face, wrenching her arms back as she bows up to snarl in my face. "That sweet pussy doesn't want to come like this," I murmur.

"How would you know?" she means it to be just as harsh, but it's not. I can already see the lust worming its way back in.

"Because I know that she wants my cock as much as I want to stretch her open and fill her up." Deftly, I drop my hand to her hips and spin her around, keeping her wrists pinned to the tree the entire time. Brielle gasps when she finds herself shoved chest-first into the tree.

I lean forward, bringing my lips to her ear as I press my erection firmly into her ass. "And that's exactly what I'm going to do."

A shiver wracks her body, but she doesn't protest. She just lifts her hips, rubbing harder against me, and I groan as I look down at her perky ass.

Unable to withstand it, I grip the waistband and tug. My mouth waters as I drag the fabric down her legs, exposing her to me, and I press her palms flat against the tree. "These stay here, got it?"

Brielle whimpers and nods, and when I let go, she doesn't move an inch. Good. With both my hands free, I cup her ass and lean forward, dragging my teeth along the skin. Her quiet

cries grow louder, and I grin just as I sink my teeth into her skin.

She screams and squirms but keeps her hands in place as I get a taste of the prey I caught. When I pull off her skin, I lick the wound, which is hardly broken skin.

Moving down, I see just how soaked she is. “Brave one,” I coo, bringing a hand to slide between her lips. “You weren’t lying. You did like me catching you.”

She moans in agreement as I push my fingers through her slick arousal. I swipe up once and back before pulling away, earning me a deep groan in protest. I only chuckle as I undo my pants with one hand, releasing my cock and smearing the arousal on my hand down the shaft.

My balls draw up as I watch her shine along my skin, and I know that I need more. I plant one hand above hers, leaning forward as I grip my base and guide it between her folds. I grit my teeth as I feel her pussy part around me, so warm and wet that I worry about how long I’ll be able to last.

“Oh, fuck,” she whimpers as the crown presses at her entrance.

“When you moan,” I grind out as I thrust upward, forcing myself inside of her. “It better be my fucking name.”

I’m only halfway in when she lets out a throaty scream that has her walls squeezing me so tightly that I feel like I’m choking. I bring my hands to her hips, leaning back to watch as I slam the rest of the way into her.

Brielle chokes, her head dropping forward as her body fights against my length. Tension lines her body, a slight sheen of sweat coating her skin, but before she has even adjusted to me, her hips start to move.

“Is this what you wanted?” I ask her as I watch her ass bob up and down my shaft. “You wanted this cock, didn’t you?”

“I wanted to be *fucked*,” she growls so viciously that I am momentarily blinded by pleasure.

Planting my feet, I pull all the way out to the tip, staring down at my cock glistening with her before I murmur, “My fucking name, brave one.” Then I slam up, grinding harshly against her clit before pulling back and doing it over and over.

“Yes!” she screams. “Yes, Thali.”

Her body is so tight that I have to fight with each thrust, and I slide my fingers down to spread her open. I watch as she stretches to accommodate my size, her body convulsing each time our hips meet.

She feels even more incredible than I expected, and I know that I am fucked. I could get addicted to this feeling. I’d rather spend my days buried inside of this woman rather than breathing.

And it seems she feels the same.

“Thali,” she pants, and I slide my hand up her spine until I reach her neck. My fingers curl around the collar, wrenching her back just as she says, “You feel so good.”

Her head slams into my shoulder, heightening the next scream that leaves her as the position forces me deeper. I wrap my arm around her torso, pressing against her stomach so that it’s even tighter around my cock.

“That’s because you were fucking made for me, sweet girl. This pussy was designed to take my cock, over and over, as many times as I want to give it to her.” Her whimper is beautiful. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” she gasps, her hips bearing down on me. Her legs are starting to give out, and I have to hold her up with one arm. “I want... Thali- I...”

“Tell me,” I purr in her ear. “Tell me what it is.”

“I want to come,” she rushes out.

I shift her back more so that I can more easily drive into her. I’m having to focus on not filling her up right now. She’s been so close for too long, and it’s caused her to squeeze me painfully.

“Then come for me, brave one,” I tell her as I shift my hand up to knead her breast. “Come all over this cock and claim it as yours.” She throws a hand forward to lean against the tree. “And then maybe I’ll reward you by pumping you full of cum just like you want.”

“Thali!” she cries out as my words push her over the edge and she tightens around me as she comes, pulling me with her.

BRIELLE

I step out from the forest, my legs wobbly, mind empty. I feel like I could sleep for a century if it meant I wouldn't be missing out on such immense pleasure. Every muscle in my body is sore and drained, but I don't care. I'm counting down the moments until I can be back in Thali's grasp.

I can still feel his fingers against my skin, his cock exploring my depths.

"You've gotten careless."

I turn around to see Riya, arms folded. I force a smile, but she doesn't look amused.

She looks down, frowning at the ground, and I immediately notice that she isn't alone. Seemingly, the entirety of Lowntown is emerging behind her, visible now through the vines. They all look equally enraged, except for the children, who have no idea what's happening.

I've become a spectacle. I can feel their eyes upon me, sizing me up, judging me, and threatening me.

"Riya?" I plead with her, attempting to connect with her on some level, but her eyes are filling with tears now, and she refuses to meet my gaze. "What's going on, Riya?"

"You know damn well what's going on," she says, struggling to hold back the tears.

While I'm engaged in conversation, Declan emerges beside me. I smile up at his old and wizened face.

“Sorry, kid,” he says, before slapping a pair of shackles on my wrists. I look down at them in disbelief. “You’re coming with me.”

I attempt to jerk away, before realizing that my movement is obviously impaired. I look back up at Riya, whose distance from me is now growing.

“Whatever this is, I can explain.”

Declan is attempting to lead me away from the forest entrance toward unknown parts. Our prison? We haven’t used that in decades. Everything is usually resolved so cleanly.

But I fight him with the force of my body. He’s got my hands bound, but I still have my legs.

“Whatever it is,” I shout to her, though it is more of a plea to everybody. “I can explain!”

I don’t expect a response. Declan patiently waits with my shackles in his hands.

She walks up to me, from back out of the crowd.

I try to offer a look of genuine kindness to her.

She just takes my cheek in her hand, smiling at me in return. I can feel a bit of her gentleness oozing though.

Maybe she’s coming to apologize, I think.

I still have the faintest hope that this issue can be resolved without a conflict.

But her face contorts in rage, and I realize how much I’ve hurt her.

She slaps me, raising her hand in a show of force.

My face is sore from the collision, the noise echoing through the chilly air. The crowd of people all look shocked but engaged.

Skye cries out in pain, and my heart breaks. She frantically paces the pavement, unsure of what to do. She has been by my side for so long, and she has no idea how to help me.

“Was it all a lie?” she asks me. “How long have you known?”

“If you’ll stop and explain what all of this is about, maybe you can –”

“Why?” She chuckles. “So you can deflect again? Change the subject? Gaslight me?”

She laughs louder. “I’m sorry, Brielle,” she says. “But I can’t do this anymore. I care about you so much, but you’re going to bring Lowtown down with you.”

During all of this, Declan looks compassionate toward both of our pleas but keeps a safe distance away, holding my shackles from about four feet. I try to register a connection at least with him – he has always defended and protected me, ever since childhood – but not even he will meet my glance.

He just looks sad.

“Is anybody going to explain to me what’s going on?”

“Think of the worst thing you’ve done in the past few weeks,” Declan growls, sparing Riya from delivering the bad news. His voice is solemn and contained. “We know.”

“How could you –” Riya stares at me, her eyes empty. “With an *elf*?”

It’s over. They know.

I shake my head. Riya is nearly inconsolable now but rebuffs Colson and Genesis as they approach, attempting to comfort her. They back away, folding their arms and looking at me with disgust.

“It’s not that simple sometimes, Riya,” I say, tears welling up in my own eyes.

“Oh!” Riya chuckles madly. “It’s not that simple, is it? Do you mind telling me how it’s not *simple*?”

I stare her down, trying to find the words. The eyes of the entirety of Lowtown are upon me now. I see people I grew up with... adults who comforted and molded me, friends who lent

me a shoulder to cry on. This is my whole life up to this point, damning me for my actions.

“It just sort of happened.”

I don't know what else to say to her.

“Tell me how *fucking* an elf just sort of happens!” I notice as the parents move to cover the ears of some of the children. “What, did he fall into and out of you for *hours* at a time? Because it sure looked to me like you were enjoying it!”

I look down at the ground, noting the increase in vines creeping through the pavement.

“This is humiliating,” I tell her, not meeting her gaze this time. “How could you humiliate me like this?”

Declan coughs, my chains still in his hands.

“Should we carry her away, or –”

“No,” Riya interjects. “I want to hear it from her own mouth. Tell me how you fucked a dark elf. Tell me how much you loved it!”

I look at her in disbelief. As I look up, I notice that the crowd isn't as civil as I once thought. Many of them are holding bows and swords and torches casually at their side.

Declan shakes his head.

“Normally, we save this stuff for the trial,” Declan says before trailing off. “Why don't we give her a chance to speak her peace?”

I can see that Riya, in her angry attempt at finding closure, hasn't just stirred up a captive party. She's roused a mob, bringing everybody in the city together against me.

And I think I hate her for it.

“You know what they do to people like us,” Riya rants. “You know how badly we're treated. How many of your friends have died under their thumbs, because they couldn't be bothered to give a crap?”

There's nothing she can say to me that I haven't already told myself in frustration. I can feel myself holding strong against her. I try to shift my face, maintaining a calm stoicism.

"Oh, nothing to say about that," she asks. "Well, did you ever consider that in your careless, *stupid*, unnatural trysts, you might actually be endangering the people you care about?"

I look to the crowd, to the mob, who don't seem terribly concerned for my well-being now. I wonder if I ever really knew anybody here. They're showing me very different faces now.

If they really wanted to talk, then they could have *talked* to me. But the first thing they do is shackle me up and lead me away to jail.

"It really hurt me to leave those notes."

I feel the wind exit my throat, ice dropping into my stomach.

"You what?"

"I didn't have any choice," she says with righteous anger. "At first, I just wanted to scare you, but when you didn't heed them, you left me no other option. Then I just wanted answers."

I shake my head, thinking back to how scared I was upon finding those notes.

"How many of the notes were yours?" I ask, unable to contain the feeling of betrayal in my voice.

"I can't say," she says, looking up. "There were a few threatening notes left in the clearing for you, and a few to draw you there. But it was all just so I could see him... so I could know for certain."

"Well," I chuckle caustically, "now you know. Bet you feel a lot better."

She smiles sympathetically. In many cases, her smile would make me feel better, but right now, I just wish she would slap me again.

“I never meant for it to come to this,” she says, her tone having shifted drastically. “I’m so sorry.”

Looking around her at the mob, whose angry expressions still have not relaxed or softened, who would sit through anything if it meant the chance to get their misguided revenge, I scoff.

“You brought a mob to me, Ri,” I tell her, frowning. “Then you had them lock me up. I don’t think there’s any apologizing for this.”

The crowd’s attention begins to turn, and I notice that more of their eyes are leaving me. I furrow my brow in confusion, looking out toward the subject of their vision.

I hear the steps of equu rapidly approaching, their diamond-shaped hooves pelting the pavement leading into Lowtown.

The mob around me raises their weapons, preparing to strike. From the way they’re trembling, I can tell that they weren’t prepared for any kind of altercation.

They just wanted to scare a girl into a jail cell.

As I thought, the equu roam into my field of vision, their riders trying not to announce themselves. But the crowd is already riled up, and as a misguided old man raises his weapon to try to attack one of them, driving his spear harmlessly into the rider’s armor, my heart shatters.

I know what’s about to happen.

The rider scowls at the man, driving his sword cleanly into the man’s shoulder, and the crowd looks on in horror as he falls to the ground.

His name was Wynn, and I barely knew him. We had a small conversation on the way to the factory once.

And I just look at this crowd, who I have incited with my actions, wondering how many more of them might meet the same fate. How many more of them that my selfish actions might kill.

“Stand down!”

The head of the guard marches forward, his equu prancing toward us.

THALI

I've been watching Brielle since she left me in the woods, unbeknownst to the humans who have captured her. I watched the whole thing happen and listened to her and her friend arguing. It's taken everything in me not to go down there and slaughter every single one of them. It's what they deserve for touching my girl.

I hear Brielle talking to her friend again. I've seen her around with the brown-haired girl, and I think they may even live in the same dorm.

"You brought a mob to me, Ri. Then you had them lock me up. I don't think there's any apologizing for this."

My girl looks so heartbroken, it hurts to watch. I just want to hold her in my arms and comfort her. Later. I'll get to hold her later.

Out of nowhere, some of Kaisax's men show up on their equu, and the energy of the mob instantly shifts. Why the fuck are they here? My girl does not concern them.

They ride up to the humans, and one of the humans, an elderly man, stabs one of the dark elves in the arm. Man, these humans are dumb. Do they really think they can take on dark elves?

I jump down as soon as the elf kills the old man. These are my kills, and I won't allow them to take any. Kaisax's men need to get the fuck out of here.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, Brielle's head whips toward me. A million emotions cross her face at once, ranging from relief to pure terror. She knows exactly what's about to happen. I make a beeline for her, and the humans instantly scatter and start running every which way.

I stop where I'm standing and adjust my bow and arrow. Within seconds, I've hit every human in Brielle's vicinity in the throat, and every last one of them hits the ground, spurting blood everywhere.

I sling my bow back to its spot on my back and unsheathe my long sword. I want to feel these kills as they happen, in a way that my arrows can't give me.

Instantly, I stab the human nearest me, going for another, and another. I'm slaughtering my way to Brielle, who is standing there amongst the chaos, mouth hanging open and eyes widened in horror.

Before I can reach her, I'm spun around to face Kaisax, who looks incredibly angry. I push him away from me, instantly feeling protective over Brielle. And furious that he interrupted me.

"What are you doing here?" I growl.

"What am *I* doing here? This is my territory. These are my humans. What are *you* doing here? Why are you always in my fucking business now? You shouldn't be anywhere near here."

I ignore him, needing to know how he knew to come here.

"Why are you here, and why did you send your men?"

"Not that it's any of your business, *little brother*, but I was informed by one of my guards that the humans had formed a large mob against one of their own. Seeing as they are owned by me, I sent my men here to stop it before they do too much damage and I'm left with no one to run my factories."

"Ah."

"So what are you doing here? Why are you refusing to back off of what's mine? This doesn't affect you."

“That’s where you’re wrong. See, your humans were forming that mob against my girl.”

“Your girl?” he laughs. “Are you staking claim to one of my humans?”

“She is not yours. She’s mine.”

“Does she work in my factories?”

“Yes.”

“Then she’s mine. I literally own her.”

“No. You don’t understand. She’s *mine*, Kaisax. And I’m willing to kill for her.”

His eyes flash in recognition, and he appears to finally understand.

“Is this why you’ve been hanging around so much lately? I knew something was up, and I never believed your taura shit about having jobs here for one second. I knew there was something going on with you.”

“Look at you. You’re so smart, Kaisax. So then it should be easy for you to understand that Brielle is mine, and you are not to touch her. She is no longer your slave, and she will never set foot in one of your factories ever again.”

We stare at each other for a long minute, and I’m prepared to kill my own brother if he fights me on this. Luckily, that isn’t necessary.

“Fine, whatever. Take her, but you’re going to stop killing my humans. Just take her and leave, Thali.”

“Can’t do that, big brother.”

“Gods see it you can. You have no stake in Lowtown.”

“Your humans messed with the wrong girl, Kaisax, and now they have to pay. See, I called my own men long ago, and while we’ve been standing here, they’ve arrived to back me up.” I nod to something behind him.

He slowly turns to look over his shoulder. Twenty of my own men who work with me as assassins are lined up behind

him.

“You only brought twenty?” he scoffs. “What the fuck are they going to do? I have hundreds of mine within calling distance.”

“They’re all highly trained assassins. Don’t underestimate them. And clear your men unless you want them to die, too. That’s an order.”

I don’t actually have the authority to order my brother to do anything, but I don’t care. He either does what I say, or he dies.

With that, I turn back towards Brielle, who is still standing in the same spot with her mouth hanging open.

“Kill them all,” I order my men.

They waste no time doing as I say, and I hear Kaisax muttering something about the humans not being worth it as he walks away. I smile at the human running nearest to me before beheading him with my sword.

I slash my sword again, taking off two more heads before plunging into another’s heart. Their blood sprays all over me, and I relish it. Checking that Brielle is okay, I set off to do just a little more killing. Brielle is fine, and I need to work off some of this murderous energy I’m feeling before I’m alone with her.

I sheath my sword and pull my bow back out. Time to get rid of the humans who are far enough to think that they actually got away. I notch an arrow and release it, letting it fly into someone’s eye, before repeating the motion and hitting another in the same spot.

I spend the next few minutes doing this before grabbing my sword once again. Every now and then, I glance at Brielle, who still hasn’t taken her eyes off me. I need to go to her now.

I kill a few more humans on my way to her but sheath my sword once I’m in front of her. It’s up to my men to destroy the rest of them. I know they’ll get the job done.

“Are you hurt? Are you okay?” I ask as soon as I’m in front of her.

“Um... y-yes. I’m okay. I’m not hurt,” she sputters.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I put a hand to her face.

“You came for me. You saved me.”

“Yes.”

“You killed all those people for me.”

“Yes.”

After a moment of silence that goes on too long, I speak again.

“Does that scare you?” I ask her. She shrugs.

“Are you sure they didn’t hurt you?”

“I’m sure. They barely touched me. I don’t think they were planning on hurting me. I think they were just going to lock me up and put me on trial.”

“You are not theirs to lock up. They touched you, and no one touches my girl. I did what had to be done. Do you understand that?”

She stares and stares at me before lowering her eyes to the ground.

“I understand why you did it,” she whispers.

“Good, now we should probably get you out of here.”

“Did you kill her?” she asks.

“Who?”

“My friend. The one I was arguing with before you got here.”

“No, I didn’t kill her. She ran off as soon as I set foot on the ground. Would you like me to kill her? Is she the reason for all of this?”

“No, I don’t want that. And no, I’m the reason. I betrayed the humans. They were only doing what they should’ve been.”

“No. I will not agree with that. What they were doing was wrong. Besides, I don’t care. I don’t care who you betrayed. As long as you’re mine.”

“I deserved whatever they had planned for me,” she whispers.

“No, you definitely did not. You did nothing wrong. They were just mad they didn’t have someone as sexy as me to fuck *them* in the middle of the woods.”

That gets her to laugh, and the return of a smile to her face warms my heart. This is what I killed all those humans for, to see this smile again.

We look around us then, seeing dead bodies everywhere. Too many to count. Buildings and houses are on fire. Humans are getting dragged out of their houses by my men. Every last human they see will die, and I can’t say I feel bad about it.

I gave them orders to spare the ones who are at work, for Kaisax’s sake, but that was it.

I scoop her up into my arms without another word, pressing a kiss first to her cheeks, then her forehead, then finally her mouth. It’s a soft, short kiss, but I’ll give her a real one later.

Right now, I have to avenge my woman.

BRIELLE

“This way!”
“No! Wait—”

“I didn’t —”

I spin around, looking for any gap in the crowd to get away from this mayhem. Thali has unleashed absolute chaos, even as he cuts through people with ease.

I dodge someone swiping at me, darting forward and between two little buildings, pressing up against the wall as I try to get my bearings. Some people are still looking for me while others are just trying to get out of Thali’s grasp. Everyone is screaming and running, looking for loved ones, some grabbing prized possessions as they flood into Lowtown while others charge at the dark elf painting the alleys in red.

I’m not sure what I should do.

My eyes dart to Thali, who is grinning wildly as he slams a knife up and through a man before spinning around and slitting someone else’s throat. Blood is splattered across half his face and coated in his hair.

The sight sends fear coiling in my stomach, and arousal shooting down my spine. I have to clamp my thighs together as I try to quell the feeling.

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” I mutter.

“There she is!”

My head snaps toward the voice to see three angry men, ones I've known vaguely over the course of my life, shoving through the panicked crowd as they stalk toward me.

They don't make it far, though. His shout clearly drew the wrong attention. I've barely scrambled back when one head goes flying across the alleyway. Thali is already darting toward the second before it hits the ground just before me, rolling to stop a few feet away.

I clamp a hand over my mouth as my limbs start to shake and, without thinking, I turn and run. I know that I have to get out of here before I get hurt, caught and dragged away, or worse. It's not safe, and maybe my body is starting to finally realize how psychotic Thali is. I find myself turning to look back at him, relieved when I see his back to me.

"This all went to shit," I curse beneath my breath as I take a familiar path out of Lowtown. The ruins are worse, the buildings having collapsed among the fighting, but there are few fleeing this way to slow me down.

I scramble toward the familiar patch of woods I've spent most of my time in. I know that I will be safer there than anywhere else. No one else knows the paths like I do.

I don't have much of a plan as I slip between the trees, my speed only picking up the farther I get away from the commotion. I just know I have to put distance between me and the others.

My eyes search the trees as I push myself to keep running even though my legs feel too heavy already. I don't see Skye anywhere, and although I shouldn't be worried about a bird right now, I am. I can't help but wonder where she is.

With my mind distracted, I'm not paying close enough attention to my surroundings, and I stumble over a tree root. I manage to catch myself on my hands without any injuries, but before I get back to my feet, I hear a thud just above me.

On my hands and knees, I turn slowly to see an arrow sticking out of the tree trunk.

Right where I just was.

Fear grips my lungs, sending ice through my veins, and I force myself back up. I have to keep going, especially now that I know someone is after me.

I weave between the trees, trying to add as many distractions as possible. My eyes scan for small spaces, something that I could easily slip through that others will be slowed down by. I dodge through every spot I see like that, keeping my movements erratic when I hear another thud behind me.

My heart is in my throat, and my lungs feel like they are being sawed in half. I don't let either slow me, though, and this time when I see a small space, the base of the trunks are so close together that I am going to have to leap through it.

Just as I take the step forward to launch myself up, my shirt jerks me back. It's not forceful, but enough to get my attention. I spin around, pulling at the fabric and trying to rip it when I see it's been pinned beneath an arrowhead.

I know that it might be Thali, but after the destruction he caused, I'm afraid he's not the only one hunting me. I can't take my chances.

A slight whistle in the air is the only thing that alerts me to the next arrow, and I have just enough time to scream as it embeds itself next to my neck. It's just grazed my skin, and when I try to move, I realize it's caught the collar of my shirt.

Now the fabric is pinned in place, and when I try to move, the sharp arrowhead slices at my bare skin.

I lean away, trying to put some distance between the weapon and my throat, wondering how the fuck these arrows are so strong. I'm sure they are enchanted, as most things are here on Protheke, and when I reach down to grab the shaft of the one near my hip, I can't yank it free.

Panic is starting to fully set in when I see movement between trees in the distance. Now I am caught, prey waiting to be slaughtered, and it makes me reckless.

"Come on," I mutter as I pull and jerk on the arrows keeping me in place. Blood trickles down my neck as I slice

my skin open, but I don't care. I can only focus on getting free.

I catch another flash of whoever it is, now much closer, and I start pulling at the bark, hoping to loosen the arrowhead. My nails splinter and rip, blood trickling down my hand just as a figure appears from between the trees in front of me.

Relief and fear burst through me when I see Thali, his piercing silver eyes zeroing in on me. I drop my hands, sagging against the trunk, even as I eye the arrow still trained on me.

"Thali," I breathe. He still hasn't lowered his weapon. "It's me."

He steps closer, his muscles taut. His braid is loose and messy from the fighting and wisps of hair brush over his face. His hands don't waver, though.

Beneath the blood, dirt, and hair, I can just make out his expression. And he looks pissed. His lips are pressed in a firm line, his eyes flash angrily as he takes me in, and his grip on his bow has turned his knuckles white.

My mind flashes back to the last time I ran from him, when he caught me and told me he'd punish me for trying to escape him. And only now do I realize how much worse this situation is.

A part of me wonders if he's going to kill me. Has he decided I've outlived my use? Almost immediately, I reject the notion. I know that Thali wants me. He's obsessed with me, really, and I have to hope that it will protect me.

Though, the crazed glint in his eye is sending waves of excitement through me. I love when he lets go, when he does what he wants with me, and if he doesn't kill me, I know that I'm going to love whatever else is in store.

But then he sucks in a deep breath, and his right-hand releases the string, launching his arrow forward. Time almost seems to move in slow motion as the arrowhead spins, moving on a perfect path straight toward me.

All my other senses cut out as I focus on it. I'm not even sure if I scream or not. All I can feel is the surge of fear as I stare down death.

What makes it worse is when it leaves my field of vision. I can't quite see the arrow as it buries itself into the tree, but I do feel it cut the other side of my neck.

Everything slams back in as I gasp, the forest suddenly loud and my lungs feeling as if they might burst as I suck in air. I lift a shaky hand up to my throat, feeling the slickness of my blood there.

The arrows are embedded perfectly on either side of my neck, and now, I'm pinned in place as Thali lowers the bow, turning to stare at me. His eyes glint with violent promises, and a shiver wracks my body.

What have I gotten myself into?

THALI

“**Y**ou ran.”

I don't even recognize my own voice. It's deep and rough, laced with anger that the woman who is *mine* thinks she has the right to try and disappear in this forest. As if I wouldn't catch her.

Brielle gulps, the collar moving with her throat, and my hand itches to latch around the column and squeeze, to remind her that her life is mine and mine alone to control.

I think the arrows suffice as the message.

“I wasn't running from you.”

I shake my head, the words hardly even registering. I drop the bow on the forest floor as I start forward, seething that she thinks she had the right to leave like that.

“You ran.” I stop before her, planting my hands on either side of her head and leaning in close. I run my tongue up her neck, sweat, and blood mingling on my tongue, and my cock jerks in my pants. “I told you before, I will punish you for that.”

“I wasn't safe –”

I bark out a harsh laugh. “You think anyone would have touched you with me there?” I pull back to stare into her eyes. “You think I would have let anyone near what is *mine*?”

Her pupils widen as she stares at me, and I almost wonder what I look like right now. I'm sure it's crazed. Good. Let her

see me for what I truly am.

I drag my nose down her cheek. “No. You know better. Now stop arguing. It’s time for me to claim the prey I caught.”

My hands drop to her waist, and I jerk on her pants. She hisses, and I look up, cocking an eyebrow. “Be careful.” I pull again until the material is pooling at her feet and there is fresh blood on her neck. “The edges are sharp.”

She bares her teeth, but before she speaks, I grab her underwear and rip them free. A gasp blocks her words, and I unlace my own pants. My cock pops out as soon as the restraints are gone, and I stroke myself as I take in her body.

Brielle is pushed up on her toes to keep the arrows from pressing too deep, and while I can see the tension lining her body, I can also see how turned on she is by the fear and violence of it all. Her nipples are hard, pushing through the fabric of her shirt, and her legs are clenched together as she fights the ache there.

One I intend to fill.

“What is it, brave one?” I ask as I press the tip to her clit, pushing forward so I slide along her seam. Her jaw tightens as she stares up at me. “I thought you’d like whatever I give you. Were you disillusioned that you could have all the pleasure without the pain?”

Her chest heaves, but she doesn’t answer, only making me angrier. I step closer, sliding my hands beneath her knees. I force her up, her back digging into the trunk as I push her legs up on either side of her torso and bare her pussy to me.

Her hands press against the trunk as she seeks purchase. I’ve alleviated some of the pressure of the arrows off her throat as I’ve shifted her up, but the threat isn’t gone.

I hold her there, the wind whipping against her dripping cunt as I wait for my answer. When she seems to realize that I won’t continue until she opens that smart mouth, anger clouds her eyes. “No,” she snaps. “I just didn’t think it would be life-threatening.”

I chuckle. “What use is pain if it doesn’t stir up fear, too?” I shift my hips up so that my crown presses against her entrance. “Now be a good girl and put my cock inside of you so I can punish you like you deserve.”

Defiance filters across her face, but she reaches down, grasping my cock. She doesn’t immediately push me inside, though. She guides me up and down, collecting arousal on the tip and on her hand so that she can smear it on my length. She pumps up and down with a tight fist that has my hips jerking forward and then, with a smirk, she pressed me into her tight hole.

I slam up, all the way to the hilt, and her back arches forward as she sucks in a deep breath. I don’t give her time to recover before I pull out and do it again and again. “This is what disobedient girls get,” I snarl as I drive deep into her, every movement raking the arrowheads along her throat. “I’m going to bruise this pussy so that all you can think of for days is how you can’t escape me.”

Brielle’s hands come up to grasp my shoulders as I force her wider, my hips slamming into her harder. “Shit,” she cries out, and her walls convulse, struggling against me. Her fingers dig in and her legs start to shake as she stretches around me.

“If I didn’t know any better,” I grunt, fucking her so hard that the bark is crumbling to the ground beneath us. “I’d think you like it.”

One hand leaves my shoulder as Brielle reaches up to finger the collar at her throat, tugging lightly on it like I normally do. “I’ll take your cock any way you give it to me.”

I nod, slamming into her and grinding against her clit. Her breath hitches and she throws her head back with a deep moan. “You fucking will.” I pull out, watching as her cunt squeezes around nothing. Her whimpers are quiet, but it’s still enough of a protest that I consider dropping her to her knees and fucking her throat to make her pay for them.

Instead, I drop one leg and jerk the arrow at her hip free. I bring the tip of the arrow to her waist digging in until I draw blood. “You’ll take everything I give you.” I draw a line across

the bottom of her torso, marveling at the way her skin breaks out in chills as droplets of red dot her pale flesh. “Whenever I want to.”

A soft cry escapes her as I drag it up, scraping along her nipple through her shirt. I draw circles around it, savoring the way her hips jerk forward, begging for me.

I drop the arrow and slap her pussy, making her head jerk up as she cries out. I only grin as I lift her leg back up and lean forward, my cock pressing to her entrance again.

This time, I don’t have to command Brielle. She reaches down, parting her pussy for me and guiding me in, her hand staying tight on my shaft as she works me in slowly. I let her since she’s being so good, the little moans that escape her driving me mad.

Once I’m seated inside, she lifts her eyes to me, biting her lip before answering. “Yes, Thali.” Mischief glitters in her eyes like she knows just what she’s doing, making my balls squeeze when she says my name in that pitiful voice.

I thrust up into her, starting up a rhythm that Brielle tries to match, as I hold her gaze. “Who do you belong to?” I ask, her eyelids starting to droop. Her jaw has slackened, her hands are tight on my shoulders, and I know that she’s getting close.

“You,” she whispers, and I slam harder into her as a reward. “I belong to you, Thali,” she cries.

“That’s right.” I push her harder into the tree. “This cunt is mine to do what I want, and I am going to fill her up.”

“Oh, gods,” she whimpers, her walls pulsing now.

“Do you want that?”

She shakes her head, slicing her throat on the arrows as a soft whine works its way out. “Please.”

“I’ll tell you what.” I grit my teeth and angle my hips back so I drive deeper into her with each thrust. Her head is tilted back, eyes fully closed, and I’m not even sure she’s listening to me anymore.

“What?” she moans.

“I’ll give you permission to come if this tight cunt will squeeze my cock and milk it dry after.” Her eyes pop open, her gaze filled with lust. “Got it?”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip as she nods. “Yes, Thali.”

Fuck, I want to unload in this girl. “Good girl,” I murmur. “You want to come for me, baby.”

Her hips grind down on me every time I slip inside. “Gods, yes!”

My fingers dig harder into the undersides of her thighs, pulling her farther apart. I watch as I pump in and out of her, the flesh pink and swollen, and my balls draw up as I think about watching myself drip out.

“Then do it, brave one,” I tell her. “Fucking come all over my cock.”

Her hips buck against me as her muscles clamp down, and I slam up hard, filling her as her orgasm hits. Reaching up, I pull the arrows out of the tree, tossing them to the forest floor so I can grab her collar and jerk it up.

Her eyes bulge as I cut off her oxygen, her pussy convulsing around me. I can feel my climax coming as she rides me, and I lean in, licking up her throat.

The taste of her blood and sweat pushes me over the edge, and a growl rips free of my throat as my release finds me. Brielle screams as I suckle her wounds, maybe my cock throb as it shoots into her at record speeds.

When I pull back, I jerk my hips back and watch my cum seep between her lips with a savage grin. My gaze flicks up to Brielle, satisfaction filling me when I find her watching with rapt attention.

Her eyes lift to meet mine. “This pussy is fucking mine.”

She reaches down, sliding her hand through both of our arousal before thrusting her fingers back inside. My cock jerks at the sight. “Yes, it is,” she mutters, pulling her hand out and

smearing it up over her clit and along her pubic bone. “I am yours.”

BRIELLE

I wrap my arms around Thali, blinking up at him. I can't even describe the feeling it gave me for him to swoop in and save me. He really does love me, even though he hasn't actually said those words. It makes me feel good, as well as making me not give a fuck anymore that he's a dark elf.

I know who Thali is. I know he's not a good person – I'm not an idiot. He kills anyone who gets in his way, human or otherwise, and he doesn't care about the consequences. He's reckless and psychotic. But I don't care because he isn't like that with me.

I know that he would never hurt me, never treat me the way he treats others. He would do anything for me, and that's all I've ever wanted. Thali does not scare me, and that makes me hug him even tighter as he strokes his fingers through my curls.

He wants me. *Me.*

"What?" he grunts, and I realize that I'm still staring up at him.

I give him a shy smile and hide my face in his chest. He grabs my chin and lifts it up to meet his gaze.

"What?" he repeats.

"I – thank you."

He lifts an eyebrow, his hand slipping to cup my cheek.

“Whatever for?”

“Saving me,” I whisper.

“I will always save you. But in the future, you won’t need saving. I will never let you be in another position like this again. You will never be in danger again. You’re safe now. Do you understand me?”

I nod, a blush spreading over my face. I understand him perfectly.

“Half of Lowtown is destroyed, including the part I live in. What am I going to do?”

“You’ll live with me, in my townhome or in a new home, I don’t care. Just me and you.”

“What?”

“Did I not speak clearly?”

“No, you did, it’s just... isn’t it a little early for us to move in together?”

“I’ve been stalking you for months, and you’re just now worried about boundaries?”

The honesty in his words makes me giggle, and he’s right.

“No, I guess I’m not.”

“Good, because you don’t have a choice. You’re going to come live with me, and there is nothing you can say or do to stop it. You are mine, and no one can ever take you away from me. I will cut the head off of anyone who even so much as thinks about it.”

I shiver at that, but it sends an interesting thrill throughout my body. Why do I like the violence he exudes? What is wrong with me?

“But what if I’m not ready? What if I don’t want to?”

He lifts an eyebrow again and pulls away slightly, searching my face. Finally, he sighs.

“Brielle, if it wasn’t already obvious... I’m in love with you. Completely. This goes beyond obsession. Yes, I’m

obsessed with you, but I also love you. You're a beautiful woman, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. You make me feel things that no one ever has, and no one ever will. I will do anything for you, anything to protect you. But I will not be separated from you. Do you hear me?"

Before I can speak, he continues. "If you want a little space, then you can have it. But you're still going to live with me. You're still going to be mine. I simply cannot deny myself this any longer. I cannot go without you, I refuse."

When I don't say anything, he caresses my face, an odd expression coming over his face.

"I love you," he whispers.

It's the most vulnerable I've ever seen him be. It's an odd thing, seeing him like this, when he's normally so tough and stoic. I can't say I hate it, though. In fact, it makes me feel special that only I bring out this side in him.

I give him another shy smile and inch closer.

His mouth slowly spreads into a grin, and it's the biggest smile I've ever seen him wear. I'm fascinated by this smile, and I can't stop staring at his mouth. Gods, I need to feel that mouth all over me.

Thali's expression changes, and the energy between us shifts.

"Brielle..." he whispers.

The look in his eyes sends shivers down my spine. He feels it too, the change. He knows how badly I want him, how badly I need him right now.

How can I want him this badly after what I just went through? What does this say about me? Do I even care?

No, I don't. I truly don't care anymore. I've accepted what it means to love this man, what it makes me. And I'm okay with it.

"I don't want space," I whisper.

“Good,” he growls. “Because I wasn’t going to give it to you anyways.”

I gasp, and he grabs my face with both hands and brings his lips to mine. The kiss feels different, it feels more intense than the others we’ve shared.

His tongue swipes at my bottom lip, asking a silent question. I answer by opening my mouth to him, and his tongue darts in, tasting everything it can touch.

My hands find their way into his soft, silky hair. Gods, I could touch this hair all day. *Maybe he will let me braid it.* I start giggling at the thought, and Thali pulls away, visibly angry. I can’t help but think he’s sexy when he’s angry.

“I’m kissing you, thinking about all the ways I’d like to fuck you, and you’re giggling?”

His serious face only makes me giggle more, but he’s not having it. He grabs my jaw in one hand and squeezes, forcing it open. My eyes widen as he spits in my mouth before letting go.

“Swallow.”

I do as he says, eyes still wide, and I don’t dare look away from him.

“You will not disrespect me,” he says before smashing his lips back on mine.

This time, I’m breathless within an instant. He’s kissing me so fiercely, it almost scares me. My heart is beating so fast it feels like it might explode. Despite this, my lips match his every movement, and my tongue works in tandem with his own.

Only when my lungs are completely out of air does he pull away, eyes blazing as he stares me down before moving. He walks in slow circles around me, surveying my body like I’m a piece of meat. To him, I guess I am.

“Do you understand your place in my life?”

I nod.

“Speak out loud. I need to hear you say the words.”

“Yes, sir. I understand my place in your life.”

He smirks.

“A quick learner. I like that.”

He continues walking around me, before finally stopping in front of me, taking my hand, and lifting it up between us.

“Do you understand what this means?” he asks, stroking a finger over the ring he gave me.

“I can never take it off?” I say, unsure of what he’s asking.

He chuckles, making my cheeks flush with embarrassment. I knew it wasn’t the right answer. But he doesn’t punish me and instead drops my hand before cupping my face again.

“Oh, brave one, don’t you know all gifts are binding? Of course, you can never take it off. It symbolizes you and me, and how you’ll never be able to get rid of me.”

“I don’t want to get rid of you,” I whisper.

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes. I would never lie to you.”

“Good girl,” he praises, making my pussy throb.

His hand leaves my face, trailing down until it rests on my neck. He doesn’t choke me. He just leaves his hand there.

“You’re mine.”

I nod.

“Say it.”

“I’m yours, Thali.”

“Good, good.”

He leans in until his lips rest against my ear, licking it and giving my entire body goosebumps in the process.

“And just so you know,” he whispers into my ear. “I plan on claiming you in *every* way possible. That includes having a

traditional mating ceremony. I want everyone to know who you belong to.”

He pulls away, giving my earlobe a quick tug before he does. Gods, I need him to just take me already. What is he waiting for?

“I’m okay with that,” I breathe.

“Did I ask you if you were?” he snaps.

“N-no.”

“That’s what I thought.”

I shiver, but this time it’s not because of him.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Yes, I’m a little cold.”

He smiles softly, nodding.

“You’ll learn, my brave one. And I’ll take you to my town home now. If you want, we can stop by your old room and grab anything you want to bring with you, if you can find it. You won’t be going back there.”

“There’s nothing I want to bring.”

That must’ve been the right answer because he pulls me back against his chest.

“Of course not.”

After a moment, I dare speak.

“Thali?”

“Yes?” he asks, pulling back to look at me.

“I’m yours, but are you mine?”

He pauses, blinking at me in surprise. It takes him a moment to respond.

“Of course I’m yours. Just not in the same way that you’re mine,” he smirks, his tongue darting out and licking his

bottom lip.

I can't help it. My mouth drops open. He takes the opportunity to grab my jaw again, keeping my mouth open. I blink up at him.

“Do you submit to me? Do you accept that you're mine forever?”

He lets me go so that I can answer.

“I thought it didn't matter if I agree or not.”

His nostrils flare, and I know I've fucked up.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Please don't punish me for that.”

He lifts an eyebrow at me, but he obviously finds this amusing.

“I'll give you a pass for that one. But I asked you a question. Answer it.”

“Yes, I submit. I'm yours, Thali.”

He nods, satisfied. He's about to reach for me again when I step back.

“Or am I?” I giggle, turning around and running as fast as I can into the woods before he can stop me.

THALI

All I can think as Brielle takes off is how fucking perfect she is for me. Everything she says and does is everything I never knew I needed in my life.

My brave one loves to run from me, and I love to chase her. As she runs, she keeps looking back at me over her shoulder, shrieking and giggling when she sees how close I'm getting.

Of course, I could catch her in less than a second if I wanted to, but she's scared of me, and she loves that fear. She thrives off of it. And so I'm more than willing to give it to her, and then some.

"You're not getting away," I taunt.

"Leave me alone!" she screams back at me, daring a peek that almost causes her to trip.

I chuckle, and my eyes wander down to her mostly bare ass and linger on the dried blood and ripped dress. I almost forgot that this isn't the first time that I've chased her today. Gods, she really does love this.

And she really is so brave. I have no idea how after everything she's been through today, she appears to be perfectly fine. I expected her to be a fucking wreck.

Getting chased and fucked by me earlier was surely a lot for her. Then she got captured and betrayed by her best friend and almost died. She saw her whole side of town destroyed

and watched everyone she knew being slaughtered... by the man she loves. Fuck.

Except, does she love me? She didn't say it back when I confessed it to her. At the time I didn't even think about it, but now... maybe she doesn't love me? Or maybe she's just been through a lot today and didn't even think to say it back.

"You know, you're really not that fast for a dark elf," she teases.

Oh, now she's really done it. I growl and barrel ahead, catching her in a split second and slamming her back into a tree. Her eyes are wide, and she's already trembling beneath my hands.

"You'll never be able to get away from me. No matter how many times you try to run. I will *always* catch you. You don't stand a fucking chance. Even if you think I'm not there, and I couldn't possibly catch you... I'll be there. I'll always find you, and you will always be mine. No amount of running can change that, sweetheart."

I tighten my grip on her arms before releasing one and letting it trail up to her throat, choking her against the tree.

"I expect a response," I snarl into her ear.

She quickly nods her head as much as she can.

"I'm going to need to hear it."

She tries to squeak out a response, but with my hand squeezing her throat, she can barely get out a sound. I loosen my grip on her.

"Yes, sir. I understand that no matter how much I run, I'll never get away from you."

"So if you understand it, then why do you still run?"

Her lips slowly spread into a naughty smile, but she doesn't say anything. I hike up an eyebrow and purse my lips.

"You don't want to say?"

She shakes her head, trying to stifle a giggle.

“Fair enough.” I cock my head, squeezing her throat once more. “You don’t get to breathe until you decide you want to tell me. You’ll tap my arm when you’re ready.”

Her eyes bulge out of her head, and within seconds her face is turning a deep red from the lack of oxygen. She digs her nails into my arm but doesn’t tap.

“You actually like this.” I laugh at her, shaking my head. “Fucking masochist,” I mutter.

A few seconds later, she still hasn’t tapped, and now I’m thoroughly impressed.

“I bet you’re fucking soaked,” I whisper in her ear. “I bet you think I’m eventually going to give in and let go, but you’ll learn that lesson the hard way.”

Her face is a reddish purple now, and I’m actually starting to think she’s going to force herself to pass out under my hand when she finally taps my arm. I immediately let go of her neck but don’t step back.

She reaches up to her neck, gasping for air. I give her fifteen seconds to collect herself. When she drops her hands, I see my fingerprints already starting to bruise her tanned skin, and it gives me a sense of pride knowing I’ve marked her.

“I’m waiting,” I remind her.

“I-I-” she gasps. “Fuck, Thali. I like running from you because the fear of getting caught turns me on. I love knowing that at any second I could feel you grabbing me, but I don’t know when it’s coming. And I love looking back and seeing how close you are to catching me. Even earlier when I didn’t know it was you chasing me, my pussy was wet from the fear.”

I grin, nodding. I already knew this, of course, I knew it. But seeing her so embarrassed to admit it to me is exquisite.

“What if I put a blindfold around your eyes, tied your hands behind your back, and made you run through the woods until I caught you?” I lean in and whisper.

She closes her eyes, slowly breathing in and out before opening them again. When she does, her brown eyes are almost black, her pupils completely dilated.

“Only if you put something in my ears so that I won’t be able to hear you, either.”

Fuck, she’s amazing.

“It’s a date, brave one,” I promise her.

“Thali?” she asks, searching my eyes.

“Yes?”

“I love you, too.”

I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear her say it back. In fact, I’ve been convincing myself that I didn’t need it ever since I said it to her. But hearing that come out of her mouth does something to me.

I bring my hand to her face, stroking down her cheek. She shudders under the light touch, and I slowly lean in to kiss her. When our lips touch, I know that she means it. She really, truly loves me.

“How?” I ask when we finally pull away. She smiles, repeating the same motion I did with her hand against my face.

“Because you protect me, and I know that you always will. I’m safe with you, and you see me. You see everything about me, and you don’t judge my fucked up mind, just like I don’t judge yours.”

I kiss her again, more urgently this time. Suddenly she pulls her face from mine.

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, Thali. I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else. Just as I’m never getting rid of you, you’re never getting rid of me. I’m not going anywhere, ever.”

“Oh, baby, as if you ever had a choice in the matter,” I smirk.

To my surprise, she laughs. The sound sends goosebumps along my body. If we keep standing here like this, we’re going

to have a repeat of this morning. As much as I'd like that, the next time I take her needs to be in private.

"You're right," she admits.

I step back and admire her for a moment before grabbing her ankles and throwing her over my shoulder.

"I do prefer a willing prisoner, though," I tell her, starting towards my townhome.

Once we reach my place, I set her down before unlocking my front door with a flick of my wrist.

"I could have walked, you know," she complains.

"I know, but I didn't want you to. And we do whatever I want."

"Whatever you want?" she questions as we enter my home. Our home, now.

"Yes, does that scare you?"

"No."

"No?" I lift a brow, calling her bluff. We stare at each other for a good minute or two before she cracks, rolling her eyes.

"Okay, yes, it scares me a little."

"A little? Is that what your pussy will say if I reach down there right now? Seeing as how we already established that fear turns you on?"

Her face burns bright red. I love how embarrassed this still gets her, even after admitting it to me. She's so perfectly innocent while also being so not innocent at the same time.

"What are you going to do about it if your fingers come out dripping?"

Her words shock me, but she lifts her chin up, standing her ground. It almost takes my breath away to see her like this. To see her standing in my living room, after all this time.

She really is mine now, completely. And it's my job to take care of her, so as much as I'd love to slip my fingers under her

dress and find out just how wet she is, there are more important things that need to happen.

“A tempting offer.” I step closer to her, and she sucks in a breath. “But I think I should show you your new room and get you cleaned up. You’ve had a really hard, long day.”

“Hard and long?” she giggles.

“Don’t test me,” I snap at her, turning towards my bedroom before she can see the smile on my face. “Follow me.”

Once I’ve shown her around and drawn her a bath, I relax behind her in the tub, slowly scrubbing her hair clean.

“I’ve never had a warm bath before,” she admits.

Anger sparks in me, and I have to calm myself down before responding.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about things like that anymore.”

She sighs, and I’m about to ask her what’s wrong before she speaks.

“You really aren’t going to fuck me?”

This time it’s my turn to sigh. She really won’t just let me take care of her.

“I was trying to let you relax after the day you’ve had. I figured sex wasn’t what you needed tonight. Are you telling me I’m wrong?”

“Maybe? I don’t know, I just want to be close to you,” she says, snuggling back against me and letting her soapy head rest on my shoulder.

“Well, then who am I to deny you?” I nip at her ear.

I could never deny this girl anything. She truly is my biggest weakness, but I couldn’t be happier about it. Nothing will ever change that.

RIYA

I'm shaking uncontrollably, and no matter how many deep breaths I take, I can't make myself calm down. But if I don't get out of here soon, I'm sure I'll end up dead, like every other human I know. Knew.

Everything that happened tonight was one hundred percent my fault. If I hadn't told Declan what was going on with Brielle... if I hadn't led everyone right to her, none of these people would be dead. If I had just minded my own fucking business like Brielle wanted me to all along.

I had no idea that this would happen. I never wanted anyone to get hurt. I truly thought I was helping my best friend at the time.

When I first suspected that Brielle's secret admirer was a dark elf and that she was entertaining him, I thought she was just being naïve.

I truly thought that, because she was so used to being all alone, growing up with no family and scarce friends, the attention he was giving her was more than she was ever used to. I thought she had fallen for his trap. But I think I underestimated my friend. I think Brielle was a lot smarter than I ever gave her credit for.

How was I supposed to know that this dark elf Brielle has been seeing actually cared about her? That goes against everything I know about the ways the dark elves treat us. It goes against the things I've been taught my entire life. The things I've seen countless times.

Dark elves don't protect us, they don't care about us. They use and kill us. And they don't have any regrets. We are nothing to them. They are savage killers who only think about themselves.

And yet I just saw one of them slaughter a whole village to protect one human. I misjudged this entire situation, and now I have to deal with the consequences of that. But how?

I'm incredibly sorry for what I did to Brielle, obviously. The way I spoke to her, the things I said when we captured her. The aftermath. But I'm also so mad at her.

None of this is her fault, I fully take that blame. But if she had just been honest with me from the start, we could have avoided all of this. If she had come to me when she found out the person leaving those gifts was a dark elf, if she had told me she was falling for him and that he was good to her? Maybe I would have been understanding.

But I know that isn't true. I probably would have ended our friendship over it, maybe even still turned her in. And because of that, I deserve whatever comes to me. I'm not a good friend, and I never deserved a friend like her.

Brielle may have lied to me, but I betrayed her. I could have confronted her privately when I saw her in the woods with him earlier. I could have just given her a chance to explain. But my rage and hurt overpowered my rational self, and instead I ran straight to Declan.

Declan who is now dead. I saw Brielle's dark elf kill him with my own eyes.

I will never forget the look on Brielle's face when I told her that I was the one who left those threatening notes, and it killed me to see how scared she was at the time of reading them. But I really thought that if I left them, she would think it was the secret admirer and never go back there. I was so, so wrong.

"This is humiliating, how could you humiliate me like this?"

"I don't think there's any apologizing for this."

I force myself to remember some of her last words to me. Suddenly I'm snapped out of my memory by voices nearby.

"Keep looking, I don't care if it takes all night," I hear a male voice shout. "Look under everything, behind everything. Find the bitch."

My blood chills. Fuck, I need to move from this spot *now*. But I have no fucking clue where to go. Everything is in ruin.

"Was this area already searched?" a different male asks.

"I don't care, search it anyways, and then search it again. If Thali wants us to find her, then we have to find her."

Thali... wasn't that what Brielle called her dark elf? Why would he have them out here searching for someone? He already found Brielle... oh gods. Oh *gods*. They're looking for me, they have to be.

Brielle must have told Thali that I was the one who betrayed her, and now they're going to kill me for it. I don't blame her. It's what I deserve.

I peek out from behind the wreckage I've been hiding under, trying to spot a way out of here. The air is thick with smoke, and I see two dark elves not too far from where I am, searching for me.

I turn and look the other way, opposite them. There's an abandoned house that's still in good condition considering everything. If I can get there, maybe I can find a space to hide inside where no one would think to look. I just have to make it over there alive.

As slowly and quietly as possible, I inch my way out from the pile I was under, staying low to the ground. Both of the dark elves are bent over, looking away from me. I take the opportunity to run behind what appears to be half of a wall. I have no idea what this used to be.

Looking out from behind the wall, I check to see if either of them heard or saw me. I sigh with relief upon seeing them both still turned away from me. But my relief is soon replaced by terror as I look down and realize that one of my coworkers

from the factory is lying dead behind the same half wall that I chose to hide behind.

“*Fuck,*” I gasp and quickly cover my mouth with my hand.

Tears immediately start falling from my eyes. The dead girl’s name is Cassandra. She had a husband and two sons. She had a fucking family, and now she’s dead. Because of me. Me.

I can’t take it anymore, being out here, exposed. I need to find somewhere to hole up and cry. And maybe never come out. Why do I get to live when I’m the reason these people didn’t?

I peek over the wall again. The two dark elves are discussing something, turned slightly away from me, but I’m still in their line of sight. I’ll have to stay really low.

I drop to the ground and crawl to the next thing I can hide behind, then the next. Finally, I’m right in front of the abandoned house. All I have to do is sneak into one of the doors or windows without being seen.

I take a few shaky breaths and make a run for the side door of the house. If I’m caught, then maybe that’s what I deserve. Maybe I’ll just have to accept that fate.

Lucky for me, the door is not locked, and I get in easily. Once inside, I immediately drop to the floor. The windows have no curtains, and someone could still see me.

I try to hold myself together just a little bit longer as I crawl through the house. It’s definitely been abandoned for a while and hasn’t been updated for even longer, so the floorboards creak with every move I make. I wince at each sound I hear.

I can still hear the dark elves hunting for me, and as I crawl into the kitchen, I quickly shove myself into a cupboard. This will have to do for now.

Finally alone, I let myself fall apart. I begin sobbing uncontrollably, clutching at my chest as I gasp for each breath. The tightness of the cupboard doesn’t help the situation.

“What did I do? What did I do?” I mutter between sobs.

At this point, I don't even care if someone hears me.

I stay there like that for what feels like hours, and by the time I've worked up the nerve to leave, it's completely silent outside. I haven't even heard a single sound for at least an hour.

Slowly, I ease myself out of the cupboard, and my joints hurt so badly as I unfold myself and stand up. I know I need to sleep, desperately, but first I need to get far, far away from here.

A glance outside confirms my suspicions – it's the middle of the night. I see no one out there, and after a couple of minutes, I convince myself that it's safe to leave.

As soon as I step outside, I realize that I haven't thought about where I'm going to go. I have nowhere. I have nothing and no one.

Closing my eyes, I force myself to breathe in and out. I can't think like this, I need to just get out of here and figure out the rest later. I glance around one last time before leaving the side of the house.

But as soon as I turn the corner near the back of the house, I scream, and all I can think is that I should have just stayed in that cupboard. Declan is strung up from a tree behind the house, hanging upside down. I'm about to scream again when a hand quickly covers my mouth from behind and jerks me around.

My eyes widen as I see who grabbed me. All of my instincts scream at me to run from the smirking face in front of me. The devastatingly beautiful face of a dark elf.

THE END.

To read more about Brielle and Thali sign up for my newsletter here: [Celeste King Newsletter](#)

PREVIEW OF DARK ELF'S SECRET BABY

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, Dark Elf's Secret Baby

Dark Elf's Secret Baby

By Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)

LAYLA

I drop my pickaxe at the mouth of the mine as I step into the open air, the metal tip clanking against the countless pickaxes beneath it as it falls. The setting sun glances off the snow capped tips of the mountain range around us, stars beginning to wink into existence in the sky.

After a few steps forward, I reach the small stand where one of the dark elf overseers sits, taking inventory of the product we bring back to the surface from the mines. I shrug off my bag and hand it to him, watching as he rummages through it and pulls a chunk of kirialite out, his eyes glimmering as he beholds the raw stone.

The dark elf gives me a curt nod before sliding a handful of tickets to me. They never give us real money, of course, as it could be used to formulate some type of escape, but these tickets are as good as currency within the camp.

I grab the tickets off the table and return his nod, turning away and letting a small sigh slip through my lips as I start on my way home. Camp Horizon isn't a bad place to be as a human, and if I'm being honest with myself, I rather enjoy the predictability of my routine.

Wake at dawn, to the mines just after sunrise, work until sunset, and on the way home at twilight. The same location, same activity, and same schedule, every day but holidays.

The dark elves aren't as bad here as they are on the other continents, either. Sure, there are some who are too quick with

their whip and take too much of an interest in the human women, but the vast majority are rather apathetic.

My steps fall rhythmically as I walk down the path from the mines toward the village square, the footsteps of the other miners around me creating a strange, drum-like beat, accented by catches of quiet conversation. It isn't long before the squat little cabins of the village square begin to peek into view from behind the massive tree trunks of the surrounding forest.

People mill about in the loose gravel streets, moving from vendor to vendor after their work day and collecting various supplies and food for the coming week. A handful of dark elf guards lean against the walls of scattered stalls and cabins, watching with thinly veiled boredom as the humans move about. The camp is almost peaceful- at least, as peaceful as any dark elf run settlement can be.

The camp is separated into different quarters, which also helps to keep the peace. The dark elves largely stay in their quarter, situated to the west of the main village square, and the humans stay in their eastern residential quarter. The mines lie to the north, and the road into Camp Horizon sits to the south, along with the warehouse where all of what we mine is stored and cataloged.

I sigh, wiping my soot-covered hands across my face. No, Camp Horizon isn't the worst place to be, but the work is hard. And I know, deep down in my bones, that I want something more.

A stray, chilly breeze sweeps up the path from the village, carrying with it the decadent scent of fresh nimond bean rolls. The baker in town, Marshall, always seems to be making something with the spices he trades for with the dark elves.

I half-believe he's managed to stay out of the mines almost solely because of the confections he creates in his little kitchen. I follow my nose to his small shop, the cabin radiating heat from the ovens within and enveloping me in its sweet, yeasty scent as I cross the threshold.

"I already know why you're here," Marshall calls teasingly over his shoulder, not even needing to turn around to know it's

me. This is another bit of my routine, although my trips to Marshall's bakery are far less frequent than I'd like, only happening on a weekly basis.

"Then it's a wonder you aren't more prepared," I rib back, leaning on the counter with a small smile. Marshall clucks at me as he turns around, producing a small box tied with twine and giving me a lopsided grin.

"How could I ever forget my favorite customer?" He teases as he hands me the box. I roll my eyes but give him a warm smile as I accept it, the heat radiating from the bottom of the box soothing my aching hands.

Marshall and I chat about our days as I tuck into the nimond bean roll right there in the shop, Marshall recounting an order from one of the dark elves while I stuff my face between laughs.

This gentle camaraderie is another reason I can't imagine leaving Camp Horizon- there are so few places where humans are allowed to simply be, to form relationships with one another without being punished or watched constantly.

Wiping the crumbs from my face, I reach into my pocket to produce a ticket, but Marshall is already shaking his head at me.

"No, no," he says, backing up a step. "You've repaid me with conversation, that's all I need. Save that ticket for your family."

Ah, shit. My family.

I throw an alarmed look outside the bakery to find that the sky has darkened past twilight and let out a string of curses under my breath, earning a laugh from Marshall.

"At this point, they should expect you to be late," he jokes as I hurry toward the door. I fling him a crude gesture as I rush outside, the sound of his laughter following me out into the cold night.

I pull my sweater tighter around me as I begin to trudge up the path. I'd move faster if I weren't already thinking about the

way Amara's eyes will inevitably skate over me, sizing me up and always somehow finding me lacking.

My cousin is perfect, in every way. The golden daughter, strong and smart and capable, and while I know Leandra and Jethro love me just as much as they love Amara, I can't help but still feel like an intruder sometimes.

My parents brought us to Camp Horizon right after I turned ten. At the time, they told me it was because they wanted to be closer to my father's brother, saying that it was so rare for humans to have extended family and that we should be more grateful, and find ways to spend more time with them.

Now that I'm older, I understand the real reason they fought so hard for us to get here.

The continents are a dangerous place for humans, especially human women, and even more so for the pretty ones. I've never thought of myself as particularly pretty, but I know now that what I think holds little bearing on the way things actually happen.

My parents got us out of Orthani as fast as they could, bringing us here to work the mines and escape the more cruel treatment that runs rampant in the continental cities. For the first few years, everything was perfect.

My aunt and uncle and cousin took us in, and we lived together as a family. The cabin we shared was always warm and full of laughter and conversation, even when Amara pulled my hair or took my favorite doll. I was allowed to work at the tailor's shop until I was 12, mending clothes until I was big enough and strong enough to work in the mines.

It was only a few days before my thirteenth birthday, when I was supposed to start in the mines, that the collapse happened.

To this day, I don't know what really happened. It could've been something as simple as the wrong stone being taken out, or perhaps the planet shifted deep down and the tunnel in the mountains closed because of it. I don't know. All I know is that my parents kissed me goodbye that morning before

heading into the mines, and then a few hours later, the earth swallowed them up.

The dark elves didn't even bother trying to unearth the bodies.

I shiver, only partly from the cold, as the eastern edge of the village comes into view. The path winds through the last of the shops and up a small hill, and on the other side, is my home. And the only family I have left.

Despite the fact that it's late, and knowing that my family is more than likely already worried about me, my footsteps slow to a halt. I do nothing but stare at the crest of the hill, the last stragglers of the villagers pushing past me on their way home.

It's not that I don't want to go home, at least not necessarily. My head just feels too full of thoughts to bear Amara's judgemental gaze or Leandra's lecturing on finding a husband, however well-intentioned.

Whenever Leandra mentions finding a nice, human man to settle down with, I never seem to be able to find the heart to tell her what I really think. The only thing Amara and I seem to agree on these days is our lack of interest in marrying off any time soon.

I understand why Leandra pushes the subject, of course. She wants her family to stay close, wants to be able to play a hand in mine and her daughter's life for years to come, and I can't bring myself to dash her dreams.

While I know I want more for myself than what I have right now, regardless of whether or not Camp Horizon is one of the best places to be as a human, I'm just not interested in any of the human men here.

I'm not ignorant to the sneaky glances some of them give me, both at work and in the village, but I just don't find any of these men... appealing.

Movement sounds from behind me, far enough away that I almost don't turn toward it, until the husky voice of a dark elf calls my name.

“Layla!”

Oh, shit.

KERYM

Layla whirls toward me, her dark curls bobbing with the sudden jerk of motion. I can't help the smirk that rises to my lips as I see the panicked look on her face before she realizes it's me, a laugh nearly breaking free when her features relax slightly and she rolls her eyes.

Layla steps toward me hurriedly, her eyes darting around for witnesses as she hisses "That's not funny, you scared me!"

The laugh that had been building in my throat shakes free as I look down at her and give her a wink.

"You like it," I murmur softly, earning another eye-roll, although she's unable to hide the small smile playing across her full lips. My fingers itch with the desire to brush across them, to feel her soft, tanned skin beneath my hands. I've waited long enough for her.

The rest of the village is quiet, but that's no reason to be sloppy. Before she can react, I grab the crook of her elbow and pull her into the alley behind us, pinning her to the wall with my body weight as I drop a searing kiss to her lips.

Surprise renders her unresponsive for a moment, her human senses struggling to catch up to my elven speed. As soon as her mind catches up with her body, however, her lips part beneath mine, returning my kiss with every bit of hunger and passion.

I can't get enough of her.

Layla's tongue darts from between her lips, brushing against the seam of my mouth in equal parts question and demand. I groan, opening my mouth against hers and letting our tongues tangle together.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of her.

Ever since I first spotted Layla last year, I haven't been able to control myself. Dark elves take human slaves and play things all the time on the larger continents, especially in the bigger cities, but Layla is so much more than that to me.

When I first arrived at Camp Horizon, I was an eager, untried, bright-eyed soldier, intent on making his way through the ranks. Miou soldiers never stay in Camp Horizon too long, finding the camp boring and lacking any real way to move through the ranks.

Soldiers pass through here in rotations, using the camp as a stepping stone to bigger and better positions once they gain enough experience to warrant transfers to more exciting, opportunistic locations.

But the second I found Layla, I knew I wasn't going anywhere. It took nearly no time at all for me to be head over heels for the woman. I don't care that she's human, and I don't care what beliefs or opinions others of my kind hold- she's everything to me.

My ambitions within the ranks of the miou, my dreams of becoming a Lieutenant and proving my worth to my family, all feel childish as my lips move over Layla's. Nothing, no victory or rank or recognition, could compare to the way she makes me feel.

Layla breaks our kiss first, the both of us breathing heavily as we stare at each other. Her warm brown eyes twinkle in the stray spears of moonlight. It's all too easy to forget my responsibilities when I'm with her, to cast aside all of the things I know I want. In this moment, right now, I only want her.

"How was work?" I breathe, falling into our usual, playful routine. Layla loves her routines, and I love that about her. I

especially love throwing a wrench into it every now and again, especially if it means that I get more time with her.

Layla grins and gives me a playfully casual, one-shouldered shrug.

“It was work,” she responds. “How about you, how was work?” I mimic her reaction, loving the way her smile grows wider.

“It was work,” I reply. Neither of us acknowledges what we know is coming. Transfer season is on the horizon, and Layla is all too aware of the ambitions I hold so closely to my heart. They’re certainly not unusual ones, especially for guards who choose to be stationed here for at least a brief time, but my case is made all the more unusual by my family.

Phonipe and Kunardah Torsys, power couple of the decade. My father is well known for his position among the miou ranks, being an influential player in Vhoig among the nobility. My mother was his chosen prize, the beautiful and talented daughter of another strict, traditional miou family.

My older brother, their first son, is everything they’ve ever wanted him to be. The perfect soldier in shining golden armor, with his perfect mate and perfect life. He was stationed in Camp Horizon for a time as well, before leading armies and earning prestige through his victories.

My parents have always wanted me to be the same, to uphold our honorable family name. They waste no opportunity to tell me as much, to push me harder and farther, pointing out all of my numerous flaws and missed opportunities for success.

In some ways, I guess I can’t really blame them. Salnath created an expectation that I don’t know if I’ll ever live up to, and given the social expectations of my dear family, it’s no wonder that they expect only the best from me.

Too bad I’m little more than a disappointment.

With transfer season coming up, my father has sent countless karasus with messages on where I should be

transferring, what I should be doing, and the like. Just like every year since my first at Camp Horizon.

And just like every year before, I have no intention of following his orders. I won't leave Layla, I don't know that I could even if I wanted to. I'll simply have to find a way to become a lieutenant in Camp Horizon, even if it means usurping the current camp lieutenant so I can take his position.

There's only ever one lieutenant here at a time, intended to lead us and run this camp and our sister camp on Zerva, hence why no other miou have lingered here for too long. That's no problem to me, however.

Our current lieutenant is a drunk, and I have no issue with gunning for his job, no matter how long he's been in his seat. Especially if it means I can stay close to Layla without my family breathing down my neck.

Another problem with transfer season, and another problem Layla and I never speak about, is that there will be new guards entering the fray. Guards that are eager to make a name for themselves, who will keep a closer eye on things. Those who might notice the two of us sneaking off together and cause trouble.

It wouldn't be the first time a dark elf has been caught with a human, of course. It's generally accepted as part of the perks for this job by some of the more uncouth miou, but my family would take less kindly to finding out about any sort of dalliance of mine, especially with a human woman.

I can only imagine the position it would put Layla in.

I realize too late that Layla and I have just been standing in silence in the quickly dimming light. There's a certain sadness in her gaze, something distant that I can't quite put my finger on. I can't help but wonder if she's thinking of the coming transfer season, too.

"Stay the night with me," I breathe as I hold her gaze. Layla's face shutters instantly, her eyes dropping mine as they dart toward the mouth of the alleyway.

“I’m already late, my aunt and uncle are going to worry. They might even send Amara out after me,” She says, avoiding answering my question directly. She can’t bring herself to truly say no- she wants to come with me, we both know it.

“You know Amara won’t find us,” I retort, dropping my face into the warm crook of her neck and drawing my nose lightly across the sensitive skin. Layla shivers beneath my touch, her head dropping back slightly in welcome.

“We could get caught,” Layla argues, although her voice is feeble and lacking any real conviction. I graze my teeth lightly over the peak of her exposed collarbone, a purely male swell of pride blooming in my chest at the strangled noise that slips from her lips at the contact.

My obsession with Layla and the looming, ominous feeling of transfer season aren’t the only reasons I’m so intent on making room to have her to myself, although they certainly play a part. No, there’s another reason everything feels more urgent now, every stolen second feels weightier.

Layla’s 24- marrying age. Most human women tend to get married even earlier these days, their lifespans shorter and more pressing on Protheka than they ever were on their home planet. I see the way the men in the village eye her as if she’s some prize to be won, as if she could ever be anyone’s but mine.

The idea of another man with Layla, of her marrying or his hands skating across her curves, fills me with rage. I drown the feeling, unwilling to let my darker nature ruin a perfectly good moment as I withdraw from Layla’s neck and find her eyes.

“We’ve never been caught before,” I say with a grin, my voice rough with my overwhelming desire for her. Layla’s cheeks flush scarlet as her eyes dip to my lips, only making my smile grow wider. She wants me nearly as bad as I want her, a fact that will never cease to make smug satisfaction ripple through me.

“But my family-”

“I’ll send word,” I interrupt her, my hold on myself growing weaker with every passing second her little body is pressed to mine. “I’ll tell them you’ve picked up an extra shift. You’ll be safe with me, I promise.”

“I know,” Layla whispers. It’s all the permission I need as I twine my fingers between hers and tug her down the alleyway, leading us toward the dark elf quarter.

To be continued. To read more click [here](#)!